

DCIA

Fireside Chat with William Burns:

Aspen Security Forum 2023

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Mary Louise Kelly: Bill Burns.

William Burns: Hi.

Mary Louise Kelly: Good to see you. Welcome back to Aspen.

William Burns: Thanks. It's very nice to be with you and nice to be back at Aspen. Thank you for inviting me again.

Mary Louise Kelly: Are you ready? Russia.

William Burns: Shocked that would you ask that.

Mary Louise Kelly: What just happened? When you were watching events Saturday, June 24th, what was your understanding of what was unfolding?

William Burns: Well, 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 none more fascinating than Prigozhin's mutiny, which was the most direct assault on the Russian state in Vladimir 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 had 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. What was equally remarkable, if you look back at the 36 hours that preceded that deal, it began a month ago today in the morning of 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 Shoigu and General Gerasimov, the chief of 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 the corruption which animates the Russian elite today, which is richly ironic given the fact that Prigozhin himself had profited as much as anyone from the corruption.

And so it was quite remarkable to see, and then, of course, what was equally remarkable was, you know, what transpired in those 36 hours after the video.

Mary Louise Kelly: And we're going there. You just called it a mutiny. Was it an attempted coup? Do we know what Prigozhin was trying to do?

William Burns: President Biden put it succinctly when he said that we knew things ahead of time. I'm not going to 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 Shoigu and Gerasimov, and a lot of this had 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 any real surprise when he decided to take action.

Mary Louise Kelly: How wounded is Putin?

William Burns: Sorry.

Mary Louise Kelly: How wounded was Putin?

William Burns: If you think about 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 has constructed his image, which has been carefully cultivated, and his grip on power around the notion and the image that he is the arbiter of order in the Russian system. What that has meant with the wider Russian public is a kind of social contract in which his message 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, 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 what we've seen especially in those 36 hours as this mutiny was unfolding was you had the spectacle of the Wagner forces, Prigozhin's mercenaries, advancing unopposed into Rostov, which is a city of a million people in southern Russia, also, the military headquarters of the Russian command in Ukraine, seize control of that significant city, and then over the following day, get two-thirds of the way up the road to Moscow, as well.

Mary Louise Kelly: Yeah.

William Burns: 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 what we saw was Russian security services, Russian military, Russian decision makers which were adrift or appeared to be adrift for those 36 hours. For a lot of Russians watching this, used to this image of Putin as the arbiter of order, the question was, does the emperor have 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 war in Ukraine began - since Putin's war on Ukraine began – asking questions about Putin's judgment, about his relative detachment from events, and from his indecisiveness.

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 it, and I think those weaknesses have been exposed by Prigozhin's mutiny. But I think even more deeply than that, they've been exposed by Putin's misjudgment since he launched this invasion as well. And I think there is a relationship between the battleground in 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.

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 in

Wagner. Because they have borne the brunt of the fighting and the battle of Bakhmut over most of the last year, suffered the brunt of the casualties there. Eighty percent of the Wagner forces in the battle of Bakhmut were recent residents of Russian penal colonies. They are useful to Putin in Africa, and Libya, and then 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 of 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 that real?

William Burns: Yeah. He's moved around a bit.

Mary Louise Kelly: Yeah.

William Burns: I think he's been in Minsk lately. I'm not sure he has any plans to retire in the suburbs of Minsk. But he's spent time in Russia, as well. And I think 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 payback. So I would be surprised if Prigozhin escapes further retribution for this. So in that sense, the President is right. If I were Prigozhin, 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.

Mary Louise Kelly: The CIA has taken this opportunity to make your first video post Telegram to let brave Russians know how to contact us safely on the dark web. Have they?

William Burns: We had 2.5 million views of that Telegram video in the first week it was on. So the truth is, there's a lot of disaffection in Russia in the elite and outside, and in 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 after this. Is there a friendly rivalry to get in first?

William Burns: No. Yeah. I mean it's aimed at the same objective right now, too.

Mary Louise Kelly: And as part of the objective, you know, whether that leads to useful intelligence streams for you to make Putin look over his shoulder. Uneasy about who he can trust.

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

Mary Louise Kelly: Yeah. You were just in Ukraine. How is the big counteroffensive going? What's your assessment?

William Burns: I am pretty regular traveler to Ukraine, you know over the course of the last 18 months. That's a reflection of the significance that the president, everyone in the U.S. government attaches to our support for what has been an incredibly courageous and tenacious Ukrainian effort to fight back against Putin and against Russia. You know Putin was fond of saying that Ukraine is not a real country. Well, 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 counteroffensive 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 extensive minefields as well. So it's going to take time and it's not going to be easy to make progress. I am, however, an optimist not based on those trips -- not only based on those trips to Ukraine -- but on the intelligence. You know they were able to acquire and develop that -- you know the Ukrainians will be able to make advances. I think the thing sometimes that is easy to forget is behind those considerable fixed defenses that the Russians have built in southern Ukraine and Zaporizhzhia, you know, there still lies some pretty significant structural weaknesses. Poor morale, uneven generalship to put it mildly on the Russian side, and the disarray we were just talking about in the political and very senior military leadership.

Mary Louise Kelly: Yeah.

William Burns: So I think it is going to be a tough slog, but we're going to do everything we can as an intelligence agency to provide the kind of intelligence support, ensuring 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 it less. It's less in the news. Is the possibility of a nuclear weapon being introduced in the war zone? I knew that late last year, you met with your Russian counterpart, Sergey Naryshkin, and you have 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. It suggests that President Biden thought the possibility was real enough that he dispatched his CIA chief to make it 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 that Putin and some of those around him have engaged in is reckless and deeply irresponsible. It is, however, not something that 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 Sergey Naryshkin, one of my Russian counterparts, and through other channels, the depth of our concern. I think it's been important that President Xi in China has spoken out about this as well because his is a 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 preparations for nuclear use.

Mary Louise Kelly: How much more instability has it just introduced to have Russia pull out of the grain deal and increasingly expanding its attacks on the Black Sea?

William Burns: Well, it's deeply troubling. I mean, first, for Ukrainians where, you know, what Putin is trying to do is wreck the Ukrainian economy and wreak real havoc on innocent Ukrainian civilians. It obviously also does deep damage to some of the most vulnerable societies on earth – in Africa and the Middle East – that depend on those grain shipments. What Putin has 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 attacks in Odessa, Mykolaiv, and other port cities, against grain storage facilities.

And as the White House made clear earlier today, we see some very concerning signs

of the Russians considering the kind of false flag operations that we highlighted in the run-up to the war, as well. In other words, looking at ways in which they might make attacks against shipping in the Black Sea, and then blaming it or trying to blame it on the Ukrainians.

Mary Louise Kelly: Why is Iran arming Russia in Ukraine?

William Burns: Yeah. Because I think the defense to partnership between Russian and Iran right now is a useful two-way street.

Mary Louise Kelly: What's Iran getting?

William Burns: Well, I think we've seen signs of the Russian technicians working on the Space Launch vehicle program in Iran and other aspects of their 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 it was attacked with Iranian UAVs. Other armed Iranian drones had been used indiscriminately against Ukrainian civilians, but you know the provision of advanced combat aircraft obviously creates threats to our friends in the 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, just gave an interview this week in which he 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. Are you seeing that?

William Burns: Yeah. I mean I'm not going to add to what Richard said. In terms of our commentary on intelligence, we collect about what's going on inside the Iranian leadership. We have however seen signs and some of these have been public where the Iranian leadership has hesitated about supplying ballistic missiles to the Russians which you know is 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: Now 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 it's been discussed publicly a lot that instruction is to be ready by 2027. I think it means just that, 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 the other?

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 about whether they could pull off a successful full scale invasion of Taiwan at acceptable cost to them. You know, no foreign leader I think has paid more careful attention to Putin's experience in Ukraine than President Xi has as he thinks about Taiwan. I think that's probably reinforced some of those doubts, too, not only in the way in which an objectively smaller military has had incredible success in fighting back with a great deal of motivation against a bigger military but also some of the flaws in Russian weapons 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 in support of Ukraine and the solidarity of the West in being willing to accept some economic costs to inflict damage on Russia. All of that I think gives pause to the Chinese leadership. But having said all that, I don't think any of us at CIA or in the U.S. Intelligence Committee underestimate President Xi's commitment eventually to try to control Taiwan.

Mary Louise Kelly: Do you have a sense of what would trigger it, what the red lines would be?

William Burns: You know, there are all sorts of things, unfortunately, given the state of relations that could trigger that kind of movement. But today I think our effort as a government - and here 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 we're not interested in changing the status quo right now across the Taiwan Strait. We oppose any unilateral efforts to change that. We don't support Taiwan independence, but you know we've made very clear in 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: Well, it's something we obviously worked very hard at. I'm proud of the record of CIA and the wider U.S. intelligence community in providing credible, accurate, early warning on Putin's plans to invade Ukraine. I mean that was why the President sent me to Moscow in November of '21, months before the war, to lay out in what was kind of an unusual step on what we knew about his plans and what the consequences would be. So we work 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 policymakers if that day ever comes of what we see being planned.

Mary Louise Kelly: I'm going to push you on this because about a decade ago 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 strong human intelligence capability to complement what we can acquire through other methods.

Mary Louise Kelly: Yeah. On the cyber front, the recent Chinese hack of U.S. government accounts, email accounts, Microsoft says it went undetected for a month. Was this Chinese intelligence?

William Burns: Well, I mean I would say several things. First, I mean it was the U.S. government - as the White House said - who had made clear and that I think first detected those hacks and 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 go beyond what I just said.

Mary Louise Kelly: Was it within the realm of what is normal tit for tat? We know that Chinese are going to try to spy on the U.S. Or did you see it as soon as escalation?

William Burns: Well, I think the effort is not just of the People's Republic of China but Russia, Iran, North Korea and others to hack U.S. systems or U.S. critical infrastructure. It had been going on for some years. So in that sense it's not new, but it's something

we take very seriously.

CIA's role as a foreign intelligence agency is to collect all the intelligence we can and then support the Department of Homeland Security, and the FBI, and others who are properly focused on protecting the United States' domestic security.

Mary Louise Kelly: Yeah. Why do U.S. government accounts keep getting hacked? Why can't we protect them better?

William Burns: All I can do is speak for the CIA. We work very hard to protect accounts there. We work very hard with other agencies, both domestic and other intelligence agencies, to ensure that we're not only sharply focused on those issues but we're sharing every bit of intelligence we can acquire that will help us not only better protect U.S. government unclassified accounts - because this is what we're talking about, not classified accounts in the case of the most recent hack – but also trying to do all we can to strengthen our cyber security.

Mary Louise Kelly: How are you feeling about election security in 2024?

William Burns: It's 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 is to try to create problems whether it's through disinformation or other means. In our election processes, I think interagency cooperation on those issues is a lot stronger than it was in 2016 and even in 2020.

Mary Louise Kelly: Are you seeing like red warning lights though the way in hindsight we should have before 2016?

William Burns: You know we're trying to anticipate a lot of those concerns right now so we don't get to the point of red warning lights as well. We've organized ourselves at CIA with a new mission center, which is one of the organizational building blocks, a dozen or so of them at CIA, that's focused on a range of issues - both transnational and technological issues. That I think helps us be a better partner for other U.S. government agencies.

Mary Louise Kelly: Yeah. I know you don't do politics. I know the CIA's mission is foreign-focused on foreign threats. But I wonder if the line feels awfully blurry some days. What is the CIA's role if the greatest threat to our security is our domestic politics?

William Burns: Well, 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 is, I think Ali Mayorkas who was here earlier today, expressed that 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 role gets shared quickly and effectively with our domestic law enforcement partners. And I think we're doing better at that than we have in years past.

Mary Louise Kelly: I mean do you, Bill Burns, personally agree with that premise? I think Richard Hass, now President Emeritus of Council on Foreign Relations, has expressed this. The greatest threat to our national security is us.

William Burns: I mean 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. They wonder sometimes about what appears, to them at least, to be our domestic dysfunction. So as a matter of intelligence assessment, I'd be crazy if I say 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: The great advantage of democratic systems in my experience as a citizen and not just as director of the CIA is that, for all of our faults, we're pretty good at addressing them and fixing those flaws I think better than authoritarian systems are. Now the proof is obviously in the actions we take. Not every action we take reassures people about that as a society, but I think that's the best and I think the most honest answer to those kind of challenges.

Then in our role as an intelligence service, we try to demonstrate that we're an apolitical institution. That what we're committed to is serving the best interest of the American people and building intelligence partnerships that they can rely on and that they can trust and by foreign partners.

Mary Louise Kelly: You spent 32 years in the diplomatic service and then you took over

CIA in 2021. So like two-and-a-half years ago. 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: I think first I would say my predecessor, Gina Haspel, deserves a great deal of credit for shielding the apolitical institution that the men and women of the CIA are proud to be a part of from a lot of the criticisms and the challenges that came in the last administration. You'd have to ask my colleagues, but what I am as deeply proud of is the work that our officers do as we sit here this evening in 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 work very hard at every day.

Mary Louise Kelly: Yeah. I mean when you talk about the CIA as an apolitical institution, that's when you go testify on the Hill and before Jane Harman's old 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 serving at the CIA, the intelligence has been politicized. How do you think about that particularly in this moment leading up to what is about to be another toxic election cycle?

William Burns: My obligation, and President Biden reminds me of this frequently, is to offer the best intelligence that we can collect and analyze straight up even when that's inconvenient to policymakers. I spent enough time on the other side of the table to know when it's inconvenient to, when somebody's telling you that the big new idea is actually not so big, not so new, and not so effective.

Our job is to be straight about that, whether it's welcome downtown, at the White House, or other parts of the executive branch or not. It's not an easy role to play, but it's an incredibly important one. It's one I take seriously. I know Director Haines does and others across the US intelligence community. That's what our officers do their very best to provide.

Mary Louise Kelly: I want to draw everyone's attention to a recent *New York Times* headline. For those who missed it, the headline on May 9th was: William Burns, the CIA Spymaster With Unusual Powers.

William Burns: My daughters got a big kick out of that, yeah.

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 discreet figure with weary eyes, ashen hair, and a trim mustache. A sort you could easily imagine in a John LeCarré novel whispering into a dignitary’s ear at an Embassy party that the city is falling to the rebels and a boat would be waiting in the harbor at midnight.”

William Burns: I am tall.

Mary Louise Kelly: Have you ever had occasion to whisper in a dignitary’s ear that a boat would be waiting in the harbor at midnight, or do you aspire to that?

William Burns: It’s something to aspire to, right? I'm a big LeCarré fan too. That's a vastly exaggerated --

Mary Louise Kelly: Were you tickled when you read that? Did they get it right?

William Burns: Tickled may not be the right word. Yeah. Yeah.

Mary Louise Kelly: Is there any aspect of your job that's fun?

William Burns: Fun is a strong term in this job. But I genuinely do enjoy it. I mean, it's -- you know, I genuinely enjoy it, the women and men I work with. As I said, I'm very proud of them. I learn 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 about my colleagues. I worry about all those people doing hard jobs in hard places, taking incredible risks. But I feel like they're performing an important service for our government and for our nation, and we work very hard at it. So, while not every day is fun, 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 had, if you were trying to design a crash course for the incoming CIA director to understand the world, you've taken the course. You could be teaching it.

William Burns: Especially some of the creepy leaders. Yes, that's true.

Mary Louise Kelly: I believe you once said Gaddafi was the creepiest? Is he still top of the list?

William Burns: Yeah. It's a tight competition, but yes, yes.

Mary Louise Kelly: Who's number two? Okay.

William Burns: Gaddafi was in a class by himself.

Mary Louise Kelly: But I do wonder, 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: It is. It is fundamentally different. I mean, you know my role now, our role at CIA is to support policy makers. It's not to be a policy maker. And that's something my colleagues and I understood very clearly. But part of our job, just as it is for diplomats, is to understand and navigate some very complicated foreign landscapes as well and using foreign languages, using an understanding of history and culture. And 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 too. And so, you know, as I said, that's one of the things I have enjoyed 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 worked very closely with CIA colleagues serving overseas. And I know the intelligence they have collected and the analysis they provided made me a better negotiator and an ambassador, a better diplomat. And I'd like to think that my experience on the policy side of the table and as a diplomat makes me well-equipped to understand what matters most to policy makers, and, therefore, to make sure that we're providing, at the pace that is required, the kind of intelligence that's going to make the biggest difference despite policy choices.

Mary Louise Kelly: I think 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, are unimaginable. How do you carry that responsibility, that weight?

William Burns: I don't dwell too much on what you just mentioned. I mean, you try to focus on the challenge at hand, and that's one place where having lots 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 asks 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 early in my career that I'd be lying to you if I said I wasn't anxious about things. But I've been at it long enough when I just try to focus 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 that we are not. I have just run through the laundry list of things that I would be -- you know, the top. I'm going to start with Russia. I'm going to ask you about Iran. I'm going to ask you about China. We're going over the war in Ukraine. We're going to talk cyber. Is there a country, a person, a place, an issue that journalists never ask you about that we should?

William Burns: I mean, I think as a government and sometimes as an agency, we don't pay enough attention to the continent of Africa as we should. This is a part of the world that's only going to become more significant for the American interests as the years flow by. The population of the continent of Africa is likely to double before the middle of the century. If you add to that all the unresolved problems of food, water, and health insecurity, the impact of climate change, unresolved regional conflicts, good governance in some places, corruption in 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've traveled several times to Africa in my role as Director of CIA. I work very hard to try to provide the support and the resources that our officers operating in Africa need and can make best use of.

You know, we were reminded I remember late last April when a political crisis accelerated rapidly in Sudan. The kind of challenges that matter enormously to the people of Sudan, which has suffered more than its share of humanitarian catastrophes over the years, can spill over and deepen regional insecurity, as well. So that's an area where I try to stay a sharper focus as I can and our agency does, too. So that's one example at least.

I think broader than that, broader than the geopolitical part of the question, is just the revolution of technology. And we've already talked about that a little bit, and I know --

Mary Louise Kelly: We need another hour for that to -- yeah.

William Burns: And the forum is focused on that, but I think how well or how poorly we take advantage of emerging technologies as an agency, not just in helping policy makers to 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 going to 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 at the Security Forum. Young people in their 20s who are considering or already launched into careers in public service, in the government, in the military, in academia, what would you tell 25-year-old Bill Burns, what you wish he'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. 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 has 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'm deeply proud. And, you know, that swayed me a little bit at that time. I never expected four decades later to still be in public service. But, you know, throughout all of those 40 years, every year, every job I've had, I've learned the truth about those words of advice.

And so what I say to any 25-year-olds out there is public service, I think, is always going to have its challenges, especially in the foreign service or in the CIA. You're moving back and forth overseas, it poses challenges to families. You can ask my two daughters who are in their 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 and the biggest number of applicants since the immediate aftermath of 9/11. 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.

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