



# WTH did the intelligence community know about the coronavirus threat? Former CIA chief Michael Morell on how intelligence must change

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Danielle Pletka: Hi, I'm Danielle Pletka.

Marc Thiessen: I'm Marc Thiessen.

Danielle Pletka: Welcome to our podcast What the Hell Is Going On? So Marc, surprise us. What the hell is going on?

Marc Thiessen: We're talking about the coronavirus. Surprise. But we're actually talking about intelligence and the coronavirus. This pandemic that we are now experiencing, we just had 17 million people file for unemployment in three weeks. We are going to have anywhere between 25 and 40% reduction in gross domestic product in the size of our economy in the second quarter. This is an attack on our country by a virus that makes 9/11 pale in comparison in terms of the economic and even in the loss of lives. Like 9/11, we weren't ready for it.

Danielle Pletka: Right. So that's the question.

Marc Thiessen: We're not prepared.

Danielle Pletka: Does our intelligence community, which spends so much time looking at China as the largest country in the world, as a country, obviously, with nuclear weapons, as a country that has an active chemical weapons program and active biological weapons program-

Marc Thiessen: And even more worrisome, active wet markets.

Danielle Pletka: God. Can you believe they've reopened by the way?

Marc Thiessen: Oh my gosh.

Danielle Pletka: We spend a lot of time looking at China, but do we spend enough time looking at China and the health threat that it poses to the rest of the world?

Marc Thiessen: Answer's no. Apparently.

Danielle Pletka: Apparently.

- Marc Thiessen: Because we're in complete lockdown as a result of our failure to do that. Look, there's a lot of criticism of the Trump administration for not having been ready for this. There was also a lot of criticism of the Bush administration after September 11, that he didn't heed the warnings that were coming. You had Richard Clarke saying how he was pounding on Condi Rice's door, trying to get her to pay attention in al Qaeda. There was a briefing ... Presidential Daily Brief: "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US."
- Marc Thiessen: It's an interesting question of whether that criticism of the Bush administration was fair or whether we should have looked even further back at the Clinton administration and its failure to respond to repeated attacks against the United States. Similarly, is it fair to pin this all on the Trump administration and its failure to prepare or should we be looking further back at the failures of his predecessors to prepare for this?
- Danielle Pletka: I think part of the problem actually is less about who the president is and whether Barack Obama let us down or Donald Trump let us down or... We always want someone to blame here in Washington. But I think the real issue here is that, we are in so many ways stuck, national security wise, in the construct that was built basically in 1948. Our State Department basically looks the same. Our Defense Department, obviously much more sophisticated, much better weaponry, but in terms of organization, pretty static as well.
- Danielle Pletka: Of course, the intelligence community, despite the unbelievable layering that went on after 9/11, basically looks at threats the same way they always have. Which is, do you have people who are trying to kill us, do you have weapons that are trying to kill us? And what are you saying about us in the halls of government in secret places like Beijing and Moscow?
- Marc Thiessen: I would look at it a little bit differently than that. I think that we did do a lot of change after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks both in our intelligence community and our military, our entire structure of government. In fact, I did a whole speech for President Bush at West Point at a graduation, comparing the changes we had made after 9/11, to the changes that Truman made at the start of the Cold War that prepared us for that. But it seems like always, the pattern in America is, don't anticipate a tragedy, allow some catastrophic event to happen, spend billions and billions and trillions of dollars refocusing the government to make sure that event never happens again, succeeding, but they're not anticipating the next event.
- Danielle Pletka: Right. We're always fighting the last war.
- Marc Thiessen: So what's going to happen now is in the wake of this pandemic, we're going to have to restructure the intelligence community and restructure the public health infrastructure of the country and all sorts of different things. We're going to spend a lot of time and a lot of energy focusing on how do we reorganize government to make sure we never ever have something like this happen again. And we'll do it. We may stop the next pandemic, but then something else is going to hit us that we weren't anticipating.
- Danielle Pletka: Right. Well that is the nature of the world. But at the same time, I really do think that part of this is that, the bankruptcy of institutions, the loss of faith in government is a big part of this because frankly, if Donald Trump had stood up two years ago, Barack Obama had stood up six years ago and said, "I want to spend x billions of dollars

preparing us for a pandemic." There would have been a lot of criticism.

Marc Thiessen: Well, George W. Bush did do that.

Danielle Pletka: Yeah.

Marc Thiessen: In 2005. We spent a lot of money on it. We prepared the stockpile and all the rest of it. Then in 2009, there was the swine flu, and we depleted the stockpile and never refilled it, because the imperative wasn't there. I guess partly one of the things the Bush administration was trying to do after 9/11 was, we had a failure of imagination in 9/11 of how we might have a catastrophe in this country. Let's think of other ways that we're not anticipating and use our imaginations to anticipate and one of the ways he predicted we might actually get hit was a pandemic and lo and behold, 15 years later, here we are.

Marc Thiessen: But it's hard to sustain that for 15 years over multiple administration's because, the feeling that we had after 9/11 of vulnerability dissipated as we weren't attacked again. So we thought we were invulnerable again. Guess what, once we got attacked by a virulent ideology, and now we've gotten attacked by a virus.

Danielle Pletka: So should it be the job of the intelligence community to try to anticipate this? I mean, one of the things I worry about is that, as everything becomes politicized, we end up putting more on the intelligence community than we should. I'm still asking myself whether it's right that the CIA is operating drones that don't come under any War Powers Resolution, so they can go off and shoot off drones against terrorists as part of their missions.

Danielle Pletka: I worry that with all of the political hot buttons that are out there, climate change and populism, and disinformation, that the intelligence community is going to get saddled with now, anticipating health emergencies.

Marc Thiessen: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Danielle Pletka: Is that a good thing?

Marc Thiessen: Probably not, though they certainly have a role in it. It's probably primarily the job of the CDC and our public health institutions to give us that early warning, though a lot of this has national security implications as well. So they've got a role too. But we've got the perfect person to answer your question Dany, because we've got the guy who actually delivered that PDB briefing to President Bush – "Bin Laden Determined To Strike Us" back in 2001, Michael Morell, who went on to become the acting director of the CIA.

Danielle Pletka: So it's really a pleasure to have Michael Morell with us. He hosts his own podcast on CBS News Radio called "Intelligence Matters." He's actually though a career intel guy, career intel analyst, and he served as deputy director of the CIA from 2010 to 2013. And twice as acting director, first in 2011 and then from 2012 to 2013. He's now a senior counselor and global chairman of Beacon Global Strategies, which is a consulting firm at which we know lots of great people here in DC. So we're pretty lucky to have him.

Marc Thiessen: Michael, welcome to the podcast.

- Michael Morell: It's great to be with you guys.
- Marc Thiessen: Thanks so much. So you're a host of a podcast of your own "Intelligence Matters." It's one of my favorite podcasts on national security issues. Tell us a little bit about the show.
- Michael Morell: We have an episode a week and we sit down with a national security person, sometimes they're currently serving in the administration, sometimes they're former. Sometimes they've got breadths on all the issues like former national security advisors or sometimes they're very narrow, on one particular topic, like I did get one on coronavirus, the virus itself this week. But the reason I love it, is because it reminds me of being in my office at CIA before I went to the White House or before I went to Congress to talk about a specific issue. I would get the best experts in the building, in my office and I would ask them 1,000 questions, and that's what my podcast feels like.
- Danielle Pletka: Oh, that's awesome. No, that really ... I think Marc and I feel the same way. We learn so much from our guests and for us, it's frankly a privilege to have people who know so much about these various issues.
- Marc Thiessen: Like you.
- Danielle Pletka: Marc and I are going to go practice medicine after this whole coronavirus thing. We've done so many coronavirus podcasts, but something that we really wanted to ask you about, a terrific op-ed you had in the Washington Post, "Four ways US intelligence efforts should change in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic." Would you walk our listeners through that?
- Michael Morell: Sure. Shouldn't be surprising to anybody that the intelligence community has for its entire lifespan been focused on what we all consider to be the traditional national security issues, right? Chinese military modernization, Russian military capabilities and intentions, right? The plans, intentions and capabilities of terrorist groups, right? All of that makes perfect sense. But my co-author, Glenn Gerstell, who just retired as the General Counsel from the National Security Agency, he and I are good friends. So we decided to collaborate on this because we both feel the same way.
- Michael Morell: We need to broaden the definition of national security, that there are issues that are outside of the traditional national security framework, whether they be pandemics, whether they be the vulnerability of supply chains, whether it be climate change, whether it be any sort of non-traditional national security issue that in some way impacts our security, that the intelligence community should be focused on those. In doing that, one of the arguments we make is that the best way to do that is to take advantage of open source tools.
- Michael Morell: The number of tools out there tapping in to open source are growing by the day, and the intelligence community needs to be on the cutting edge of those. Let me just give you an example. There are companies that do sentiment analysis around the world. So they have thousands and thousands and thousands of people in every country in the world, who they task to tell them about, "What do you think of the Coca Cola brand?" Well, you could also task those people to tell when they see disease in their particular area.

- Michael Morell: When they see something unusual from a medical perspective, right? That might be able to get you out in front of an epidemic or a pandemic. So the use of open source in those ways I think could be revolutionary and could help places like NIH and CDC do their job better. Then the third point we argue which is look, there is no such thing as a free lunch. If you broaden the scope of what the intelligence community does, you're going to have to resource them. We make what we know is a non-starter suggestion which is moving 1% of the defense budget to the intelligence community. We know that's not going to happen.
- Michael Morell: But we just wanted to show how 1% of the defense budget equates to a 10% increase in the intelligence community budget, just wanted to show that disparity there. Then our last point is, this virus has driven home a lot of things, but one of the things it's driven home is, other countries' willingness to use disinformation against us, right? We've known that for a long time and we learned the lesson the hard way in 2016. The Russians have never stopped, very active in that space. Now the Chinese as a result of coronavirus, have also gotten very active in the disinformation space outside of China, right?
- Michael Morell: They were always very aggressive at it in China, but now they're doing it very aggressively outside of China, with much of it aimed at our interests. So this is going to become an area where the community is going to have to focus even more than it already is. So those are the four points we make.
- Danielle Pletka: It was terrific. There are so many things I want to ask you, I don't even know where to start. But one thing I worry about ... during the Obama administration, obviously, there was a heightened focus on climate change, which then diminished in the Trump administration, sort of different perspectives on that challenge. How much do you worry that the intelligence community will be buffeted by the political fashions of the moment? Obviously, right now, it's going to be health care. If a Democrat is elected in November, it's going to be back to climate change. Then we have disinformation, we have corruption, something that I've talked about often as an issue that I wish the intelligence community focused more on.
- Danielle Pletka: At a certain point, aren't they just going to get beyond what their abilities are? Even with that extra 1% you're planning on stealing away from Mark Esper.
- Michael Morell: I'd say, two things. One is, there's a little bit of a game that goes on. So the IC and CIA have focused on the national security implications of climate change for a long time, right? The IC shouldn't be in the business of doing the science of it. Is it actually happening and why is it happening? Are questions that should be left for scientists to deal with and not intelligence officers. But we should be focused on the national security consequences. So people having to move in search of water, people engaged in conflict over water. The US and Russia and other nation states fighting over resources that are now available right in the Arctic that weren't available before.
- Michael Morell: So we should be focusing on those, and we probably should be focusing on those more than we actually are, is what Glenn and I would argue, but the little secret is that, we focus on what we think is important, irregardless of what administration is in office, and what their political views on certain issues are. So, for example, when Bill Clinton came to office, the Vice President Al Gore said, "I want you guys to have a climate center." So we created a climate center and took the analysts who were doing the national security implications of climate, and put them in one place.

- Michael Morell: Then the Bush administration came to office and said, "We don't want you to have a climate center." So we got rid of the name climate center, but we still did the national security implications of climate, so there's a little bit of a game that goes on in terms of how you name things. But I would say that, in general, we need to focus more on those kinds of things. Again, pandemics is a good example. I don't want the intelligence community to be the one in the US government responsible for making a call on whether a pandemic is about ready to happen. That's CDC's job. That is clearly in their bucket.
- Michael Morell: But what I want and what Glenn wants, is the intelligence community to ask itself, "How can we help CDC do its job?" It might be from this open source monitoring I was talking about, it might be from traditional intelligence collection showing, for example, I don't know this, but showing for example, that the Chinese were not being fully transparent, or outright lying about what was happening in Wuhan and making sure you're collecting that stuff, and making sure that it's getting to the right place. Not only to the White House and into the traditional national security agencies, but making sure that it actually gets to CDC and the NIH as well so that they can use it in building their models and their analysis.
- Danielle Pletka: When there was a question about who knew what when, you tweeted and said it's hard without more public information to know what the IC reported and when...
- Michael Morell: Exactly.
- Danielle Pletka: Can you talk about how good that is?
- Michael Morell: So I actually had a reporter call me yesterday and say, "What's the relationship between CIA and CDC?" And the answer is, "Look, I haven't been in government for seven years. So I don't know. I have no idea what it is today." But I have to tell you, when I was the deputy director of CIA, I was not aware of a relationship between CIA and CDC. Doesn't mean there wasn't one, but I wasn't aware of one.
- Marc Thiessen: But this was the problem before 9/11 too which is that the sharing of information between the FBI and the CIA, could have impacted our readiness. You were the briefer for President Bush. You were telling us offline he used to call you Mikey. But before 9/11, when he got that famous PDB which was declassified "Bin Laden Determined to Strike US," the IC and President Bush got a lot of criticism for not anticipating the 9/11 attacks. Now we're seeing the same thing with President Trump getting criticized saying that he was briefed by the intelligence community. He was warned about this and he didn't heed the warnings. You probably find the criticism of Bush was a little bit unfair. Is the criticism of Trump unfair?
- Michael Morell: Yeah. So it's a great question. There's a parallel between 9/11 and the pandemic. And the parallel is that the intelligence community and many other people, not just the intelligence community, but many other people, for years have been providing what intelligence analysts call strategic warning. Right? And with 9/11, it was for five or six years, the FBI and the CIA, five or six years before 9/11, the CIA and the FBI were saying, "This group al Qaeda, we're really worried about it. This guy Osama Bin Laden, we're really worried about him. He is coming after us. At some point, he's going to make an attempt. He's already attacked two embassies in East Africa. He's already attacked a US warship in Yemen, right? This guy's coming after us."
- Michael Morell: That's strategic warning. The same thing was provided to multiple presidents with

regard to a pandemic. Many people, CDC, NIH, intelligence community, many people saying at some point, there is going to be a pandemic. We can't tell you when, we can't tell you next year, we can't tell you 10 years from now, we can't tell you how bad it's going to be. But at some point, there's going to be a pandemic. Strategic warning. What nobody provided in both the case of 9/11 and in the case of the pandemic was what I would call tactical warning. Which is, we can tell you that al Qaeda is coming after us on this day, in this way, in this manner

- Michael Morell: The intelligence community failed in that mission. I don't know whether CDC failed or not, we got to figure that out, in its mission of warning that a pandemic was coming. When did they first say that? I don't know. Did they say it early enough? I don't know. But it doesn't sound to me like they said it early enough. So I think there was probably a tactical failure here to warn early enough about a pandemic. Now, the lesson here in terms of the strategic warning, is really, really important is, if governments in general, not just the Trump administration, not just the Obama administration, administration's in general, American society in general, and the American people in general, tend not to take action on strategic warnings.
- Michael Morell: They tend to wait for the bad event to actually happen, before they take action. Think about what the difference would have been, had President Clinton taken the fight to al Qaeda in Afghanistan, immediately after our embassies in East Africa were attacked in 1998. There probably wouldn't have been a 9/11. Could he have convinced the American people of the need to do that in the fall of 1998? Very easy to do it after 9/11. Could he have done it in the fall of 1998? I don't know. Didn't even try. So there is this tendency on the part of Americans, to push strategic warnings to the side.
- Michael Morell: Don't pay attention to the experts until it's too late. Then man, we're all over it right? We successfully deal with a problem. But we do have this tendency, to not listen to strategic warnings. Very interesting.
- Marc Thiessen: There's a similarity in 9/11 and this in that, before 9/11, we had a series of escalating attacks. We had the Khobar Towers, we had the embassy bombings, we had the Cole, going even further back the first World Trade Center attack, and we didn't take those things seriously and the result was 9/11. Similarly here, we had SARS, we had the swine flu, we had Ebola, we had Zika, we had all these near misses, and we still waited. But the difference between 9/11 and then, is that, 9/11 was a failure of imagination, right? Because no one could have anticipated that 19 guys with box cutters would take planes, turn them into missiles and fly them into buildings.
- Marc Thiessen: There was no failure of imagination to figure out what's happening. Literally, what's happening now is what was anticipated, it's just the different virus. So-
- Michael Morell: Exactly.
- Marc Thiessen: ... so it's a-
- Michael Morell: That's a big difference.
- Marc Thiessen: Yeah. So should we have been better prepared for this?
- Michael Morell: I think so. The Bush administration got very interested in the second half of the

administration, they put together a strategy for dealing with a pandemic. The Obama administration similarly had a strategy for dealing with a pandemic, they actually handed it over to the Trump administration. But having a strategy for dealing with a pandemic once it starts, is one thing. It's completely different to do two other things that you also need to do. Number one, you need to find ways to mitigate the risk of the bad thing happening. So what would that have meant? That would have meant getting very aggressive with the Chinese about these animal markets.

- Michael Morell: And really pushing hard in the Chinese to get rid of them, so that we would reduce the chance that there'd be a pandemic that originated from animals to humans. Another example of what you need to do is you need to actually prepare, not just a strategy, but you actually need to prepare in terms of getting the right stuff in stockpile, right? The right masks, right ventilators. Getting prepared in that way. We were not doing enough on the mitigation front. We were not doing enough on the stockpiling front to be prepared for this. That's where I think we failed.
- Danielle Pletka: So another interesting question when we talk about the analogies between 9/11 and this, which we do on not just the national security front, but also on the economic front. But one other interesting aspect is, what lessons we're teaching terrorists about our vulnerabilities to a bio weapons attack. How important do you think that is?
- Michael Morell: So I think it's very important. We know that terrorists have been interested in biological weapons for a long time. We know that al Qaeda was. In fact, we learned after 9/11 that prior to 9/11, they were actually researching anthrax, and anthrax dissemination and how do you kill the most people. We also know that ISIS was interested in biological weapons. They actually used chemical weapons on the battlefield that they made in university labs in areas of the caliphate where there were universities. So I think this will be a reminder to them of the damage that can be done from these kinds of bio weapons.
- Michael Morell: Now, having said that, it's not easy to engineer something that is as perfect as the coronavirus. This is a really unique virus. I did an interview with a doctor the other day and he argued that this thing is so perfect, that it could not have been produced in a lab. That there was absolutely no way that science at its level today, could have produced this perfect of a virus, only nature could have done that. So it will make them more interested but we got to keep reminding ourselves that it's hard, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't pay attention to it from an intelligence perspective and a preparation perspective.
- Marc Thiessen: But for a terrorist, it doesn't necessarily take the biological weapons expertise to produce it. They could just turn to nature.
- Marc Thiessen: You remember in the Bush administration in 2001, we did an exercise called Dark Winter, where terrorists released smallpox into shopping malls and that exercise, 3 million people were infected and a million people were killed. Why would terrorists not simply look at the damage that's been done to our economy, which dwarfs the damage of 9/11, and think instead of sending 19 guys with box cutters to get on planes, I'm going to send 19 guys to Wuhan or to the Ebola river in Africa and then get them to infect themselves with a virus and then come and start coughing on everybody. I say it in a funny way, but isn't that a realistic threat?
- Michael Morell: Absolutely. The anthrax thing was the thing that scared us the most because, literally



a teaspoon of finely granulated anthrax, just a teaspoon of it in the London subway could kill 10s of thousands of people. So absolutely, it's something we need to focus on. This is going to be an absolute reminder to everybody about that, including the terrorists.

- Danielle Pletka: So the other thing I think this has laid bare and obviously the worm was already starting to turn on this question even before the coronavirus is just, the Chinese. The nature of the Chinese government, the nature of its relationship with its own people. You know, better people die than someone think that Xi Jinping is weak. The disinformation, the unwillingness to cooperate, the destruction of the initial genome sequencing. Just from an intelligence perspective, do you think that we have been sharp enough, focused enough and clear enough about the challenge that China poses?
- Michael Morell: There's an arc to that narrative that answers that question. The intelligence community 10 years ago, like China scholars everywhere, believed that the Chinese as they became richer, would become more liberal, small "L," right? Would become more like us. Boy did that turn out to be a wrong judgment. In fact, it's gone the other way. They've become more like them. They've become more communist, not less. Xi Jinping's main goal is to maintain and strengthen the Communist Party. He talks like a hard line communist, when you listen to him talking to his own people.
- Michael Morell: He doesn't talk that way internationally, but boy he talks that way domestically. So, we've learned a lot about China as a society and Chinese politics and where that country has headed over the last 10 years. So it's been a lot of learning and we didn't quite get that right. What really worries me at this moment, is that China is no doubt in my mind, absolutely trying to take advantage of the current situation to significantly boost their influence in the world at our expense. There's a huge diplomatic effort to do that. There's a huge propaganda effort to do that.
- Michael Morell: The propaganda effort has a positive side to it, where they're trying to paint a picture of solidarity between China and the rest of the world. There's a negative side to it, which is disinformation, which is, "This is a US weapon. The US can't lead in the world anymore as a result of this, and the US is not capable of even taking care of itself." So they are being extraordinarily aggressive. Diplomatically, Chinese leaders, the whole group of them are calling foreign leaders around the world every day, just to check in.
- Michael Morell: Just to say, "Hey, how are you guys doing? Do you need anything? We're here for you." And then they literally have Chinese doctors and nurses and Chinese medical supplies on every continent at this moment except Antarctica. So, they're being extraordinarily aggressive here and trying to win influence. They want that influence for one reason and one reason only, which is to push countries to make decisions that are in China's interest, very narrowly based foreign policy. We got to figure out how to push back on that and be effective at it or we're going to find ourselves at the end of this thing, in a place that we'd rather not be.
- Marc Thiessen: It's like an arsonist who sets your house on fire and then shows up with a bucket of water. We're learning more and more that the Chinese regime was directly responsible just through its mishandling of this and through its cover up for this becoming a global pandemic. They knew-
- Michael Morell: Absolutely.

- Marc Thiessen: They knew that there was human to human transmission in December and they didn't ... In middle of January, they were still saying there's no human to human transmission. They wouldn't let the CDC come to the ground to help. They wouldn't give us viral samples. Literally this would not be a global pandemic if they had accepted cooperation and been truthful.
- Michael Morell: As an analyst, I would say I agree with everything you said up to the point where you said it wouldn't be a global pandemic, if the Chinese had done the right thing. That I don't think we know. It would not be anywhere as bad as it is.
- Marc Thiessen: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Michael Morell: No doubt about that. But would it have spread out of China? We can't say. We really can't say, but-
- Marc Thiessen: There was a study at the University of Southampton that said that if they had acted three weeks earlier, 95% of the cases would not have happened.
- Michael Morell: Yeah. I don't know about that. But clearly they mishandled it, and they mishandled it largely for political reasons.
- Marc Thiessen: Here's a question for you. So, why did the Chinese lie? Why were they in such a hurry to cover this up? David Ignatius, my colleague at the Post, had a possible theory. He wrote a column the other day, which basically said that there's doubt about the origin story that this started with animals contaminated in the wet market in Wuhan and he said there's a competing theory of an accidental lab release of bat coronavirus. The Wuhan branch of the CDC is 300 yards from that wet market. He said that a lot of people who are saying that a sample could have leaked, there could have been improper waste disposal.
- Marc Thiessen: Not that it was a bio weapon that was being engineered, but just they were studying bat coronavirus there, or a lab worker could have accidentally been infected. That that lab was only a biosafety level 2, compared with a biosafety level 4. How much credibility do you give the possibility that one of the reasons the Chinese were so desperate to cover this up is, because it didn't happen organically. Because it was an accident in a government lab?
- Michael Morell: Yeah. So as an analyst, you never rule out a possibility, until the data rules it out for you. So I'm not going to rule that out. But I have seen absolutely no evidence of that. There is no evidence of that. In fact, the evidence that exists, is that evidence that I talked about earlier about how sophisticated this virus is, and the fact that there's no way it's manmade. Now I understand you're making a different point.
- Marc Thiessen: Yeah, the suggestion is that they were studying bat coronavirus and that it wasn't very well contained. Not that they were engineering it as a bio weapon, but that this virus leaked out of the lab.
- Michael Morell: Yeah, so I'm not going to rule it out. Not going to rule that out but again, nobody's shown me any evidence that that's the case. It's just speculation. So you've just got to be careful with speculation. Doesn't mean it's wrong, it just means you can't prove it. There's no evidence for it. So you just got to be careful with that. I think the stronger argument is that, what is Xi Jinping most concerned about? Xi Jinping is

most concerned about his people believing that he is not running the place efficiently and effectively, and not running the place in their interests.

- Michael Morell: He has a very, very strong incentive to create the perception that things are being managed well. That's incentive enough for him to not be transparent, for him not to lie, once things became clear that they were bad to blame local officials, and not officials in Beijing. I think that's incentive enough for him to lie. And as an explanation for why they weren't transparent about this, and why they took the steps they took.
- Danielle Pletka: Of course, we need to take that knowledge to the bank. We need to treat with great skepticism, almost everything we learn from the Chinese government about health care, about national security, about human rights and about technology.
- Michael Morell: I want to just add one more thing-
- Danielle Pletka: Yeah, of course.
- Michael Morell: ... as it comes back to intelligence is, what we're talking about here, which is exactly how did this start, and what actions did the Chinese government take that actually made it worse? That's something that we want to understand, in every detail. That's something that the intelligence community can provide significant help with, because of their collection capabilities.
- Danielle Pletka: Amen to that.
- Marc Thiessen: Michael, thank you so much. To all our listeners, tune in to Michael's podcast. It's called "Intelligence Matters" on CBS Radio. You can download it wherever you get your podcast.
- Michael Morell: Great to be with you guys.
- Marc Thiessen: Thanks for coming.
- Marc Thiessen: It was great to have Michael on the podcast. He's a really smart guy, and I think he's the only former CIA director or head of CIA that has his own podcast. So that's pretty cool. Maybe we could be head of CIA one day.
- Danielle Pletka: Yeah, that's how it works. You have a podcast and then you become head of CIA.
- Marc Thiessen: Exactly. But I think he was a little bit too dismissive of the idea that this started in that Wuhan CDC office. He makes a very good point that this virus is too perfect to have been engineered by anything but nature. I don't think many people are suggesting that this is a bio weapon per se, though some are. But I think what's very possible, and makes a lot of sense. If you're going to have an intelligence community... 9/11 was a failure of imagination, we should have a little bit more imagination here. There was a lab that was 300 yards from that market, where they were studying bat coronavirus, what has been released as bat coronavirus.
- Marc Thiessen: The idea that this lab ... Chinese labs probably don't have the same security that American biological labs have, that either a worker got infected, or there was a problem with waste disposal or an accidental leak of some kind. I think that it makes

sense that the Chinese government would be terrified of the idea that this would get out, one because, if their people knew that this happened in a bio lab, that could be the end of Xi Jinping.

Marc Thiessen: Plus, if this was a lab accident, then their culpability legally, is very different than if this just happened organically in a wet market.

Danielle Pletka: I don't think we'll ever know. That really is the challenge here is that this is the information that is very hard to come by. Again, I just don't have enough confidence in my understanding of its propagation or frankly, in the origins of this, to understand whether we can say it was a cover up of a lab accident or actually something that simply occurred in nature because of course, these wet markets have spawned viruses before.

Marc Thiessen: Sure.

Danielle Pletka: SARS is a similar one. I think though the Avian Flu similarly came from a Chinese market. Animal to human transmission. So it's equal opportunity over there is the challenge, isn't it? There are the labs and then there are the wet markets.

Marc Thiessen: Well, here's something we do know with certainty. China lied about this. They lied repeatedly. They knew that this was capable of human to human transmission. They had their first case, we now know the first case in November, in late November, and in mid January, they were still telling the World Health Organization and the world, that there was no human to human transmission. That was a lie. They had 1,700 health workers who had been infected. The only way health workers can get infected is if there's human to human transmission.

Danielle Pletka: Of course.

Marc Thiessen: So they've literally ... We are in this pandemic, because of China's lies.

Danielle Pletka: So another area where I disagree where the I think there really wasn't intelligence failure, is this analysis that had been done by the intelligence community 10 years ago, that growing prosperity was going to make the Chinese Communist Party a kinder and gentler version of itself. Of course, that's true. That was the conventional wisdom. That's the biggest problem with the intelligence community. It reflects the conventional wisdom.

Danielle Pletka: I still remember the director of Asian Studies at AEI Dan Blumenthal, going on and on trying to persuade people that more money, more riches, more prosperity, was going to make the Chinese Communist Party more dangerous, more aggressive, more willing to invest its money in the kind of things that it could use to oppress its neighbors and its own people. Boy, was he right about that?

Marc Thiessen: Absolutely. I think Michael acknowledged that. I think our colleague Hal Brands put it really well in a piece the other day he said, "They got rid of Marxism, they just didn't get rid of Leninism." That they become an authoritarian ... Probably the first free market totalitarian regime in human history. And part of the problem is that as the economy develops, and as technology develops, the technology that allows for free exchange of ideas here in our country also allows for unprecedented surveillance in a country like China.

- Marc Thiessen: We're all concerned about people hacking into our iPhones and using our information. What if we had a repressive government that was doing that proactively, as opposed to just criminals trying to get into our systems? So you're absolutely right. I think one of the good things that is going to come out of this whole pandemic, the silver linings of the cloud, is we're going to have a fundamental reassessment of our relationship with China. Josh Rogin had a great column in the post this week about how basically, polls show 77% of Americans, including 67% of Democrats, blame China for the virus.
- Marc Thiessen: And there's large numbers of both Republicans and Democrats in the country who feel we need a fundamental reassessment of our relationship with China. China has really hurt itself with the cover up, with its failure to contain this virus, with its failure to cooperate and the authoritarianism that fueled all that. I think we're going to have, as a country, a bipartisan consensus, that we need social distancing and economic distancing from China, and that we need a new China strategy.
- Danielle Pletka: Couldn't agree with you more. So I want to end with one of my favorite vignettes.
- Marc Thiessen: Okay.
- Danielle Pletka: This happened in a classified setting. So I can't tell you exactly what it was about. But it was a briefing on something bad that China did. And that China had been engaged in for quite a while involving weapons proliferation. There was a briefer from the Department of State. He's now retired as a scholar actually, from Brookings, Bob Einhorn, I think he was the Under Secretary of State for policy. And Dianne Feinstein, senator from California, was there and she had made a practice of going back and forth and meeting with the Chinese leadership and really trying to build a constructive relationship, and it wasn't Xi Jinping at the time it was Hu Jintao.
- Marc Thiessen: Yeah.
- Danielle Pletka: And-
- Marc Thiessen: Well, she had a Chinese spy on her staff. True.
- Danielle Pletka: Yes. I know. So fact. So Bob is talking about this problem, right. He's talking about the fact that the Chinese are still doing this bad thing that they had been doing. And the Senator raises her hand and she says, "Bob, I just don't understand. I talked to Hu Jintao about this. He assured me that they weren't doing this. So I just don't understand what you're saying." Bob was absolutely floored. He looked at her, and this is why this is my favorite story, he just looked at her and he paused and he goes, "Well, Senator, sometimes they lie to you." I think that needs to be the epitaph right?
- Danielle Pletka: Sometimes, not sometimes, pretty much always, if it's the government of the People's Republic of China, they lie to you.
- Marc Thiessen: Couldn't agree with you more Dany.
- Danielle Pletka: Excellent way to end with beautiful harmony between me and Marc. Hope everybody had a great holiday week, Easter, Passover and all the rest of it and we'll see you soon.