

# Alexander S. Vindman

April 14, 2022

Interviewed by Dr. Matthew Muehlbauer

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[Interview starts at 1:38]

**[Vindman: [00:00:00]** To work with family.

**Muehlbauer: [00:00:03]** It's always lovely to have you. We will. We'll get you that.

**Vindman: [00:00:06]** On the record.

**Guidera: [00:00:07]** Now. Yes. Thank you. We're officially recording here. Whoo hoo!  
Everything sounds good.

**Muehlbauer: [00:00:11]** Here. Everything sounds good.

**Guidera: [00:00:13]** Okay, you're recording on this camera now. I'm out of the way. Okay. Yeah.  
If you need anything, just. Just holler at the phone right there.

**Muehlbauer: [00:00:20]** Okay. Thanks. Holler.

**Guidera: [00:00:22]** All right. Yeah. Don't holler too loud.

**Muehlbauer: [00:00:23]** Yeah, I know you're you guys. Thank you. Okay. Good morning. How  
are you doing?

**Vindman: [00:00:30]** Doing well.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:00:31] Good. It is Thursday, April 14th, 2022. I am Dr. Matthew Neubauer. And on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, I have the honor of interviewing retired Lieutenant Colonel Alexander S. Vindman. Lieutenant Colonel Vindman served over twenty years as a US Army officer from 1999 to 2020. He was stationed in Korea, in Germany, saw combat and was wounded in Operation Iraqi Freedom, served as a foreign area officer in Russia, as well as on the staffs of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the National Security Council. Now, I should start by noting that you've already published a memoir here, "Right matters."

**Guidera:** [00:01:10] I just need to check a setting on my camera. Here's the sound setting that. Okay. Yeah, it's good. Should I start from the beginning or whatever? Yeah. Why not? It was just started. So if that's okay now you'll have.

**Vindman:** [00:01:21] You could. You could also add an aspiring doctor also.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:01:24] Oh, yeah, I was getting there. I was getting there.

**Guidera:** [00:01:27] Just joking.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:01:29] Okay. So, yeah, I guess I'll try this again. I'm just going to do this a little brief intro.

**Vindman:** [00:01:35] That was so, so good.

**Guidera:** [00:01:36] Thank you. ]

[Interview starts at 1:38]

**Muehlbauer:** [00:01:38] Good afternoon. It is Thursday, April 14th, 2022. I'm Dr. Matthew Muehlbauer and on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, I have the honor of interviewing retired Lieutenant Colonel Alexander S. Vindman. Lieutenant Colonel Vindman served over twenty years as a US Army officer from 1999 to 2020. He was stationed in Korea and Germany. Saw combat, was wounded during Operation Iraqi Freedom, served as a foreign area officer in Russia, as well as on the staffs of Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Security

Council and is currently pursuing a doctorate at Johns Hopkins University. I should start by noting that you've already published a memoir about your life up until about a year ago called, "Here, Right Matters An American Story", which is a wonderful book. Also, last September, Dr. John Allen Williams interviewed you on an episode of Pritzker Military Presents where you discuss the memoir, which is available on our website, the episode. Now, your book does a wonderful job describing your background in childhood, providing an overview, military career, and the problems and challenges you faced. So rather than cover the details that you've always addressed there. Well, first, I'd like to start out by giving the opportunity to elaborate on any aspect of your military service that you'd like to discuss going into more detail than you could have in the book.

**Vindman:** [00:02:54] Sure. Well, it was only the book was only about 250 pages. It was called it was like a lightning rod on Amazon. So, you know, it covers the wave tops. But I did try to do a couple of things with the book. I mean, it was not a natural place for me to begin to write a book in my forties. Lieutenant Colonel. Kind of mid-career. Approaching senior. So I wanted to write something that explained the why, the why I reported the phone call, the why I was involved in the presidential impeachment and then, the, how the tools that I was armed with throughout a military career of twenty-one and a half years of, you know, being raised by a great set of parents, a great dad that instilled some very important values about some virtues, I guess, about being truthful and honest and frank and direct and things of that nature. I guess to some people that's endearing. To some people that's off-putting. But I thought it was important to to write something about that book. And for sitting here sitting here in the setting of PMML, I think it's it's important to kind of focus in on the military component. And sometimes my criticism, which I think is comes from a place of love and I think is constructive criticism is taken as a swipe at the military, a swipe at the Department of Defense. But in reality, it's not. I think I tried to do things that I think would be helpful to the to the service. And I do this because I'm really proud of my military career. My military service made me who I who I am. Gave me the technical, tactical, skills to be effective in my various jobs. Instilled a set of values in me, building on what I got from my family, from my dad, from my origins. And I think it honed or gave me the opportunity to practice these values not as... I think we walk through life without...and day to day, we don't have to face maybe major challenges. We have to deal with, like getting a cup of coffee to get our days going. It's kind of like routine, mundane routine. But there are challenges, consistent challenges in the military that do allow you to exercise what

I've referred to as your 'values muscle'. So like this it gets strong and then you could face down significant challenges when they arise. I think I could self-reflect and realize that earlier in my career I don't know how I think I still would have the kind of the same sets of values, but maybe not as well formed, not as well exercised. So I think I like to describe: All are drawing on everything that I had in my background for those days around the impeachment, around Donald Trump's Ukraine schedule [sic] scandal, drawing on every bit of background I had not just in terms of kind of values, but also training, situational awareness, kind of what could be, you know, navigation skills like understanding, like where I was situated, bearings and stuff like that. You know, the unique training that you get as an attache, at times with kind of like. With resisting interrogations or something like that. Even those little, little skills or sub skills became or came in handy for for something that nobody's really ever experienced.

**Vindman:** [00:07:15] You know, certainly no military officer being put into that kind of position. So I'm grateful for my military career. I'm grateful that I had a chance to serve and make a difference, in my view, serve. And oftentimes, you know, military service results in an accumulated impact on an organization. You mentored folks maybe in combat. You've you you did something decisive that helped turn the direction of a battle is an overstatement. But, you know, it's not like, you know, Civil War battles or something like that, but was was impactful, saved some lives or something of that nature. But oftentimes, you have to reflect on whether you made a difference. Difference. And I think I know exactly when I made a difference. I mean, there were several times probably during my military career, certainly in in Moscow, serving as an attaché in the Pentagon, supporting the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and authoring some of the critical documents to help the military orient on Russia as an adversary. And then National Security Council having an impact there. And then, of course, you know, being drawn into the public eye as an impeachment witness. So. I'm proud of my military career. I wanted to make sure that that's accentuated.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:08:45] Good. Well, thank you for sharing that. And yes, you certainly have done that. I'm curious in terms of talking about the moral compass involving the values muscle. What were, Early in your career, what were the experiences that really helped you do that to develop your values? Sort of like as a young officer, second, first, lieutenant, captain. What were the story that make me the most impactful experiences you had in that regard?

**Vindman:** [00:09:11] So I think there was a lot of trial and error, and I think I learned as much from mistakes as I did from successes. I learned as much from watching people and seeing what not to do, as as examples, as good examples of *what to do*. I mean, I can think of, you know, just the things that popped into my mind immediately are like, I write about it. Operation Cabbage Patch kind of not trusting my instincts in this book where I basically I'm on a Humvee doing a reconnaissance and the Humvee rolls over because I didn't trust my gut, and listened to the driver that said he you know, he could navigate through this particularly precarious stretch of road. It could have turned out to be a catastrophe. Somebody could have really gotten hurt. So I learned from that, you know, a painful lesson of trust, trusting my instincts and also the the motto of 'trust but verify'. Learned something about like the consequences of of your actions in resp[onsible], in a position of leadership, because this whole thing ended up resulting in like, you know, brigade level assets being brought to bear to extract this Humvee that was in the, you know, a mud pit, basically. So that was that's one of the things that comes to mind, you know. Some practical jokes associated with that.

**Vindman:** [00:10:38] Actually, on the back end, like the Humvee actually surprisingly didn't get too badly damaged and I avoided having to pay for it, which know which was always a concern for a second lieutenant with little means but managed to recover that partially, because it landed a bunch of mud. [Laughter] I'm thinking about a major and executive officer I had as a as a captain, you know, years later and the way he treated people, kind of like a caustic personality, and the way you talked to people with respect, treat them with dignity they deserve, motivate them, making them part of the team as opposed to, you know, the way this this particular field grade talked down to people. Across the board just made it very, very difficult kind of environment for up and down that chain of command to build a functional team, to build kind of loyalty and things of that nature. Those are those are kind of two two ideas that popped into my mind. Some other things about, you know. Right. Coming back from a from a deployment, having to deal with soldiers that likely were suffering from PTSD at a time where the war was relatively new. And this was not an issue that was well understood but that weren't reconciling to garrison life and, you know, being urged to instill discipline with a heavy hand by seniors that really didn't have much more combat experience than I did. I mean, they might be more senior in military, but they've never served in combat. They served the same same tours that I did and were basically saying, "That's the way you discipline, your discipline with a heavy hand. You set an example", and running afoul when I refused to do that, frankly,

because I didn't think it was the right thing to do and that, you know, being closer to the troops, closer as in, you know, interacting with them on a regular basis, direct leadership, as opposed to kind of managerial leadership at the battalion level having to, at times, you know, kind of resist the demands of, I guess, senior leadership for more harsh punishments and stuff like that, or communal punishments, which I don't think are particularly effective way of doing it. I guess there's a bit of like a, I tend to push back a little bit. So that has in general been a good, good thing for my military career. I've been encouraged to do that certainly as as as time wore on. More senior positions to speak up when I was sitting at a table with much, much more senior military officers [pause] to exercise my voice.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:13:55] So I'm curious then in terms of sort of, you know, exercising your own judgments about how to deal troops and push them back a little bit, at what point--- And so learning how and when to trust your subordinates, How? How did you negotiate that line? Because you gave us the example of the Humvee in the cabbage patch where you trusted the soldier. Didn't work out. And then your superiors often trusted you. So how do you balance that line of how far do you trust, at what point you say, "Okay, no, we're going to do it this way?"

**Vindman:** [00:14:31] Well, I think there's you know, this may be sometimes an unsatisfying answer, but I think, you know, sometimes is referred to as your gut is an accumulation of experiences and instincts around issues. I think there's something to be said about that. It's more than your gut. It's just the fact that you're kind of your mind may subconsciously piece together aspects that resonate or are similar to other experiences you had in the past. That's what I think your gut is. So there's something to be said about that. I think there's a lot to be said about the experience, the foundational experience that gets you there. I think [pause] experience accounts for for a lot. It's the experiences of seeing something before and discerning either right from wrong or, you know, good from bad that train you to to to face the next series of challenges, I guess, in that line. I don't think that should be. You know, there are plenty of very bright, competent folks, young soldiers, officers that should be given the latitude to make their own judgments and make their own decisions and guided them away from mistakes, guided towards successes. So there's definitely something to be said about enabling subordinates to take take charge and responsibility. But there that I think optimal formulaic should be the competencies of that soldier, but then a series of experiences that actually somehow amalgamate to a much, much more comprehensive skill set to deal with severe

challenges. So think about it like, you know, good instincts on the one hand and then paired with experiences. And then you have a good formula for for for success in navigating difficult challenges.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:16:49] Okay, great. Do you think that the Army is well set up to allow that to happen in terms of how it operates and its procedures and its bureaucracy?

**Vindman:** [00:16:59] That's an interesting question. I don't think so. I think we have a zero defects Army a lot of times where mistakes are. You know, there was for a long period of time, I, I think I've been away from troops for for too long to judge that completely. But from my experience at the strategic level, there is not a lot of latitude for for making mistakes. And there are certain mistakes that shouldn't necessarily. I think there are certain mistakes that if they're made, show such an egregious lapse in judgment that maybe disqualify you from certain roles. But in general, I think the bar is too high for perfection when we're really trying to to develop folks that may take a little bit some additional risk sometimes. You know, I guess I like to think I take calculated risks or had taken calculated risks as a as a young officer. And oftentimes those were successful decisions. Sometimes I made mistakes. Nothing fatal. I mean, there are a couple that we discussed here that are indicative. But I think the point is that. We need an organization that does not breed a deep sense of risk aversion. So if you risk nothing, and therefore based on the fact that you're not risking anything. That's a measure of success because you don't have any failures, not having failures as a measure of success. That is probably not the kinds of folks that we want leading our military, especially in combat with near peers. We want folks that are taking a very well-considered calculated risks because those calculated risks are the ones that are going to exploit weaknesses, result in successes on the battlefield instead of somebody that's deeply risk averse. That's. That's not likely. That may not lose a battle, but is not likely to win a battle either. Either. That's a that's a recipe for disaster over the long run. That's that's what results in battles of attrition. That's what might explain. It's a good question. I wonder if that's in part what explains, you know, twenty years of warfare in the Middle East.[footnote US involvement...]

**Muehlbauer:** [00:19:24] Yes. Actually, since you mentioned that, well, since you mentioned that, one of the questions I had, which I think is I'm kind of really curious about, is you served in one of the first Stryker brigades. So I'm curious as to what that was like with a brand new sort

of a brand new technology in a combat zone and how you folks, you know... What were you told about the technology and how to work it? And then what did you actually folks actually have to do?

**Vindman:** [00:19:49] Well, my wife, Rachel, refers to me as a used Stryker salesman because I was a big advocate for the platform. I mean, I really it's it's not meant to be a tank. It's you know, you could at the base level, you could describe it as a as a fortified taxi. But that's deeply understating what the capability is. I mean, it's a wheeled vehicle. It can travel really high speeds on roads or off roads also, for that matter, but definitely on on roads. It could get troops to the fight protected. It's not a tank, but it could take some punishment. As a matter of fact, if I would were in my Stryker as opposed to in a Humvee, which is how I got wounded, it was a Marine Humvee, I probably wouldn't have been wounded because it would have taken taken some punishment. But it's not just that. It's the it does carry some Mk 19 [grenade launcher, pronounced Mark 19]. It carries a .50 caliber machine gun. Has a I think the newest versions have remote weapon stations that are very effective. You have different platforms that have main guns. So as I think 1105-millimeter cannon, I think that's right. It has thermal weapon sites. Those are thermal weapon sites for like even just the base infantry carrier that has the Mark 19 and the .50 cal.

**Vindman:** [00:21:21] So it's a it's a pretty decent system and it's networked. It has communications, situational awareness for the force. I think it's just a terrific platform that was highly effective. Certainly, in a counterinsurgency fight, it probably would still be pretty effective in a high-intensity conflict. You wouldn't want it necessarily, you know, it wouldn't be the lead element. You'd want it to be following in close behind armored formations. But you need the infantry to support the armor. As for a conventional fight anyway. Very effective in in a urban environment, I think. So I guess in total it's probably one of the most agile formations that the US military has. It carries a full squad of infantry, infantrymen. A rifle company was 176 folks. That's a large rifle company. A light infantry company is about 120, maybe 140. So it's bigger. You have you have three rifle platoons, a mortar section and anti-tank platoon. And then usually you'll get a medical vehicle, medical variant in there. So it's a it's about twenty-twenty-one vehicles in a platoon in a company, rather it's a and the total for our brigade when we deployed was about 4000 troops. So it's a large brigade, too.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:22:59] Yeah. And did it function as well as anticipated when people were first drawing up the plans, the operations?

**Vindman:** [00:23:08] [Coughs] Excuse me. It, I think it did I think it probably exceeded expectations in a lot of ways. You know, it's it's not a it's not a tank. It's not a Bradley. A Bradley has is a much more heavily armored vehicle, but it only carries like six folks in it. And it has a .25-millimeter cannon. That's that's not sufficient infantry for urban operations. Less functional than a Stryker in that regard. And a Stryker is also [effective] because of how quickly it could move from point A to Point B, it has unique capabilities. There was one point in Iraq we were...My organization was the Corps Reserve. My Battalion 1/5 Entry was the Corps Reserve, which means that we were committed to the kind of the hotspots. We were in that initial phase of the deployment. We served in, based out of Camp Taji, which is north of Baghdad. And we're committed to different fights in Baghdad, south of Baghdad, west of Baghdad, and ultimately to this big, huge battle called Phantom Fury in Fallujah in 2004. In the middle of that or really kind of before we hit the halfway point in that fight, that battalion that had responsibility for, we had a company that went inside Fallujah. We had the rest of the battalion that was securing the north and east of of Fallujah to make sure that the insurgents, al Qaeda, didn't didn't escape. In that fight, there was a lot of issues in Mosul, which is where the rest of our brigade was. And we were withdrawn from contact and moved to contact on a 600-kilometer road march. And we did that. We did that in a day, which is a very unique capability to be able to move a battalion worth of firepower that quickly across the country.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:25:28] So as the Corps Reserve matures, so what proportion of your time was sort of spent in combat as Corps Reserve as opposed to other units in the Corps?

**Vindman:** [00:25:40] Well, so we that that first phase of the deployment lasted about six weeks. So in that six week period, we we operated as part of the Corps Reserve around Baghdad to various missions in Fallujah. And then we rejoined the rest of the brigade that had responsibility for Mosul and all the way out to Tal Afar, to the Syrian border. And we had a significant battle space on the south side of the city of Mosul that we ended up being responsible for. And at the time, I was I was the assistant operations officer, plans officer, so responsible for basically the the battle plans and moving moving us from point A to point B, choreographing some of the movements. Well, I mean, the operations and the plans around

our activities and then trying to get out, you know, as a as a captain, trying to get out and join some patrols and see what the terrain looked like and get a feel for what was going on.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:26:52] So I'm curious now so a few moments ago, we're talking about risk and how the Army can sort of breeds many officers who are kind of risk averse. Although having worked in PME [Professional Military Education], I know there's a lot of discussion about risk and how to evaluate it, so I find these comments intriguing. But my question to you is, so how as an assistant operations officer, how what was your approach to risk and how did you see your superiors and your peers approaching assessing risk in that environment?

**Vindman:** [00:27:23] Yeah. So, you know, I understood risk as a as the textbook version, a combination of probability and consequence. And too often I think people look at the consequence and neglect the probability. And it's something that I talk about now with regards to Ukraine probability and consequence of of an escalation with Russia. So. I think that we actually have the tools in the military to manage risk relatively effectively. We kind of lay out all the risks. We we associate a probability and the consequence with those risks. And then we look for mitigation measures. But I think that is something that's done, you know, when you're planning. It's you do you you go through the risk assessment matrix and then you set aside you don't look at it again. Nor is it necessarily something that's really communicated down to subordinate leaders. It's it's almost like a kind of pro forma finger drill type of activity. And I think if we thought, if we use our tools better, we could make much, much better risk-informed decisions. We could identify the risks, mitigate those risks, and make a much better risk informed decisions that would make us less risk averse. You know, that could be the formal process using this matrix. Or you could do that, that mental. You could train yourself to do the mental math of mitigating risk or assessing and mitigating risk. And I think that's frankly, one of the things I try a skill I try to hone repeatedly throughout my career, whether that was in Iraq, whether I was training troops for combat or roaming across Russia as an as an attache trying to get with with surveillance, Russian surveillance, FSB [Russian Federal Security Service], and police constantly monitoring all all of my movements when I still had a obligation to do my job, which is observe and report. So you have to kind of operate in that bubble of surveillance still. So being able to effectively assess and mitigate risk becomes pretty important.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:29:46] I find it, you know, that's great. I find it interesting that one of the comments you just share with me that, you know, the risk assessment seems to occur in the planning process but isn't necessarily communicated down the line to the people, to the people handling the operations. Is that is that what you saw?

**Vindman:** [00:30:04] Something like that. I think I think just in general, starting with the understanding that it's it is. It is more of one of those block checks that you have to get through when you're planning something and then it's set aside and you don't think really think about it again. And I'm trying to remember how often, you know, risk assessment. They were kind of almost constantly briefed in the in the in a plan but. And we have these different other these sayings like, 'a plan doesn't survive first contact' or something of that nature. So, you know, you don't start to that. You don't kind of then reevaluate the risks as something unfolds. It should be a kind of a consistent, dynamic process. I think that's that's that's a tactical example of something that could that should occur, not just at the tactical level, but at the operational and strategic level. I think there is a. Maybe it's human instinct to go to worst case scenarios and consequences and not properly appraise the probabilities of those consequences. I think, again, in the context of the discussions around Ukraine and Russia, it's this notion that if we do something, it puts us on the escalatory ladder towards a nuclear war with Russia. And that's a deeply misplaced notion because fundamentally, if we start with the the the the the consequence of a nuclear war, it's catastrophic. It's catastrophic for our side, but it's also catastrophic for their side. And by that notion, you have this this this kind of ironclad doctrine of mutually assured destruction. And what mutually assured destruction does is it drastically reduces the the probability of the event occurring, because you know what the outcome is. And if you start if you have a nuclear war, it's catastrophic.

**Vindman:** [00:32:12] Both sides lose. So the probability of either side having an interest or moving all the way through to nuclear war as it is, is is tiny. And when you take that picture of an escalation, you then start to you don't kind of dismiss it because the catastrophic consequences. But you you understand that you have a lot of latitude for action. The US government, the president, the National Security Council have a huge latitude for action because of the bar for nuclear war being so high. And then you do the next kind of risk assessment on a conventional warfare. Conventional warfare. Before this war started, we we we thought about Russia as a near-peer and the bar for a confrontation with Russia, a near peer

was quite high because the consequences would be losses of a lot of human life. Now it looks like Russia is more of a paper tiger. Not entirely. I don't want to be dismissive, it has advanced capabilities and it's not fighting the war that was kind of designed to but it's it's it's a bit of a paper tiger and they're bogged down in Ukraine. So what is the the the interest on Russia's side to engage in war with NATO? Really, really low. So then again, you start to take a look at what are our options? That drastically opens up the options for action. Again, because the bar for Russia to take any hostile action, military action against NATO is very, very high. So that means you could do a lot of things, whether that's providing Soviet era MiG 29s or all the military materiel that's starting to flow. We should have been doing it six weeks ago. We just didn't calculate properly, calculate the risks.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:34:02] Mmhm.

**Vindman:** [00:34:03] What we could be doing to support Ukraine helping end this war quickly. So that's the kinds of dynamic thinking around risk that you need, you need to do at the strategic level to kind of properly appraise what are our policy options with regard to probably the most important geopolitical challenges that will face for for a long time, the most important that we faced for a long time, the most that we will face for for the foreseeable future. So. Um, and I don't I wouldn't say that. You know, I, I think my decisions on these issues are risk-informed because they're because of the calculations around the real calculations, around risk. Around real risk, the real calculations around escalation. But also they're informed by a lot of experience on the ground in Russia, interacting with the Russian military, understanding how they fight, how they think. Understanding that part of the equation for Russia is a show of strength because the absence of strength invites a Russian action and watching shows of strength by the US government unfold. You know, I talked about this one element in the book where the US is conducting punitive strikes against Bashar al-Assad's forces that were that conducted chemical weapons attacks and driving in to translate for a phone call. And I'm not a translator. My Russian skills are good, but I'm no, I'm not a translator, a professional translator, but translating for a phone call because it was kind of late at night and US Cruise missiles are flying and about to strike bases in in Syria that Russians are occupying and watching the Russians.

**Vindman:** [00:36:00] You know. Watching them. You know, plead to avoid having Russian injuries because then Russia might be forced to respond. And then hearing our chairman of the Joint Chiefs saying, "We will defend ourselves." And hearing kind of the impudence on the on the part of the Russians because they were desperately interested in avoiding a fight with the US. So these are, these are the kinds of firsthand experiences or being the Pentagon when the Wagner private military corporation troops attacked a special operations unit and the US forces killed hundreds of them. And the Russians saying, "Oh, those are not our guys." They're not I mean, they're they're Russians, but they're not Russian military. When in all other contexts they would scream about the fact that they have to defend themselves, defend the Russian Russian speakers, Russian lives. You hear this all the time, but totally unwilling to take any risk about engaging. So these are the kinds of risk-informed decisions that, you know, that drive my decision and my my policy recommendations. They drove them in government and they drive them now either publicly or privately when I talk to administration officials.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:37:26] I was wondering now, since you mentioned Russia, I was wonder if you might be able to elaborate on how you looked and you've looked at Russia for a long time now, many years. You went out there as a foreign area officer in 2014 or 2012, 2012.

**Vindman:** [00:37:41] I mean, I've been out there I was out there since 20- 2009 in Kiev. [Muehlbauer inserts: Right.] And then traveling throughout the region, including Russia. So I mean, yeah, pretty, pretty deep.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:37:53] So I was wondering if you could talk about, people have talked about Russian new generation warfare, Gerasimov doctrine. I was wondering if you can speak to that in terms of your experiences with what you saw the Russians doing at the time and now what you think of all that in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, just two months ago?

**Vindman:** [00:38:15] So the concept of new generation warfare started to emerge. As an assessment of what they thought, what the Russians thought the US was doing with color revolutions. So. And a lot of it was just mirror imaging. So they they saw kind of plans and schemes and operations because that's that's what they do. They conduct plans and schemes and operations. They did that in 2004 with the Orange Revolution. You know, basically, they

saw the US somehow involved with with a popular protest. They know the formulation, obviously, because those were popular protests, 'Were what kind of mix of military and non-military means are involved in new generation warfare?' And the military means amount to a relatively small percentage of it. It's like mobilizing population information operations. Once, as time progressed, because they were looking backward when this when this doctrine started to emerge, I think it was, I guess, 2014 or '15 or so when it was published. It was looking retrospectively at the previous ten years. And they started to weave in, you know, a cyber operations because that was now a new tool that could could achieve military aims. You know, it's it's interesting. It was designed, again, to explain some of the the experiences the Russians had witnessed in from 2004 to 2008, all the way through 2014, with regard to Russia's war in Donbas and annexation of Crimea. Trying to remember. Am I wrong about those dates? I think that sounds about right.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:40:11] I'm just trying to think through if because Gerasimov became the chief of the general staff in 2012 same time basically about the same time I got to Moscow, just a couple. There was a little bit of overlap with his predecessor, but I don't think that doctrine actually started to get publicized for for a little while. Maybe it was 2014, either 2014, 2015. Anyway, less important. But the point is it was Russia's mirror imaging of the world and the kind of actions that they saw unfolding in front of them that then was assembled into this doctrine that talks about like everything that you do from competition, short of armed conflict, through major combat operations, through, you know, through kind of the Phase IV, the wind-down phase and all that kind of stuff. And then expanded to incorporate other aspects of there's a nuclear component. There's also it's supposed to be the full spectrum of military operations. Those operational concepts did not really seem to get proliferated or exercised sufficiently clearly to make sure that the Russian military was prepared for for their own major combat operations against Ukraine. There were different pieces of it that were theorized and explained and discussed and different pieces of it that were exercised in smaller contingencies. I'd say, you know, the Russians were somewhat effective in using small ground forces with air power for some combined arms fights in in Syria.

**Vindman:** [00:42:08] But they didn't. They didn't assemble and train their forces to to execute a strategic plan to be able to achieve their objectives in Ukraine. Massive country. Russia's a massive country. But Ukraine is also a massive country. It's the largest country in Europe. And

those are inherently difficult. Part of this could also be explained by the fact that the planning for this war was very, very insulated and very, very few people were had been brought into the planning. And certainly, there weren't any other rehearsals. There wasn't the ability to synchronize because the whole thing was supposed to unfold in a week or so with a kind of the acute phase being the first three, three days. There was just supposed to roll in, surround cities. The Ukrainians were supposed to throw up their hands and surrender. Replace the government. Move out. That's. That was the design of the operation. Therefore, you didn't have to. All you need to do is move units into position because there wouldn't be a fight. So they didn't actually even rehearse their doctrine that they've been kind of training on considering for a while. That's why when I said we shouldn't completely dismiss Russia, it's because they are now fighting the way they've been trained to or designed to fight. It's unclear how effective the Gerasimov doctrine would be.

**Vindman:** [00:43:31] What we call the Gerasimov doctrine or New generation warfare, how effective it would be if it was actually properly planned and executed. Instead, we have like a deeply flawed plan based on political assumptions driven by Vladimir Putin, who said, "Hey, Russian military, these are this is the kind of operation[s] that's going to going to unfold" and was not going to really listen to his generals that were may have had some alternative views or may have not been willing to share their views on the fight that's unlikely to unfold. I think, frankly. I think if the Russian generals. I have... I appreciate some of the Russian generals in that I think they're professionals. The ones I interacted with are professional combat-trained soldiers. That doesn't go all the way down the force. I mean, certainly at the tactical level, they're a basket case, terrible. But at the senior level officers that I've interacted with I thought were professional, competent folks. And I find it hard to imagine that they didn't they wouldn't have provided better counsel, especially having a lot of them having had experience in the East or in Syria on what to do. So to me, this has all the hallmarks of of the political leadership providing the planning assumptions. And we know how important planning assumptions are. They're basically the driving force behind the the strategic and operational planning.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:45:07] Right.

**Vindman:** [00:45:07] They're the ones that they're the like the the necessary inputs to be able to draw the plan. So if you're if your input is: The Russians. Russian forces will go in on opposed.

This will be only a three-day operation. There will be no resistance. Then your plan is completely different than a plan where your every every inch of territory is contested. You need to make sure you have your supplies arrayed, your your logistics table arrayed to support heavy combat. Completely different, right? That's why when when we talk, you know, assumptions, they have to be valid and necessary. [Muehlbauer inserts: Right] And valid, in this case, they were completely invalid. So I think that's to me, that's that's where really where this fell apart. Now, the Russian military takes a huge amount of blame because they were not quick to learn. I mean, to me, after Day Three or Four, it pretty much it was clear how things were going to unfold. And, I'm, fortunately, they didn't take my advice.[Chuckles] But I remember one time, you know, I think on our news program, I said the smartest thing that the Russians could do right now is is withdraw, secure their supply lines and move deliberately with with their logistics tail secured. And that was probably again, that was certainly within the first week, and it took them another five weeks to get there.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:46:41] Do you think that might have been because of political concerns that even if there are people in the Russian military know that's what they should do, that perhaps senior leadership, as in Vladimir Putin, would not was not quite ready to give up?

**Vindman:** [00:46:54] Of course, because then it would show that withdrawal of forces would show the fact that they're not successful and they were getting pressed to to achieve objectives, military objectives. But the problem is that, you know, in our military, what you would expect to see is the military leaders saying, "We cannot achieve those objectives. This is what we need to do. We're we're likely to just spin our wheels and lose forces in this kind of fight right now." But that's that's the difference between democracy and authoritarianism. You don't you don't necessarily get that kind of counsel going to where it needs to go. You know, certainly in those early days, some of these folks had put their credibility on the the line. So you almost certainly almost certainly saying this was easy, that the Russian military is prepared and then having to go back to the boss and say, "I was wrong. We we need a go back to to our side of the border or to our assault positions." And restart was not something that he was keen on doing and he was probably not listening to his subordinate leaders. You know, I think this is basically informed speculation, but informed speculation based on watching the battle unfold. Having experience with these with these officers. This is these are my conclusions about how-- Historians will dig into the record and prove me probably prove me right.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:48:25] Well, let's will be interesting to find out. All the reasons we're doing this today is to have the record. I'm curious, and I do want to go back to more the American experience of the American Army. But before I do. Given where we are today with the Ukraine war that we've now talking about, what is the capacity of the Russian army to fight a prolonged war in terms of the logistical problems it's had, but also the manpower issues, a number of battalion units being combat ineffective and having to rely more upon shorter term troops that don't have quite the same combat capability?

**Vindman:** [00:49:04] So Russia's capacity for war is vast. It's a country of 140 million people and depots as far as the eye can see. I mean, these are old pieces of equipment. They're burning through their new high tech stuff, but they have like 12,000 tanks in storage. That's huge. So these are these are.. Their capacity for war making is high. Their will for war making is in question. Certainly, the troops don't have the morale to fight. They didn't want to fight this war. They were told that this was going to be a peacekeeping operation. They'd be coming in unopposed. Certainly, that was in the early phases. There's no there's no mistaking that now. And the population has been keyed up to a quick victory. So now you have to kind of rebrand a protracted war to a certain extent. And I think I see some hallmarks of them moving in that direction. So the capacity is high, but the will is low. What I think could end up happening is that Russia is kind of, Most capable portions of Russia's military are broken within the next four weeks potentially. You know, today's the 14th. It's actually closer to three weeks before May 9th, April 14th or through May 9th. And that the Russians just simply do not have the means to conduct war in the short term, which means that they have to take a pause like they did this just moving from the previous phase to this phase with withdraw, kind of focus on a smaller area.

**Vindman:** [00:50:45] They're going to have to I see a scenario in which they may have to do the same thing. They have to withdraw from their current positions and then they have to go to conscription. Then they have to draw on on these depots of equipment. And that's going to take months to do that. Otherwise, they're feeding them into a meat grinder just piecemeal. And there are some some indications that right now they're, you know, they're they're not still not they certainly haven't reconstituted the those forces that they assembled from the first series of failures that, That's a weeks-long or months-long enterprise. They're doing it very, very

quickly. They're kind of quickly filling in for if two formations have 50% combat effectiveness, they're basically combining them into one. That's not a recipe for success. That's that's a that's a unit that's never trained together, you know. Potentially has different kind of standard operating procedures, all sorts of different reasons why that wouldn't necessarily make sense. But that's what they're doing. And they're rushing them to the front. They're rushing they're building mass for for an assault here, probably in the coming week, coming two weeks. There is a good chance it's a coin flip. There's a good chance that they could lose. There's a good chance that the Ukrainian fighting prowess, they've been masterful with small unit tactics, with anti armor ambushes, just like I mean, it's it's amazing.

**Vindman:** [00:52:10] I'm an infantryman. So, you know, it's a little bit morbid, I guess, but it kind of gets it just thinking through how these guys have been fighting is pretty amazing. They've been very, very effective with ambushes, both against combat formations, but specifically against logistics, vulnerable logistics. And these are this is a country this is a large territory that the Russians are going into. It's much smaller than where they started. They went for the whole country, which is pretty absurd. But they're fighting going to be fighting across 800 kilometers from Kharkiv to Nikolaev. That's a long, a large stretch. And they're focusing on probably about half that territory in the east. But the other half of the territory in the south is still potentially vulnerable to counter attacks. So the Russians, the Ukrainians don't have to fight on the Russians terms. They have to they could hold in one place and counterattack another place where the Russians are not prepared to have a fight and the Ukrainians could make some gains, take back maybe the city of Kherson is not far fetched notion. It's a critical city as a logistics hub. So I think but I think it's really too close to call because the Russians do have mass, they have overwhelming numbers locally. They have pretty capable weapon systems, maybe not particularly capably employed, but they have capable weapon systems.

**Vindman:** [00:53:35] They have good quality better than Ukrainian tanks. They have air power, they have artillery. And this is the story of this this battle right now. The Ukrainians are getting stuff, but they're probably not. They're getting it maybe just in time or maybe it's a little late and a little late, in this case, it means the difference between success and catastrophe because the Ukrainians very well could end up losing some of this terrain. Putin could claim a victory, whether that's seizing Mariupol or additional territory in the East, and that is the recipe for protracted war. That's when he doesn't take back what he has. He sees vulnerabilities and the

rhetoric is still around de-Nazifying, demilitarizing Ukraine. And we could find ourselves back with Ukraine under siege, you know, six months or a year from now with Russia fielding a massive military based on a draft. So this is the this is the my my fear is that we're doing too little, too late to help the Ukrainians win in the short term, doing too little too late to avoid a protracted war. And there's a whole bunch of reasons. This is not just about Ukraine. This is about US national security and what Ukraine's defeat means for the US led world order. It means more in the short term, more acutely, that a protracted war is a recipe for US involvement and spillover towards the US, towards US and NATO interests.

**Vindman:** [00:55:12] Because right now there's already spillover. You know, it was preposterous notions that somehow this was going to be limited. [Muehlbauer affirms: Yeah]. I already mentioned the largest country in the world going to war against the largest country in Europe. The sanctions that have already unfolded are having immediate effects on on inflation here in the US. Are having an impact on the economies here and in Europe. They're having an impact on the global economy, frankly. So that's that's spillover there. We don't...For some reason we discount that because it's not military. There's the information warfare that's going on. Is has long has for years already spilled over. It's kind of the Russians have it as direct confrontation between the US and NATO and Russia. So economic, informational, military is probably not too far away either because what I think Putin will do is he's going to eventually get frustrated with safe havens. And proxy warfare and those weapons flowing in from Europe. Which we have no choice but to do. We can't let Ukraine fail its interest in values proposition. We have to help Ukraine win. Otherwise, we have that big picture of like democracy losing and authoritarian surging. So we have to do that. But in a protracted war, that also means that Putin is going to want to do something to stem the flow of military materiel, and he's going to lash out.

**Vindman:** [00:56:46] He's going to look for vulnerabilities. He's going to do the same thing that he's been doing for... His twenty-two years is going to probe for vulnerabilities. And that is probably an accidental attack on a logistics convoy or chemical weapons that draw the US in, because right now we have this idea of strategic ambiguity. We don't say whether we're going to go in, how that changes our calculus, but it seems clear that we would have to escalate our support to Ukraine, probably potentially even establish no fly zones. These things are not farfetched anymore and that plays out over a long war. So the best thing that we could do for

the US is help Ukraine win this without having direct US involvement, and they can do that. You know, it's shocking because nobody thought we would be here. But Ukraine can defeat the Russian military and that's where this is going to get settled without NATO's having to go in. If we don't help Ukraine defeat the Russian military, then this turns into protracted war that does have direct security implications... There are already direct security implications. I mean, one of the things I didn't mention is the refugee flow is destabilizing millions of people. Ten population increase in Poland, that's not sustainable. They're the ones that are bearing the cost. But I'm talking about military costs. I think those are on the horizon if Ukraine doesn't win swiftly.

**Muehlbauer:** [00:58:11] Okay. So, that's g[ood]. Thank you. So I'm now. So we talked a little bit about the US response or US capacity, what the US should be doing. You started at the Joint Chiefs about 2015, 16,[Vindman inserts: Yes, 2015], and then you went to the National Security Council about 2018? [Vindman affirms] So I'm curious, based upon your time on those staffs, what is your and and what is your assessment for the US to develop and engage with effective policy to meet national security interests?

**Vindman:** [00:58:55] A fair bit of this is is personality driven. I was very fortunate to serve under General Joe Dunford. Amazing leader. Terrific. I mean, you know, his fortitude, his competence and his fortitude in facing off against the Russians in very, very tense moments is beyond admirable. You know, he's very soft-spoken and probably not well-known, but the guy is amazing. I mean, I frankly wish he was still the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, now. He's exactly the kind of leader that we need. He's he's been retired. He retired, actually. I guess it was October of 2019, just days, days before my. I think it was days before my testimony or something like that right around then or maybe right after, actually. I think it was a day or two after or so. And you had some very kind of things to say in support. He was the only one, only senior leader that came out in support and talked about the fact that I was not a dud. So I appreciate. Appreciate that. So that personality, a guy named Frank McKenzie, who was a CENTCOM [US Central Command] commander, was the J5, also a very, very thoughtful leader, just just retired. These were these were thoughtful individuals that appraised like I did. So it was it was we I was a junior lieutenant colonel, brand new lieutenant colonel, but still like minded because I was the one that was kind of implementing this stuff, you know, that the Russian threat was not going going to go away and this was going to be an enduring threat.

**Vindman:** [01:00:47] And they were. So we were we started working up the national military strategy. And I was probably the best position, frankly, because of my time on the ground in Moscow as a foreign area officer to lead the charge and write them, the Russia component, the Russia portion of the national military strategy. And it was, you know, beautiful synergies between their understanding that, you know, this is this is the future of, a future of confrontation between us and Russia and me having the pen and kind of outlining what what we need to be doing, what the problem is, and what we need to do to face-off against the problem. So really quite an amazing opportunity for for me to to shape the way the military was going to meet the challenge of Russia, and working on the national military strategy and then something called the global campaign plan. Basically, the the document that operationalized the strategy strategies, wave tops, the global campaign plan was, basically, what are we going to be doing over a time horizon? I think that we had to use a three to five or five to seven years, and I wrote that in 2017. It kind of laid out everything from...Yeah, I can talk about it. I laid out everything from like basically the full spectrum of conflict, what we need to do with regards to assuring our allies competition below the level of armed conflict to basically conventional warfare, nuclear warfare. So the whole spectrum of conflict, it was it was, it was a bear, but it was.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:02:30] Who did you, when you were doing that, who did you intersect with in terms of all the different components? [Vindman responds: Everyone] So all the different branches, DOD [Department of Defense], State?

**Vindman:** [01:02:39] So that was part of the process is basically pulling together a team of experts in their functional, regional, and functional expertise, space cyber information operations. Then the service components air, land, sea. So multi-domain, multi-operational, what we call it called it trans-regional, multi-functional, multi-domain, TMM trans-regional, multi-functional multi-domain. So everything that could fit into that huge that huge concept. Pulled together, you know, everything from writing kind of like problem statements from their perspective on what the Russians were [doing]. So they had to do the study of what the Russians were doing. In a lot of cases, I actually really had good idea but you know, but I don't have the technical expertise. So they would do they would kind of shape the problem statement and then what we could do in response to it. And then just literally pulling all this together, this behemoth, into a specific set of into a strategy and a specific set of tasks that we

need to do. Everything, even building more competent foreign area officers. How do you get more competent foreign area officers with language skills, with the regional skills and so forth? So it was just it was it was a massive enterprise like. You know. I know. The what? Right now I'm thinking about reconstruction of Ukraine. And it's going to be kind of that kind of scope where like all these different organizations, all these different lines of efforts, all these different kinds of competencies need to bring be brought to bear. And it's a pretty unique opportunity to to be able to be the person that has the pen, that's writing something that pulls in, pulls on every thread within the Department of Defense. So it was it was it was a very, very unique opportunity. And because of that, I found myself in the in these four star tanks. And being way down on the on the rank scale when these conversations are occurring, but being able to contribute to them to them so was pretty amazing.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:04:59] So one of the things that struck me reading your memoir is that every couple of years you seem to be, to have to be able to cultivate a new skill set from leading troops to running operations to becoming [01:05:14] an FAO [Foreign Area Officer] and [01:05:15] then writing strategy. So going from the tactical, the operational to the strategic. What do you think allowed you to do that as successfully as you did? That a lot of officers have problems when they go from the TAC, the operational officer, the strategic? Not everyone can really do that, but you seem to have done it quite well!

**Vindman:** [01:05:39] So I think part of a large part of it was hard work.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:05:42] Yeah.

**Vindman:** [01:05:43] You know, I guess like I don't. My social game wasn't wasn't superb, but I just, you know, when there's work to be done, I just do the work which is which is interesting because I think I was much less disciplined. In the book, I talk about it as a as a young man, you know, but military helped me kind of get that discipline and stay focused and just put put work into to accomplish a particular task. I think there's also something to be said about: I always made it a point to try to understand my bosses and my boss's bosses kind of like objectives. So the why of their actions and that's that's not a natural thing to do. You have a lot of obligations as an officer down to lead your subordinates, and that's critical. And that's where you should spend the bulk of your time leading, leading your organizations. But it's also really, really

critically important to understand your bosses and your boss's bosses. We talk about two level. You know, in the operations order, you want to go to, you're supposed to go two levels up. And usually, again, that's one of those things that like, you know, you do it, but you don't really pay that mind, that much mind to it. It's something that I focused in on. I thought it was important to understand, you know, what their kind of strategic objectives were. Well, strategic when I got to the Pentagon and the White House. But I would always try to think about the big picture, what this means within the broader context. I think that was helpful. It helped me kind of frame things and sometimes look for alternative solutions instead of like a prescribed solution. This is the way things are done to look at different ways it could be done. So I'm the GFI [01:07:39] [Go for It] guy, [01:07:39] you know, coming up with ideas, of different solutions to different problems. I think increasingly with competence and with experience more effectively. You know, maybe as a younger guy, I was like just, you know, DFIs [Different F\*\*n Ideas]. But later, it was just GIs, good ideas.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:08:05] Well well, do you think then the Army-- Is the Army institution that kind of rewards the initiative you often took, your willingness to pursue the office and the GIs and and to push back every now and then on leaders? Well, to question, well, not just to push back also is just to understand what they're doing. But at times you said you would push back a little bit if you had an idea. And you would, also you had superiors who wanted to hear what you had to say. So I'm wondering, to what extent do you think was your experience kind of unique? Is a typical or--? The Army is a very big organization and this kind of goes back to issues of leadership and cultivating good leaders.

**Vindman:** [01:08:46] Unfortunately, I do think I, you know, my experiences were more atypical than typical and, you know, leaders oftentimes kind of want their subordinates to kind of shut up in color or to do things the way they did them. And that's that's a mistake. And I think we have that's why we have a lot of cookie-cutter officers that look like they're seniors instead of people that may have some creative thinking and creative visions. I mean, there are plenty of terribly competent folks that are in the military. You know, I might not even be one of them. I think there are lots of folks, but for some reason, that competence is not bred and nurtured and those people find themselves kind of out, on the outs. Certainly, as they rise through the military hierarchy, I was pretty fortunate. I mean, I you know, I selected for colonel, selected for War College in spite of I guess in spite of my, you know, irreverence or something or... and

pushing back and things of that nature. But I was also very fortunate. I think from from really, from my time as a [01:10:03] FAO is [01:10:05] when my career really started to kind of soar. I had good leadership in and in Russia, my first assignment, as a foreign area officer, where I could I could make a case and take some calculated risks when I needed to, and those would be underwritten. You know, my my views were encouraged, to sharing my views were encouraged. In the Pentagon, I had terrific leadership, senior leaders, senior leadership. So basically, like, you know, we have deputy director, it's regional deputy director. It's mine was Europe NATO-Russia.

**Vindman:** [01:10:43] And I think my leadership for my tenure there was consistently really quite good. One-star officer, one star generals that were kind of moving towards two star and above. My one star there...there at the time is now a three-star. So these were capable, competent officers, you know, the J5 [Joint Chief], the three stars all made four-star, terribly competent, really thoughtful individuals. And then my the chairman I served Chairman Dunford all kind of encouraged this kind of stuff. I think in certain regards my biggest hurdles in the Pentagon were actually O-6 leadership that we're like, 'Who? Who the heck is this? Like, Lieutenant Colonel?' That one. They are the ones that wanted to Facetime. Or they're the ones that wanted to kind of like, take the information on passing. They wanted to be the intermediary then to pass it up instead of the subject matter expert, which is not something that resonates with me. Somebody knows what they're talking about. It doesn't make a difference. It could be a private. That's the person who should be talking, presenting to the senior leader. Not like, you know, not not just because you have the rank [Mulbauer inserts: Right.] Or something of that nature. Just never made huge amount of sense to me. So, you know. That's one of the things that, I don't know how. There's not a clear path to these types of reforms within the military. I just hope that it doesn't come down to defeats on the battlefield that get us to think more creatively about the kinds of leaders we need. But that's where we're headed.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:12:37] Yeah. It's--

**Vindman:** [01:12:39] Or twenty years or already the twenty years of defeat from the wars in the Middle East.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:12:44] Yeah. And we talked we mentioned you mentioned this before. And one of the things that I have heard from various officers from general officers as well as field grades is the idea that it wasn't a twenty year war. It was a one-year war we fought twenty times. [Vindman affirms: Right] And I'm curious as to your thoughts on that and the nature of the Army's, you know, rotating units in, picking them out? And are there other alternatives or do you have any comments on that process?

**Vindman:** [01:13:15] Well, I think I try not to take an overly simplistic view of of our failures there. I think, in fact, we we did a lot of good in both Iraq and Afghanistan. That sounds that sounds like a strange thing to say, but Iraq is still a stable state. It's an increasingly coherent, stable state, too, you know, with different still three to different factions vying for for power. But it's it's. It's now a democracy, maybe corrupt democracy, but it's democracy. It's progressing. So we gave those people a chance for democracy. I think that's we also killed a lot of people by way of collateral damage, even unintentionally. So it's an unfortunate war. And it's a that was a war of choice. Afghanistan was a war that we wasn't wasn't really a war of choice. We had to fight that war because that's where Al Qaida had its safe havens. But we under-resourced that particular war, and it was a war. Probably it was a war that we could thave won. I don't take put stock into this notion that it was a foregone conclusion, you know, the dustbin of empires or something of that nature. I think we underresourced that war. We made some poor political decisions with regards to the way we manage the leadership there and looking the other way for corruption. The Taliban was was a more sophisticated actor there. I think that. We also gave the Afghan people a generation of freedom and hope that they wouldn't have otherwise enjoyed large portions of it. Now, not all of it, but Kabul. You had a generation of people grow up with democracy. I mean, I think that that's an overstatement.

**Vindman:** [01:15:19] It wouldn't be democracy. It would be more like of kind of what some some freedoms would be a better way to put it. And we also kept the the terrorists at bay for twenty years. So we shouldn't. When I when when I talk to soldiers about it, they shouldn't think that their time is wasted there. That's what they did. They provided hope and they kept the terrorists at bay. But we also squandered enormous amounts of resources on these wars and resources that could have helped transform this country and helped ease the burden for large portions of the American population. Alleviated the grievance for for a large portion of the white middle-class America that is now being radicalized and drawn to the far right. And those

resources could have gone to education, towards infrastructure. So in that regard, it's a travesty that we basically we didn't.. We lost in Afghanistan and we lost in the US at the same time because we could have used use those resources better. And I think a lot of that blame goes on on the military. It's not a political. Yes, there's politicians drove some of those decisions, but it was the military that owned that battlespace. It was the Department of Defense that drove the policies that that indicated that we were on the cusp of victory, that provided the false reports. And that's why and these are the same kinds of leaders, frankly, all along the way. And I probably represent a lot of, you know, mid-grade military officers that feel quite a bit of grievance against the senior military leaders that took us down that road of failure.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:17:08] So we talked a little bit about sort of the fact that often senior leaders, you had very good senior leaders, but often their leaders who do not cultivate different points of view, just want people to repeat, kind of, what they think they should hear. So I guess, and again, how we address this as a is a big question. I'm wondering, you mentioned your book, military professionalism. So how do we understand military professionalism in light of some of the things we've been discussing here today in terms of what it's supposed to do? How does it actually work? Do we achieve it? A lot of your experiences in the Army.

**Vindman:** [01:17:55] I need to think through what that term means. The military is a profession has it's kind of has the hallmarks of profession, has is professional values, professional ethics. It's own kind of unique language around the profession of arms. I think in aggregate it does. I mean, it's I that's I can take a deep sense of pride in the military as a profession and what it does, its fundamental role to defend the nation. To breed very honorable, selfless public servants that are prepared to to risk their lives for for a higher calling, for national defense. I think at the same time it's populated by human beings and we've somehow stumbled into a military that I could take pride in, in a lot of my leaders, but I could also call out a lot of leaders... There's a there's to me, there's a big gap between what I've seen with regards to leadership from the Marines and the Army. The Marines seem to to somehow key. It's a smaller force, but their senior leadership is superb. They're four stars. They're three stars. I haven't really worked with their two stars too much, but the couple that I have are superb and they're much, much better than the Army four stars, three stars and two stars as. And that's a blanket statement. Maybe that comes across as disloyal, but that's my assessment, is that some

whatever they do, they're to develop their senior leaders seems to be far more effective than what we do to develop our senior leaders.

**Vindman:** [01:19:53] I think there there's a there are some stereotypes, jaw heads that they're simple and then some of that some of those stereotypes have something to be said about them at the lower levels. But once you get to the strategic level, they're really pretty darn creative thinkers. And I don't see that same kind of thinking from for military. It's more cookie cutter, it's more conservative kinds of leadership, more risk averse kinds of leadership, less strategic. We have great tactical, sometimes operational leaders, but we don't have what I would call strategists. And that's. That seems to be indicative. A lot of, I wonder. You know, it's interesting that in Iraq and Afghanistan, there wasn't really there were there weren't any Marine generals that were responsible for the theater. They were subordinate commanders. It was the Army. So, I mean, again, there should be some introspection of where the Army fell short in its conduct of the war in Iraq and especially in Afghanistan. There was I think there was one I guess there was one. Was it General Allen or It --? It might have been one Marine general along the way. But I think. It's a tough one. This is something that I think about on a regular basis because I usually try to offer something constructive. I just know we're falling short with our leadership--

**Muehlbauer:** [01:21:35] Does it--

**Vindman:** [01:21:36] --that doesn't. There's still but there's still something to be said about the fact that the profession of arms is is a deeply competent, professional adheres to the values and ethics. But somehow it doesn't translate to the best kind of senior leadership.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:21:57] Does you think? Do you think it's effective at the junior and mid-grade at the company level?

**Vindman:** [01:22:02] I think it's effective probably all the way to the colonel level.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:22:04] Okay. Okay. And then when you get to the O-6 and above, it's a little more questionable how who gets selected for what roles?

**Vindman:** [01:22:14] Something. I mean, that's a bit of a generalization, I think even at the I think. I think. But I'll stick with that. I think that's right.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:22:27] Okay. Fair enough. So the Army is the largest of all the services. Is it institutional? What's the word I'm looking? Is it a form of institutional inertia in terms of people who are looking back? They're the way they were when they were junior officers, younger and trying to perpetuate what they think was best about the Army then into the future? And a future that doesn't quite; that requires a little more creativity?

**Vindman:** [01:22:58] I think it could be possibly some of that. Certainly when people when senior leaders look to promote and groom subordinates, they look for people that look like them. And. You know, these are people that are probably have a good interpersonal game, have a keen sense of like institutional politics and can navigate, can do the right. There's something to be said. You have to have good, strong networks of relationships. But there's something. A phenomenon. I would say that the politicking and the way that you interact with senior leaders and play up to senior leaders. As opposed to. Just being a very competent professional. I think that the interpersonal game counts for a lot more than just basic competence. I don't know. I this is not like an easy conversation because I don't think I'm either particularly well versed or studied on on Army reforms. I could probably call out some some shortfalls, but I don't know if I have anything in the way of solutions. Again.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:24:29] Fair enough. I am curious as to what you think about the the Army, the military in general has this ideal of being apolitical.

**Vindman:** [01:24:42] Yes.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:24:44] And based upon your experiences, I'm wondering what your take is on that.

**Vindman:** [01:24:49] Well, I think there is an unhealthy kind of apoliticism that we should discard entirely, which is that we fail in our duties as citizens and don't vote. Too many military officers think that even the act of exercising your right as a citizen and voting is political. That's a mistake. I think everybody should be encouraged to vote. And any any and all Americans

should be encouraged to vote. But that's different than being political or advocating for particular partisan politics, Republican or Democrat. So I think we should be an apolitical organization. It's essential to maintain credibility with the electorate, to maintain credibility with the political class. But in our senior leaders attempting to cross over from politicking, bureaucratic politicking, all the jockeying you need to get to positions of authority and power. So like, you know, two, three, four star level, they try to apply those same skills to politics and navigate those. But they're poor players and they they they, they try to game out like, you know, what's going to run them afoul of Senate, what's going to run them afoul of the various parties? Where are the biggest pitfalls instead of just simply doing the right thing. And I think that's, I think inaction [pause] could also be perceived as a political action. So in my case, I could understand the mentality of preserving protecting the institution, not wanting to run afoul of the commander-in-chief. But I think in remaining silent when I was attacked for doing my job and acting on on those on the on the Army values, that was a political decision.

**Vindman:** [01:27:01] It was a political decision to not run to to not support the institutional values, to not run afoul of the president and the president, that former President Trump, one of his super powers, was sussing out vulnerabilities, weaknesses and determining that the military was going to was not going to be a principled actor, was not going to be an impediment to his schemes, and probably inspired him to to attempt to use the military to retain power. Whether that was parading General Milley in Lafayette Square. Or calling on the military to play a role in in overturning the election results in 2020. I think those are types of things that he again, he sensed out the vulnerabilities. He sensed out the hesitancy of the military potentially to to take action to suppress the protests. You know, that that's not a that's a high bar, by the way, because the US military can't be operational, simply operationalized in that way. But they can. There are different means in which National Guard could have been put into into place, responded quickly to the calls by either the D.C. mayor or the Maryland or Virginia governors. So I think it's, you you have senior leaders that attempt to play politics very, very poorly and are politicizing the military. I wrote an article in I guess it was The Washington Post in The New York Times back in September, being critical of Chairman Milley for this reason. Because he he made a huge mistake by walking through Lafayette Square. Like any subordinate leader would have been fired.

**Vindman:** [01:28:56] But somehow, the most senior military leader get gets held to a lower standard. That doesn't make sense to me. Then he's critical of the president working kind of like or I wouldn't say organizing kind of resistance, but certainly critical to other cabinet level officials after January 6th. But he does it behind closed doors and he doesn't say anything until he goes on the record talking to to people that are writing books in the summer. So in the moment that he could have made a difference and said, "No, the military will not stand for stealing an election." That would be the time for him to take a principled stand. Instead, he remained silent, issues out some bogus instructions about doing the right thing following the chain of command with nuclear command control. Just nonsensical stuff. He doesn't do. He doesn't actually take the kinds of actions that are meaningful. He just waits until the summer when people are interviewing for books and tends to clean up his reputation. That to me is a political act and that politicizes the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. That to me is troubling. And that's why I said that he's he's made enough mistakes where he shouldn't be in power. You know, he shouldn't be in that position of authority.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:30:13] So. Yeah. I'm wondering. So these are really valid points about it's the Army, the military in general, it's values, works on values.

**Vindman:** [01:30:29] Yes.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:30:30] [01:30:30]And wants to cultivate values, and when you acted when you reported, you took an oath to the Constitution of the commander in chief, of the Constitution. And you did what you thought an officer should do. And it was a highly politicized environment that seemed to seemed to catch your superiors unawares. And I wonder if that's. I'm just wondering, is there. Is that a problem that can be addressed? Do political senior military leaders need more education or need to be more thoughtful about how they engage, how to protect Army values in a highly politicized environment?

**Muehlbauer:** [01:31:15] Well, I think, you know, for me, that touchstone was was was the Army values, doing the right thing, or doing the wrong thing. I don't think that their political, their career aspirations should be put ahead of the Army values or the institutional values. And I think in a lot of cases, it is pure hubris to think that you're the only person that could do that job. Chairman Milley, you had a vice chairman. You had chiefs of staff of the various services.

That guy could have been swept aside and somebody else would have stepped up and done a better job. But instead, it was him. He was the one that felt like he was holding the line. That is that is not the way the military is supposed to work. We even as a as a young officer, you kind of train your folks for fallout drills. You know, the commander goes down, the XO is supposed to stand up. And that's the way. That's the way we're. We should not have a hubris about. Like, the only reason that we're important is because we fill an important role. It's the position, not the man that's important, really. And I mean, unfortunately, these, again, are human beings. And there was a deep sense of of pride about somehow that you're you're the guy that can really change things or hold back. My... My concern is once you start to, once you kind of succumb to situational ethics and you start to bend on values, that that means that you're likely to bend on other values in other situations. And I think. In a way setting me aside, but protecting the officer that did the right thing and adhere to values protects the institution. That's what protects the institution. Not not casting aside the officer and, you know, thinking that it's just one person. Because those are the things that, again, with Trump's super powers, those are the things that indicate vulnerability where you can continue to press. And I think under Chairman Milley, there was a perception of weakness and vulnerability.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:33:24] So I'm just checking the time because I know you have another another engagement. I'll just throw something slightly different at you in terms of, you know, our military is interesting in terms of the active component and the reserve. And so I'm kind of curious in terms of your career, how you saw the interaction between, you know. Guard, reserve officer, soldiers with active duty components and how that worked together in the various situations you saw?

**Vindman:** [01:33:59] So, I mean, you're, you know, I'm supposed to, as an active duty guy, say, like, you know, 'weekend warriors' or something like that or reserves, you know, 'playtime'. But now, in reality, it's it's we're all kind of critically critical components of a bigger whole. You know, I think the Reserve component and National Guard have their unique roles. They serve, National Guard actually was drawn out of they're much more much more conservative. You know, contingencies to actually fight the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. So they proved to be really important components now. It took years of experience to make some of those organizations really, really combat effective. But I think that's probably one of the reasons that our military is likely to be whichever contingency, whichever future war we're involved in, all

three of those elements will be absolutely essential to the fight because our military is, you know, for a near period, it's not large enough active duty force. So we need the National Guard, we need the Reserves to provide the kind of logistical backbone, logistics, tail and stuff like that. So. And these are people that have lives and full-time jobs but are willing to go above and beyond and commit their free time. What could have been free time compared to their peers towards military service? That's a pretty darn honorable. You know, it's my. For me, it was a full time job. Know, I got paid as a as an active duty officer, but that's the only thing I had to do. In fact, the Reserves and National Guard have two jobs. [Muelabauer affirms: Right]. And the senior they get and one of my good friends is is an O6 [rank of colonel]. I mean, that's like his his reserve duties account for much, much more than two weekends a month. So that's a big commitment.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:36:09] Right. Excellent. Lieutenant Colonel Vindman, thank you so much for being here today. We appreciate it. And good luck to you with the rest with your next phase of your career in life.

**Vindman:** [01:36:20] Thank you. I appreciate it, Matti.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:36:24] Have you received one of these [PMML challenge coin]?

**Vindman:** [01:36:28] I have not, here. Oh, thank you. That's I don't think so.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:36:31] That's a, I'm surprised!

**Vindman:** [01:36:33] Oh, cool. Yes. Nice.

**End of Interview**

**Muehlbauer:** [01:36:36] Yes...I'm still trying to get the-

**Vindman:** [01:36:38] Yeah, I like it.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:36:39] Good. I'm glad...Well, I'm surprised you don't have one.

**Vindman:** [01:36:44] I don't know.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:36:47] Well, I'm glad--

**Vindman:** [01:36:47] We so corrected that.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:36:48] Yeah. Thank you for that. I hope. Yeah, you found that--

**Vindman:** [01:36:51] That was terrific. Yeah. Covered a lot of new ground, which is always pleasant.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:36:57] You know, you a lot of the stuff. Yeah, I was trying to. I didn't want to [have] to rehash anything? I wanted to give you a chance to expand on other things. So, we have about what?

**Vindman:** [01:37:09] It's 10:00, so we're not leaving till 11:30.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:37:11] So yeah, I'll come by around 11:30 and then Ross is supposed to pick us up and in fact, I should see if I-- I sent him a text. Yes. So Ross has confirmed that they can give you a space, a quiet space, free access at 4:00 o'clock.

**Vindman:** [01:37:27] Okay. Sounds good. Okay. Okay. So I'll see you at about 11:30.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:37:30] Okay. Awesome. I'll come. Yeah, I'll stop by the lobby.

**Vindman:** [01:37:34] All right.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:37:35] Although we may have to cross the street. All right. Thank you. Hey, thanks. Have a good rest of your morning. I'll see you in a bit. Okay. Great. Yes. [Pause] [Muehlbauer addresses an unknown person] So yesterday we're at UIC Yeah. For a major with the cadets and pretty laid back. I introduced him and he thought he was good. A lot of interaction. Yeah.

**Muehlbauer:** [01:39:29] Today the luncheon is with the ROTC leadership and