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Thursday, July 20

5:00 - 5:45 PM

Fireside Chat with **William Burns**

**William Burns**, Director, Central Intelligence Agency

**Moderator: Mary Louise Kelly**, Co-Host, All Things Considered, NPR

Mary Louise Kelly

Good to see you. Welcome back to Aspen.

William Burns

Thanks. No it's very nice to be with you and nice to be back at Aspen.

Mary Louise Kelly

You ready? Russia.

William Burns

Shocked that you would ask that

Mary Louise Kelly

What just happened? when you were watching events Saturday, June 24. What was your understanding of what was unfolding?

William Burns

I mean, I've seen over the last three decades since the end of the Cold War, you know, a lot of fascinating episodes in Russia but not more fascinating than Prigozhin's mutiny, which was the most direct result on the Russian state in Putin's 23 years in power. I think in many ways it exposed some of the significant weaknesses in the system that Putin has built. Weaknesses that already been laid bare by the disastrous and deeply destructive war that Putin launched 18 months ago in Ukraine. What was remarkable to me though, was now almost exactly a month ago Today, after Prigozhin launched that mutiny was the way in which Putin felt compelled to do a deal with his former caterer. And, and what was equally remarkable, if you look back at the 36 hours that preceded that deal, it began a month ago today and the morning Russian time with a 30 minute video that Yevgeny Prigozhin put on Telegram which is a channel that probably more than a third of the Russian population is active on. And that video was the most scathing indictment of Putin's rationale for war of the conduct of the war of the corruption at the core of Putin's regime that I've heard from a Russian or a non Russian. It was bitterly critical of the conduct of the war by the Russian military leadership by the defense minister Shoiguso and General Gerasimov, the Chief Military staff. It took head on Putin's rationale for war. It said it was built on lies that there was no imminent threat to the Russian homeland or the Russian people from Ukraine or from NATO. And it was scathing in its description of corruption which animates the Russian elite today, which is, you know, richly

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ironic given the fact that Prigozhin himself had profited as much as anyone from corruption and so it was quite remarkable to see and then of course, what was equally remarkable is was the you know what transpired in those 36 hours after the video.

William Burns

You just call it a mutiny. Was it an attempted coup? Do we know what Prigozhin was trying to.

William Burns

You know, we had President Biden put it succinctly when he said that we knew things ahead of time, and I'm not gonna go into any more detail than that, but you know, Prigozhin I think was making some of this up as he went along, clearly his main targets were Shoiguso and Gerasimov. And a lot of this has been hiding in plain sight, too, because he had been scathing in his public criticisms of both of them. So it didn't come as a real surprise when he decided to take action. How long did it sorry,

Mary Louise Kelly

How wounded is Putin?

William Burns

Well, I think, you know, if you think about, you know, the comment I made before about exposing the weaknesses in Putin's system. What I meant by that is that, you know, Putin in many ways I think was constructed his image, which has been carefully cultivated in his grip on power around the notion and the image that he's the arbiter of order in the Russian system. And what that has meant with the wider Russian public is a kind of social contract in which his messages is you stay out of politics. That's my business. What I will offer in return are rising standards of living and by and large, I won't get into your personal lives. With the Russian elite, It's been a variant on that social contract, which is you follow my lead in politics, what I will ensure in return is protection from external threats, protection from one another. And, and also that everyone gets to feed at the trough that everybody gets to share in the spoils in what is a deeply corrupt system. And I think, you know, what we've seen, especially in those 36 hours, as this mutiny was unfolding, and you had the spectacle of you know, the Wagner forces Putin or Prigozhin's mercenaries, advancing unopposed into Rostav, which is the city of a million people in southern Russia, also the military headquarters or the Russian command in Ukraine, seize control of that, you know, significant city and then over the following day, it get two thirds of the way up the road to Moscow as well. And so, you know, as you think of those two social contracts what was going through the minds I think of a lot of Russians, and and what we saw was a Russian security services Russian military Russian decision makers, which were adrift or appeared to be adrift for those 36 hours. So for a lot of Russians watching this used to this image of Putin as the arbiter of order. The question was, does the emperor had no clothes or at least why is it taking so long for him to get dressed and for the elite I think what it resurrected was some deeper questions, which again, you know, you've seen circulate within the Russian elite since the Ukraine began since Putin war in Ukraine began asking questions about Putin's judgement about his relative detachment from events and about his indecisiveness.

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Mary Louise Kelly

Are you seeing fissures? Here in Aspen yesterday, the British Foreign Secretary Cleverly said that we're seeing very deep cracks.

William Burns

Well I think you're seeing signs of weaknesses in that system as I put and I think you know, those, those weaknesses have been exposed by Prigozhin's mutiny but I think even more deeply than that they've been exposed by Putin Smith's judgment since he launched this invasion as well. And I think there's a there's a relationship between the battleground and Ukraine and what's going on inside Russia in the sense that if and when the Ukrainians make further advances on the battlefield, I think what that's going to do is cause more and more Russians in the elite and outside the elite, to pay attention to Prigozhin's critique of the war as well. And so that's where Putin is trying to buy time as he considers what to do with Wagner and what to do with Prigozhin himself. You know, Putin hates, in my experience anyway, the image that he's overreacting to things, so he's trying to settle things but I think what he's going to try to do is separate Prigozhin from what's of value to Putin and Wagner because, you know, they've, they've borne the brunt of the fighting and the battle of Battle of Bakhmut over most of the last year suffered the brunt of the casualties there. 80% of the Wagner forces in the Battle of Bakhmut were recent residents of Russian penal colonies. They're useful to Putin. And African Libya and Syria. So I think what he's going to try to do is separate Prigozhin and undercut him but preserve what's of value to him as well.

Mary Louise Kelly

President Biden recently said of Prigozhin if I were he I'd be careful what I ate. He also said we're not even sure where he is. Do you know where he is? You saw this video that emerged that seemed to show him in Belarus, is it real?

William Burns

Yeah he's moved around a bit yeah, I think he's been in Minsk lately I'm not sure is that he plans to retire in the suburbs of Minsk, but he's, but he spent time in Russia as well. And, and I think, you know, what we're seeing is a very complicated dance between Prigozhin and Putin. I think. Putin is someone who generally thinks that revenge is a dish best served cold so he's going to try to settle the situation to the extent he can, but again, in my experience Putin is the ultimate apostle of pay back so I would be surprised if Prigozhin escapes further retribution for this so in that sense the President's right if I were precaution, I wouldn't fire my food taster.

Mary Louise Kelly

What about general Surovikin how much freedom of movement does he currently enjoy?

William Burns

I don't think a lot right now. I don't think he enjoys a lot of freedom right now.

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Mary Louise Kelly

The CIA has taken this opportunity to make your first video posts to telegram to let brave Russians know how to contact us safely on the dark web. Have they?

William Burns

we got two and a half million views of That telegram video the first week it was on so the truth is there's a lot of disaffection in Russia in the elite and outside of Russia right now. We're not wasting the opportunity as an intelligence service to try to take advantage of it.

Mary Louise Kelly

MI6 says they're also trying to recruit off this as is there a friendly rivalry to get in there first?

William Burns

Yeah you know, I mean, it's, I mean, it's aimed at the same objective right now too

Mary Louise Kelly

And is part of the objective, you know, whether people whether that leads to useful intelligence streams for you, to make Putin look over his shoulder, uneasy about who we can trust?

William Burns

I think Putin is already a little bit uneasy, as he looks over his shoulder. I think that's true that and the debate that goes on within the Russian elite now, and so it'd be crazy for us not to take advantage of what is in effect a once in a generation opportunity as a human intelligence service to take advantage of that.

Mary Louise Kelly

You were just in Ukraine. How is the big power offensive going? What's your assessment?

William Burns

I'm a pretty regular travel to Ukraine, you know, over the course of the last 18 months, and that's a reflection of the significance that the President everyone in the US government attaches to our support for what has been an incredibly courageous and tenacious Ukrainian effort to fight back against Putin and against Russia. Now, Putin was fond of saying that Ukraine is not a real country, and real countries fight back and that's just what President Zelensky and my intelligence counterparts in the Ukrainian military have done. I don't think it should come as a surprise to anyone that the counter offensive is a hard slog. Offense is a lot harder than defense. The Russians have had months to prepare, not only fixed defenses in Zaporizhzhia, in southern Ukraine, but also quite thick and minefields notes as well. So it's going to take time and it's not going to be easy to make progress. I'm I am, however, an optimist, not based on those trips not only based on those trips to Ukraine but based on the intelligence that we're able to acquire and develop, that Ukrainians will be able to make advances. And I think the thing sometimes it's easy to forget is that behind those considerable fixed defenses that the Russians had built

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in southern Ukraine, and Zaporizhzhia there's still like some pretty significant structural weaknesses, poor morale, uneven general ship to put it mildly on the Russian side. And the disarray we were just talking about in the political and senior military leadership. So I think it is going to be a tough slog, but we're gonna do everything we can as an intelligence agency to provide the kind of intelligence support and sharing that's going to help the Ukrainians to make progress.

Mary Louise Kelly

One thing that feels important to ask about because we seem to be talking about less. Less in the news is the possibility of a nuclear weapon being introduced. In a war zone. I know that late last year, you met with your Russian counterpart, Sergei Naryshkin. And you've described that your orders were from President Biden to make very clear what the consequences would be if Russia were to go down that path. And it suggests that President Biden felt the possibility was real enough that he dispatched to CIA chief to make sure didn't happen. Are you more or less worried about that now than a year ago?

William Burns

I'd say several things. First, you know, the nuclear saber rattling Put and some of those around him and engaged in is reckless and deeply irresponsible. It is not something we can take lightly. We do not see today Any concrete preparations for the potential use of nuclear weapons. We have made absolutely clear in that conversation with so many Russian whenever Russian counterparts that's the other channels, the depth of our concern. I think it's been important that President Xi has spoken out about this as well because his is aa voice that's difficult for the Kremlin to ignore right now. So it's something that we obviously monitor very, very carefully but as I said, we don't see any immediate signs of preparation for nuclear use.

Mary Louise Kelly

how much more instability has just it introduced to have Russia to pull out of the grain deal and increasingly expanding this attacks on Black Sea.

William Burns

Well, it's deeply troubling I mean, first for Ukrainians where you know, where Putin is trying to do is wreck the Ukrainian economy. And wreak real havoc on innocent Ukraininan civilians, you know, obviously also does deep damage to some of the most tolerant societies in Earth in Africa and middle east that depend on those grain shipments, like Putin is engaged in clearly just over the last several days is a very systematic effort. It's not just about pulling out of the Grain Deal. It's also about three nights in a row of intensive you know, attacksin Odessa and Mykolaiv and other reporting port cities against grain storage facilities and you know, as the White House made clear earlier today, you know, we see some very concerning signs of the Russians considering a kind of false flag operations that you know, we highlighted in the run up to the war as well in other words, looking at ways in which, you know, they might make attacks that could chip in the Black Sea, and I'm blaming in on the Ukranians.

Mary Louise Kelly

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Why is Iran arming Russia in Ukraine.

William Burns

Well because the a defense partnership between Russia and Iran right now is a useful two way street.

Mary Louise Kelly

What's Iran getting?

William Burns

Well, I think you know, we've seen signs of the Russians, Russian technicians working on the space launch vehicle program in Iran and other aspects of the missile programs. We've seen discussion at least of the possibility of the Russians providing advanced combat aircraft to Iran, which expands the threat from the innocent Ukrainian civilians. I've seen this on my own visits to Kyiv when shy of 130 60s and other armed Iranian drones have been used against indiscriminately against Ukrainian civilians. But you know, the provision of advanced combat aircraft obviously creates threats to our friends in a region as well. So it's a two way street and in many ways, that's what's most troubling about that defense partnership.

Mary Louise Kelly

Speaking of cracks, speaking of fissures, your counterpart at MI6 Richard Moore suggested that the drones are causing internal turmoil in Iran. His quote was, Iran's decision to supply Russia with suicide drones has provoked internal quarrels at the highest level. Of the regime in Tehran. You seeing that?

William Burns

Im not gonna add what Richard said in terms of our commentary on intelligence we collected on what's going on inside the Iranian leadership we have however seen signs and some of this has been public, whether Iranian leadership has hesitated about supplying ballistic missiles to the Russians, which was also on their wish list as well, partly because they're concerned not just about our reaction, but about European reaction, as well.

Mary Louise Kelly

China, President Xi, as you know, has instructed his country's military to be ready to invade Taiwan by 2027. What's your assessment of whether he will?

William Burns

Well, I think, you know, it's been discussed publicly a lot that instruction to be ready by 2027 I think it means just to be ready, it doesn't mean that conflict is imminent or inevitable.

Mary Louise Kelly

Has he made up his mind one way or another?

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William Burns

I'm not sure that he has. I think what it means is that today, President Xi and the PLA the People's Liberation Army leadership, have doubts whether they could pull off a successful full scale invasion of Taiwan at acceptable costs. I think, no, no foreign leader, I think it's more careful attention to Putin's experience in Ukraine than President Xi has as he thinks about Taiwan. And I think that's probably reinforced some of those doubts too not only the way in which an objectively smaller military has had an incredible success in fighting back with a great motivation against a bigger military, but also some of the flaws in Russian weapon systems. The fact that I think, certainly Putin but I think also President Xi underestimated the speed with which President Biden would be able to put together a strong coalition supporting Ukraine, the solidarity in the west and being willing to accept some economic cost to inflict damage on Russia. So all of that I think, gives pause to Chinese leadership. But having said all of that, I don't think any of us at CIA or the US intelligence community underestimate President Xi's commitment, eventually to control Taiwan.

Mary Louise Kelly

Do you have a sense of what would trigger like it was the red lines would be.

William Burns

You know, there were all sorts of things unfortunately, around the state of relations that that could trigger that kind of event. But today, I think, you know, our effort as a government, this is a policy issue, not an intelligence One is to do everything we can under the Taiwan Relations Act, to help Taiwan defend itself, but also to make clear in policy channels at the same time that, you know, we're not interested in changing the status quo right now across the Taiwan Strait and we oppose any with a unilateral efforts to change. We don't support independence, but you know, we made very clear policy channels that we would very sharply oppose any use of force by the People's Republic of China to try to alter that status quo.

Mary Louise Kelly

If, China were to make the decision to invade, would you have the same heads up from intelligence sources that you did when Vladimir Putin made up his mind to invade Ukraine?

William Burns

Something we obviously worked very hard at I'm proud of the record of CIA and the wider US intelligence community and providing credible, accurate early warning, on Putin's plans to invade Ukraine and that's why the President sent me to Moscow in November of 21 months before the war, to lay out what was the kind of unusual step what you knew about his plans, and what the consequences would be. So we worked very hard as an agency with all our partners in the intelligence community to put ourselves in a stronger position as we can to advise the President and policy makers if that day ever comes of what we've seen being planned.

Mary Louise Kelly

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I'm gonna push you on this because about a decade ago, the CIA rolled up, the China rolled up a lot of CIA operations. In China. A dozen or more CIA sources were arrested or worse, executed. Have you rebuilt?

William Burns

Yeah, we've made progress and we're working very hard over recent years, to ensure that we have a strong human intelligence capability to complement what we can acquire through other methods.

Mary Louise Kelly

On the cyber front, the recent Chinese hack of US government accounts, email accounts Microsoft says it went undetected for a month was The Chinese intelligence?

William Burns

Well, I would say several things first, I mean, it was the US government so right now so to be clear, that I think first detected those hacks informed Microsoft which acted very efficiently in response to that. Microsoft has attributed this to China. And we don't have any reason to doubt that attribution.

Mary Louise Kelly

But I mean, officially sanctioned was this Chinese intelligence or>

William Burns

I can't to go beyond what I just said,

Mary Louise Kelly

Was it within the realm of what is normal tit for tat? We have the Chinese are going to try to spy on the us, or did you see it as an escalation?

William Burns

Well, I think you know, the efforts not just of the People's Republic of China but Russia, Iran, North Korea and others to hack us systems, US critical infrastructure have been going on for some years. So in that sense, it's not new, but it's something we take very seriously and CIA's role as a foreign intelligence agency, is to collect all the intelligence we can and then support it, but the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI and others who are properly focused on protecting states domestic issues.

Mary Louise Kelly

Why do US government accounts keep getting hacked why can't we protect them better?

William Burns

All I can do is speak for the CIA and we work very hard to protect, you know, accounts there and we worked very hard that with other agencies, both domestic and other intelligence agencies, to ensure that, you know, we're not only sharply focused on these issues, but we're sharing every bit of intelligence



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we can acquire, that will help us only better protect US government unclassified accounts, because this is what we're talking about not classified. Accounts, in case of the most recent hack, but also trying to do all we can to strengthen our cybersecurity.

Mary Louise Kelly

How're you feeling about election security in 2024?

William Burns

Something We take very seriously I mean, again, as a Foreign Intelligence Service, I don't doubt that either the capacity or the determination of some of our rivals and adversaries to try to create problems, whether it's through disinformation or other means in our election processes and the interagency cooperation on those issues is a lot stronger than it was in 2016 years, even in 2020

Mary Louise Kelly

Are you seeing red warning lights though, the way in hindsight we should have before 2016?

William Burns

No, we're trying to anticipate a lot of those concerns right now. So don't get to the point. You know, of red warning lights. We've organized ourselves at CIA with a new Mission Center, which is you know, one of the organizational building blocks dozen or so of them at CIA that's focused on a range of issues, you know both transactional and technological issues that I think help us be a better partner for other US government agencies.

Mary Louise Kelly

I know you don't do politics. I know the CIA's mission is foreign focused foreign threats. But I wonder if the line feels awfully blurry someday. What is the CIA's role if the greatest threat to our security is our domestic politics.

William Burns

We're you know, we're a foreign intelligence agency, not a domestic one. But what we have tried to do is organize ourselves in a way where we can contribute to that better interagency coordination because you're right, the truth and I think Ale Mayorkas who was earlier today. expressed it well, that you know, given the challenges we face sometimes the lines between domestic and foreign get blurred. The lines in terms of our responsibilities aren't blurred, we know who we are, we're a Foreign Intelligence Service. But what that means is that we have to work even harder and work even more effectively, to ensure that what intelligence we collect in our world, gets shared quickly and effectively with our domestic law enforcement partners. And I think we're, we're doing better at that than have in years past.

Mary Louise Kelly

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I mean, do you Bill Burns personally agree with that premise? I think Richard Haas, now president emeritus of Council on Foreign Relations has expressed that the greatest threat to our national security is us.

William Burns

the only thing I can say on that is, you know, I travel a lot. And I get the question from lots of foreign counterparts, whether it's political leaders or intelligence partners. They ask questions and they wonder sometimes about what appears to them at least to be a domestic dysfunction. So you know, as a matter of intelligence assessment, I'd be crazy. If I said that that doesn't enter into the equation with some of our foreign partners

Mary Louise Kelly

What do you tell them? What's your answer?

William Burns

What I try to do is, you know, the, you know, the great advantage of democratic systems in my experience as a citizen, not just as director of the CIA is that for all of our faults. We're pretty good at addressing those flaws and fixing them and better than authoritarian systems are as well. You know, the proof is obviously, the actions we take and not every action we take reassures people about that as a society but I think that's the best, I think, the most honest answer to those kinds of challenges. And then in our role as an intelligence service, we try to demonstrate that we're in a political institution, and that what we're committed to is serving the best interests of the American people. And building intelligence partnerships that they can rely on that they can trust foreign partners,

Mary Louise Kelly

you spent 32 years in a diplomatic service and then you took over CIA in 2021. So you inherited an agency whose officers had been maligned by their commander in chief who suggested he believed Vladimir Putin over his own spy chiefs. Has the damage been repaired?

William Burns

You know, I think first I would say my predecessor Gina Haspel deserves a great deal of credit for shielding the, the a political institution that the men and women of the CIA are proud to be a part of, from, you know, a lot of the criticisms and challenges that that came in the last administration and you know, you'd have to ask my colleagues, but what I am deeply proud of the work that our officers do, as we sit here this evening and very hard places doing very hard jobs around the world, and the risks that they take and the sacrifices that they make, not widely understood nor, should they be publicly. But I'm deeply proud of that. And I think our officers take great pride in that as well. So that's what I worked very hard at every day.

Mary Louise Kelly

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I mean, when you talk about the CIA as a political institution. That's when you go testify on the hill before Jane Harman a small committee. The traditional thinking has been intelligence is too important to be politicized. And yet through no fault of the many fine men and women certainly the CIA the intelligence has been politicized how do you think about that in particularly in this moment, leading up to what is about toxic election cycle.

William Burns

Well my obligation. President Biden reminds me of this frequently is to offer the best intelligence that we can collect and analyze. Even when that's inconvenient to policymakers, I spend enough time on the other side of the table to know when it's inconvenient to when somebody's telling you that you're big new idea's actually not so big not so new and not so effective. Our job is to be straight about that. You know, whether it's Welcome downtown at the White House or other parts of the executive branch. It's not an easy role to play. But it's incredibly important. And that's one I took seriously I know director Haynes does and you know, others across the US intelligence and that's what our officers do their very best to provide.

Mary Louise Kelly

So I want to draw everyone's attention to a recent New York Times headline for those who missed it. The headline on May 9 was William Burns, a CIA spy master with unusual powers.

William Burns

My daughters got a big kick out of that.

Mary Louise Kelly

The most memorable line to my reading, and I'm curious what yours was, was the description of you. As and I quote, A tall discrete figure with wary eyes he is ashen hair and a trimmed mustache. A short you could easily imagine in a Jon LeCarre novel whispering into a dignitaries ear at an embassy party, that the city is falling to the rebels and a boat will be waiting in the harbor at midnight.

William Burns

And tall

Mary Louise Kelly

Have you ever had occasion to whisper in a dignitaries ear that a boat will be waiting for harbor at midnight? Or do you do aspire to it.

William Burns

It's something to aspire to right I'm a big Le Carre fan too but that's vastly exaggerated.

Mary Louise Kelly

Were you ticked when you read that? Did they get it right?

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William Burns

Tickled may not be the right word. Yeah. I. Yeah

Mary Louise Kelly

Is there any aspect of your job That's fun?

William Burns

Funs a strong term. But I genuinely do enjoy it. I mean, it's, you know, I genuinely enjoy the women and men I work with. As I said, I'm very proud of them. I learned something new every day. I'm a curious person. And certainly in the world of intelligence. There's lots of new things to learn every day. I'm concerned. You know about my colleagues. You know, I worry about all those people doing our jobs and hard places, taking incredible risks as well. But I feel like we're performing an important service, you know, for our government and for our nation, and we work for it, as well. So by Labor Day, it's fine. Some days, have a little bit of fun, and I genuinely enjoy what I'm doing and I'm very proud of the work that my colleagues are doing.

Mary Louise Kelly

Does it look different? And I mentioned you spent three decades in the Foreign Service, you knew every world leader you'd already dealt with them. You'd already you had had if you were trying to design a crash course for the incoming CIA director to understand the world you'd taken the course you would be teaching

William Burns

Especially with some of the creepier leaders. Yes, that's true.

Mary Louise Kelly

I believe you once said Qaddafi was the creepiest is he still on top of the list?

William Burns

Yeah It's a tight competition but yes. Qaddafi was a class for himself.

Mary Louise Kelly

But I do wonder, knowing the world knowing the issues and the people and the geography so well, does it look different from Langley than it does from Foggy Bottom? The mission is fundamentally different or is it?

William Burns

Yes, no, it is fundamentally different. I mean, you know, my role now our role at CIA is to support policymakers. It's not to be a policymaker, and that's something my colleagues and I understand very clearly. But part of our job just as it is for diplomats is to understand and navigate some very complicated

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foreign landscapes. As well and using, you know, foreign languages using an understanding of history and culture. And, you know, in that sense, there's some overlap, at least in the skill sets that are required. The professions themselves are complementary in some ways, but fundamentally different to and so, you know, as I said, you know, that's, that's one of the things I've enjoyed the most is learning something new about a profession that I thought in all those years, almost three and a half decades as a career diplomat, I understood pretty well, because I've worked very closely with, you know, with CIA, colleagues serving overseas and I know, the intelligence they collected and the analysis they provided made me a better negotiator, a better ambassador, better diplomat, and I'd like to think that my experience on the policy side of the table and as a diplomat makes me you know, well equipped to understand what matters most to policymakers and therefore, to make sure that we're providing at the pace that it's required the kind of intelligence that's going to make the biggest difference to smart policy choices.

Mary Louise Kelly

There's many people in this room who have stressful, intense, relentless jobs, very few of us who have been dispatched by the President of the United States to tell Russia You may not use a nuclear weapon, this cannot happen. The consequences if you don't do a good job in being persuasive or unimaginable. How do you carry that responsibility, that weight?

William Burns

Don't dwell too much on what you just mentioned. You try to focus on the challenge. And it's, you know, I mean, that's one place where having a lot of experience over the years does pay off. I trust the people I work with, to help put me in the strongest position to deliver messages like that. And, you know, I try to be as professional as I can be in delivering what the President asked me to deliver.

Mary Louise Kelly

Do you get scared before you walk into a meeting like that?

William Burns

No, not scared. There were times earlier in my career, when I'd be lying to you if I said I wasn't anxious about things that I've been. I've been at it long enough when You know, I just tried to focus on that on the challenge or the mission at hand.

Mary Louise Kelly

We have just a couple minutes Left, and I want to use it to try to figure out what we should be focused on it. We are not. I've just run through the laundry list of things that I would be at the top. I gotta start with Russia. I'm gonna ask you about Iran. I'm gonna ask you about China. We're gonna go to the war in Ukraine. We're going to talk cyber. Is there a country a person a place an issue? That journalist never asked you about that we should.

William Burns

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I mean, I think as a government, sometimes as an agency, we don't pay enough attention to the continent of Africa as we should. You know, this is a part of the world that's only going to become more significant for American and interests as the years flow by, you know, the population of the continent of Africa is likely to double before the middle of this century. If you add to that all the unresolved problems of food, water and health insecurity, the impact of climate change, unresolved regional conflicts, bad governance in some places, corruption and some of those places the way in which predatory players like the Wagner group Prigozhin's, mercenaries, try to take advantage of that. It's a challenge that we can't afford to neglect. I traveled several times to Africa in My role as director of CIA, I worked very hard to try to provide the support and resources that our officers operating in Africa need and can make best use of and we were reminded a member late last April when a political crisis accelerated rapidly in Sudan, the kinds of challenges that matter enormously to the people of Sudan which has suffered more than its share of humanitarian catastrophes over the years but can spill over and deepen, you know, regional insecurity as well. So that's an area where, you know, I try to stay, you know, as sharply focused as I can. And our agency does too. So that's one one example or at least, you know, broader than that, broader than the geopolitical part of the question is just the revolution in technology. And we've already talked about that a little bit.

Mary Louise Kelly

We need Another hour if we're going to

William Burns

And the forum is focused on that but I think you know, how well or how poorly we take advantage of emerging technologies as an agency, not just helping policymakers understand vulnerabilities and supply chains and a whole range of other issues. But also transforming our own tradecraft to take advantage of those changes and stay ahead of our adversaries is really gonna make or break us as a professional intelligence service. So that's something we are also very sharply focused on, which may not have been the case a decade ago.

Mary Louise Kelly

Send us out into the evening with a word of advice. We have a great young leaders program, the security forum, young people in their 20s who are considering or already launched into careers in public service and the government and military and academia. What would you tell a 25 year old Bill Burns? What do you wish you'd known?

William Burns

Yeah, well, I remember what my dad wrote to me when I was 25 years old. And I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my professional life and one possibility was going into the Foreign Service. And I remember my dad wrote me a letter which is kind of quaint but that's what people did in those days. And one line was always stuck with me. He said, nothing can make you prouder than to serve your country with honor. He was a career army officer, of whom I am deeply proud. And, you know, that swayed me a little bit at the time I never expected four decades later to still be at public service. But you

***\*\*Note that this is an automated transcription and may contain inaccuracies. Please refer to the [original YouTube recording](#) as well\*\****

know, throughout all of those 40 years, every year every job I've had, I've learned the truth and those words of advice. And so what I say to any 25 year olds out there is you know, public service, I think, you know, is always going to have its challenges, you know, especially in a foreign service or in the CIA. You moving back and forth overseas, it poses challenges to families to ask my two daughters who are very, you know, early 30s now, you know, changing high schools when you're 15 or 16 is not a lot of fun, and there are a lot of risks that people have to take, but I wouldn't have traded it for anything. I think the opportunity to serve your country and to try to do it with honor as best you can, I think is something that I would urge all the 25 year olds out there to consider we had a banner year in recruitment at CIA this past year, the biggest number of applicants since the immediate aftermath of 911. So I'd encourage all of you to consider that as well, or any other form of public service.

Mary Louise Kelly

And also a boat is waiting in the harbor at midnight. Bill Burns thank you.