

FRAGILE

Brunswick's **PRESTON GOLSON** and **GEORGE LITTLE**, both former CIA officers tell **CARLTON WILKINSON** about the role of intelligence and the US's national crisis of faith.

LEGITIMACY

THE JOKE ABOUT INTELLIGENCE OFFICERS,” Preston Golson says, “is that they smell flowers and ask, ‘Where’s the funeral?’ Because you get to a point where you have—I wouldn’t say a dim view, but a *very realistic* view of what goes on in the world.”

That “very realistic view” was on full display recently with a published report in the Washington Post citing former US intelligence officers warning that the country may be headed for a breakdown of democracy. To get a clearer view of those concerns, the Brunswick Review sat down with Preston, a Brunswick Director, and George Little, a Brunswick Partner. Both are former CIA officers who each served Democratic and Republican administrations.

A former aide to the Director of National Intelligence, Preston also served as CIA Spokesperson, Chief of CIA’s Public Communication Branch in its Office of Public Affairs, and Chief of Communications for the Agency’s Directorate of Digital Innovation. His last two years with the agency were during Trump’s presidency. George’s roles have included Assistant to the US Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs and Pentagon Press Secretary, and CIA Director of Public Affairs and Chief of Media Relations.

With the world still in the throes of the pandemic, economic uncertainty and the massive demonstrations in the streets over George Floyd’s death at the hands of police, we discussed the confluence of crises as well as the instability created by extreme partisanship. While admitting that it was natural for intelligence analysts to imagine the bleakest outcome, the two shared one overriding concern: Basic functions of our democracy were at risk of losing legitimacy, beginning with the trust in our intelligence community.

ILLUSTRATION: DAN BEJAR





You both saw those quotes in The Washington Post article. Both of you served with the CIA. How do you view those concerns?

GEORGE: Let me start with a little history. The CIA was founded in 1947 to ensure that the nation's policymakers, decision makers—at the very top, the president—would have access to unvarnished information and intelligence about what is happening overseas with respect to US interests. Part of that function is attempting to be as nonpartisan or as apolitical as possible. You can never take that risk down to zero, obviously. But that is part of the genetic fabric of the intelligence community—the North Star that guides how people try to operate.

My colleagues at the CIA wake up every single day thinking, “How am I going to get this information and characterize it in the most truthful, meaningful way for the president and the vice president and other national security policymakers?” I worked in a Republican administration. I worked in a Democratic administration. Didn't matter.

In the past four years, the intelligence community has been politicized and criticized by the very person, in the form of the president, that the CIA wakes up every day to try to serve. That's been jarring for many of my former colleagues.

There is a great deal of concern that the independence of the intelligence community will erode,

On the morning of his first full day in office in 2017, President Donald Trump addressed reporters and a select group of guests in front of the Memorial Wall at CIA headquarters. The wall's stars represent those who gave their lives in service to their country, many of whom must remain anonymous. The visit was intended to show support for the intelligence community, which the new president had heavily criticized during his campaign. But his remarks were widely viewed as disrespectful, resulting in increased tensions.

become increasingly politicized, that it will be used in many of the same ways that governments and other societies use their intelligence communities and militaries—to drive political ends for their own reasons, for their own constituencies. There's a sense that that's immensely dangerous for the country.

PRESTON: I spent the first half of my career as a counterterrorism analyst. The CIA is one of the least politically partisan places you can work in Washington. Whether or not you had a particular viewpoint or ideology on politics, you knew the people working across from you were fully committed to the same thing. The thing they drill into your head is, your job is to speak truth to power, to give policymakers the best objective information, with which they will hopefully advance the security of the United States.

On the wall in the CIA lobby is an inscription from the Gospel of John. It says, “And you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free.” There's no benefit to any policymaker for the intelligence community to not tell them the truth. We've seen occasional intelligence failures and so forth. But people are really genuinely trying hard to get it right—the same level of effort for Obama, for Bush and for Trump as well. That commitment hasn't wavered.

I'm concerned that folks who've put a lot of their time in multiple administrations, may decide that they don't want to be the subject of these particular

attacks anymore and move on to do other things. That would be a bad thing for the country.

Do you see parallels with other societies that have fallen into crisis?

GEORGE: When I was in my early days in government service, I worked with the National Counterterrorism Center on threat assessments in the global war on terror. The enemy was connoted as “red,” and ourselves, “blue.” I quickly came to realize that analyzing red is a lot easier than analyzing blue.

So there might be some parallels to historical situations that we’re seeing right now. But this is one place where actually the CIA doesn’t really excel. Its mission is foreign intelligence—by law actually, it’s not supposed to analyze us.

My former colleagues are smart, sophisticated people who understand the dynamics and the potential parallels here. But they also feel the same vulnerability as Americans, too. Assessing blue is hard.

PRESTON: There really is a selfless commitment to the ideals of America that are held deeply by people in the intelligence community. Not saying it’s perfect. But the Constitution, the rule of law, the American way of life—they believe all those things very strongly. And a lot of the CIA’s ethos was built out of the Cold War. We defeated the Soviet Union, right? Our ideals versus their ideals. Despite our many shortcomings as a nation, we’re supposed to be better than our adversaries. That’s something we’ve always told ourselves. To see some of those things called into question just kind of strikes at some of the fundamental ethos.

GEORGE: Even at the Pentagon—it’s harder, admittedly, because of its 300 political appointees running around and the scope of its operations. But when I was Pentagon press secretary, I knew that if I got political it would lead to the delegitimization of my own boss and erode the institution’s credibility.

We’re seeing those lines blur now. It was really impactful recently hearing criticism of the president from officials, formers but also currents—Secretary Mattis, General Allen, even John Kelly, who was Chief of Staff. We’ve also seen all of the chiefs of the Joint Chiefs of Staff say something. They are asserting certain values and defending traditional American institutions in a way that is clearly sending a message that this is not OK.

PRESTON: Yes, the word is legitimacy. Both the intelligence community and the Department of Defense are given tremendous powers to secure the country. The deal that they’ve struck with the American public is that there’s going to be oversight, lack

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of partisanship, following the rule of law, to utilize those authorities and capabilities around the world. So there’s a concern that if the intelligence community is seen to be politicized (as it is in many other countries), that will lead to an overall delegitimization of the work and it will be seen as just another partisan agency.

The authors of The Washington Post article say that actions by the White House could embolden the world’s autocrats and undermine US authority. How real of a concern do you think that is?

GEORGE: I think it’s a reality. Many other governments, including authoritarian ones, look at the actions and words of this administration and feel that they have greater permission to undertake what we would consider pretty repressive activities, and not suffer any consequences. That’s not to say that this administration here is acting in a way that the authoritarian governments are overseas. But there’s certainly a sense on the part of overseas authoritarian rulers that they have much greater latitude than in the past. That’s partly a function of what the president has said in support of some of these authoritarian leaders—even Kim Jong-un.

PRESTON: Autocrats by definition have quite a bit of leeway—they’re going to do what it takes to survive. There was a crackdown in Syria despite international condemnation. So what is often already a natural reaction for autocrats, has been made even easier, because now they know for sure there’s going to be little response.

I’m not trying to pick on anything the administration is choosing to do. It’s just the idea that, going back to the Cold War and that idea that, for all of our flaws we still were better than what the Soviets were doing. That was a key component of winning that ideological struggle.

You don’t want to see that high ground ceded. We’ve got a lot of issues—race being one of them. But not as many or as severe as the Soviets or another state. So you don’t want to see that high ground ceded, because it’s so important to keeping our advantages as they relate to our national security.

How do you see the demonstrations that have erupted in the wake of George Floyd’s death at the hands of police?

PRESTON: In some ways, this feels a lot like a kind of Arab Spring type situation here. There you had the spark of a fruit vendor setting himself on fire in Tunisia and that served as the culmination of a series of events that built up pressure, and then that

pressure was released. Having injustice, discrimination, can cause societal fissures that result in unrest. Unrest is a fact of all societies. We're not immune to it.

In Tunisia, they were rebelling against a dictator in power for a generation. Is this the same thing?

PRESTON: No, no, no. I don't think this is a rebellion against Trump. As an African American, I see this as a longstanding issue that's spanned administrations. People are protesting against systemic issues that are deeply ingrained in the founding of our nation. We saw 400 years from when the first slave ships landed on our shores. People will make decisions in November based upon how things are reacted to by the administration, but I do think that what we're seeing is more of a reaction to how things have gone in the country, and less a response to any particular person, unlike the Arab Spring.

GEORGE: I think Preston is absolutely right. This has been a long time coming and it's been exacerbated by other factors. And in the absence of unified government leadership and unified appreciation of what the government offers, especially in a time of crisis, who has to step into the void? It's businesses. Businesses are being forced to engage in these political and economic and social conversations that were once reserved primarily for government.

Citizens took to the streets in Tunisia in 2010 following the death of a fruit seller who set himself on fire in frustration at the country's ongoing corruption. The protests turned into a revolution that launched the Arab Spring.

PRESTON: Yes, one of the things I've been thinking a lot about recently is how much people are surprised when they shouldn't be surprised. If you go back to every decade of the 20th century, you find a period of racial unrest and race-related riots usually tied to cases of brutality—Martin Luther King's assassination is one. Each decade there are examples of it. Yet we act as if it's a surprise every time it happens. So there's an element of strategic failure and intelligence failure. Companies have to ask themselves why this keeps happening.

We all have our own biases, our own mindsets. Our brains want to make the world neat and orderly. Usually there's nothing wrong with that—it works. But sometimes because of those biases you can't spot the differences in the pattern. It takes active intentional thinking to get yourself out of that.

That's one of the messages I hope people learn from this: You've got to be able to put yourself in other people's shoes, to think outside of your circle and have a deep curiosity about what's going on in communities that aren't necessarily yours.

You have to have courage. Think about this past week. What companies could stand up and say without equivocation that they've been fully behind this effort when it wasn't popular? Nike and Ben & Jerry's are among the few. Not too many others. People are catching up to it. But there are very few who were



PHOTOGRAPH: AP PHOTO/HASSENE DRIDI

ahead of the curve and courageous about things. Human beings are just constantly being surprised by things they shouldn't be surprised by.

There are so many things that we have to learn from this moment, so the next time it's not just the same, so we're not sitting here again, 10 years from now and people are like, "Oh, how did that happen?"

Do you see signs it will be different this time?

PRESTON: Yes. This is a great example of how as a pessimistic analyst you still have to keep testing your assumptions, because you could talk yourself out of seeing actual change.

What's different now is you're seeing more of a multiracial coalition out in the streets and protesting. There's this idea that it's not just African Americans' responsibility to march for these things. During the 1960s, there were people of many races who were brave and went down South on Freedom Rides and had their buses burned up and so forth. But never on a massive scale like this.

So, you always have to ask yourself, what's different? What opportunities are presented? I'd say the biggest opportunity now is that we have a group of young people, a variety of backgrounds, socioeconomic backgrounds, who get it, who are actually taking action together. If I'm a corporation, that should give me license and some more freedom to be more constructively open about these issues.

GEORGE: Ultimately you have to match words with deeds. Corporations will be held to account on what they do to change the situation, to make profound change and to follow up on their commitments, not just within their own companies, but in society writ large. Even 10 or 20 years ago, companies weren't expected to play that role in society. They were expected to address some of these issues within their own walls, but not to play this central role in society in changing some of these dynamics and improving things like race relations and income inequality. Now it's vital.

Also, companies need their own intelligence-like function. I'm not saying they need their own CIA with spies and operators and what not. But they need sensors to understand what's happening beyond their four walls. They need greater line of sight into what's happening in our society and in other societies where they operate. And right now, they don't have that at scale.

PRESTON: Yes, I agree. As part of that they need to have people who are designated to challenge assumptions. After the Iraq WMD fiasco, the CIA created Red Cell, to find and test vulnerabilities, to

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CARLTON WILKINSON is Managing Editor of the Brunswick Review.

think about alternative futures. So say Country X is doing this? They may decide, "Let's run a Red Cell on that. Let's see what would it take for us to be wrong about that assessment. What might we be missing?"

Looking at the US social situation today, we could go in a direction that is more negative. What are the conditions by which that would happen? How can we change that? As corporations, you should be thinking, "Well, how can we help create positive conditions to get us to the place that's better than where we could end up otherwise?"

Is there something about that situation that perhaps isn't obvious to our readers that has you particularly worried?

PRESTON: Elections are inflection points in democratic societies, autocratic societies, whatever the society is—they are points at which you may see a change of leadership. That's a vulnerable time for any country. One thing that we've enjoyed, even with the contentiousness of the 2000 election, is that we've generally had a good, smooth transition after elections. That's something we shouldn't take for granted. It doesn't exist for a lot of countries. So having all this other stuff happening on top of an election year just makes that more of a concern.

GEORGE: I agree entirely. Very rarely in our history have we seen national leaders potentially challenge the legitimacy of the voting process itself. So I worry about that. It can create its own ripple effects and upheaval, as we've seen in other countries.

PRESTON: Let me just add that the siloed networks of information and disinformation are also a point of concern. In the past, we could disagree, but we could agree to some semblance of a set of facts. I may not like the facts. But we could at least agree there's a semblance of facts. But if my information is telling me a completely different set of facts from what your information is telling you—that's a problem.

We had the 2016 disruptions from the Russians. But now the risk is we'll do it to ourselves. Disinformation becomes just another political dirty trick. It doesn't necessarily need a foreign actor to amplify it. The fire's been lit internally. And unless there's a majority that will stand for truthful accurate information and not be sucked into either a left or a right echo chamber, that could be hugely problematic for the country.

The awareness of disinformation is better. I see more and more people fact checking other people on social media or trying to make the point that we shouldn't be taken in by certain things. But that is going to be a very important struggle. ♦