

Mind Your Own Business

Guest: Phil Giraldi

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Phil Giraldi is a former counterterrorism specialist and military intelligence officer of the CIA.

WOODS: I've been wanting to have you on for some time, and then I saw this piece that you wrote in *The American Conservative*, where you write regularly, and it had to do with an issue that has fallen out of the news cycle a bit, but really there is no Middle Eastern country that is permanently out of the news cycle when you're an American. And you had a particularly interesting angle on it because it turns out that the evidence with regard to chemical weapons being used by the Syrian government was so flimsy even by U.S. government standards that, apparently, there was a threatened revolt within the intelligence community. Can you tell us about that?

GIRALDI: Yeah, well, it goes back to Iraq, and we all know now that the intelligence community was, to a certain extent, blamed for what went wrong in the lead-up to the Iraq war. In other words, the information and the intelligence received by government that turned out to be either fabricated or incorrect were basically laid at the feet of the intelligence community. So, this time around, when the Obama administration was looking for an intelligence justification to intervene in Syria, the intelligence community, at least certain elements in it, looked at the evidence and basically said, "This doesn't convince me that the Syrians used chemical weapons against its own people, and we won't go on record as saying that that was the case."

WOODS: So, what kind of effect do you think this had? I mean, do you think this would have bothered the Obama people? Do you think this had a marginal effect on their ultimate decision?

GIRALDI: Well, the Obama people went back and, as in the case of the Bush people, tried to pressure the analysts into finding more information or interpreting it in a different way to make the case, but there was still considerable resistance, which eventually worked out to when the administration issued its own paper, the Government Assessment, on August 30. It came out of the White House, instead of out of the intelligence community, because the threat that was implicit was that a number of senior analysts would have resigned and publicly disagreed with the paper. In the long run, of course, we didn't attack Syria, and you can attribute that, I think in part, to this. But also, I think more so to the fact that the American people finally had had enough, and Congress and the White House were flooded with complaints from citizens saying basically, "We don't need another war. There's no justification for the U.S. getting involved in Syria."

WOODS: Now you and I tend to be of the opinion that the two parties, especially when it comes to foreign policy, can often be more alike than different. But, I wonder, though, when we're dealing with Obama if, for all his use of drones and for the fact he has increased the American role in Afghanistan, is it possible his heart is genuinely not in another war?

GIRALDI: Yeah, I've suspected that for a long time, that he's being driven in certain policies by advisors and by consensus politics, and by the fact that he can't be seen in certain ways by his own supporters, as well as by the Republicans. I think he's in a very touch neighborhood, and I suspect his heart is not in this stuff. I suspect in the current situation, he doesn't want a war with Iran, would like a negotiated solution, if he can get that by the Israel lobby. And certainly I think in Syria he was pushed into it perhaps by some of his advisors like Samantha Powers and Rice, essentially on humanitarian grounds, but as we've seen, this humanitarian argument was pretty weak. The use of military force to kill more Syrians obviously would not have ameliorated the state of other Syrians. So it was a false premise to start with.

WOODS: Now I ask this not facetiously, but where do you think we would be right now, foreign policy-wise, if we were living under, not a President Romney—who, may conceivably have had some degree of prudence—but where would we be under a President McCain, do you think?

GIRALDI: Well, I think there would have been no hesitation for using military force either with McCain or with Romney. McCain probably would have been more enthusiastic about it. But, again, it's a question of how one views the world, and how one views America's role in the world. And there is something to say for the United States having some kind of policeman's role, but there is not much of a case really to be made for America being an aggressor in terms of trying to enforce its own norms on other countries. So, there's a fine line there, and Obama kind of falls on one side of the line, and people like McCain and Romney fall on the other side.

WOODS: When I introduced you, of course, I mentioned your CIA background, so I don't know how comfortable you feel talking about this, but do you think the CIA has in one way or another gotten maybe worse in the twenty or so years—when did you resign or retire from the CIA?

GIRALDI: I left the CIA in 2002, so it's eleven years ago.

WOODS: Okay. Of course, we're talking about this case of Syria where there was a threatened mass resignation. But do you think there have also just been quiet resignations here and there without a lot of fanfare from conscientious people who just say, "I just can't do what they're inevitably going to be asking me to do"?

GIRALDI: I think that always takes place. Basically, there are going to be people that basically say I can't support these policies. I can't support what's happening. And most of them just quietly leave. There were a number of notable resignations at senior levels in the lead-up to Iraq. But there hasn't been a replay of the Iraq situation since that time, although Syria threatened to be that. And certainly if we keep going down the wrong road with Iran, that can certainly happen there, too. If one goes to some of the antiwar-type sites that you and I probably look at, you would see that there are people that basically think that soldiers are baby killers, and that people who work for the national security state are essentially conscienceless. They leave their conscience at the door when they go in. But, of course, that's not true. And may people are conflicted about their roles in working in their jobs, and I can remember many,

many acrimonious debates when I was in CIA about certain policies that didn't make sense, or that seemed to be particularly tone-deaf in terms of the impact on local people.

WOODS: Well, how much can you tell us about the type of counter-terrorism work that you did? Was it confined to a particular area of the world? Was it Islamic terrorism? What sort of work kept you occupied when you were in the CIA?

GIRALDI: Well, everybody forgets, I think, these days, that the terrorism that started out in the '70s was European, and it was basically a number of groups like Baader Meinhof in Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy. These were European anarchists, leftist primarily, people who came together and formed terrorist groups with the goal of overthrowing their governments. So I started out working with those groups. I went to Italy when Aldo Moro was kidnapped and killed. I spent four years there. I worked in Germany, worked in Spain, worked in Turkey. I was always working on terrorist groups, most of which were either indigenous or European. Terrorism coming out of the Islamic world was sort of later. It's a manifestation now of a lot of things, but a lot of the policies the U.S. and other countries have pursued internationally have literally put fuel on the fire in terms of creating this kind of terrorism.

WOODS: Now, I myself, I don't reject every single thing that I read in *The New York Times*; I mean, they do use periods and semi-colons correctly. But not every single thing that comes out of their mouths is wrong. Having said that, is there any part of you that finds the bin Laden story a little bit fishy? Or does that seem plausible? "We got him. We don't have any direct evidence of this. We immediately got rid of him, threw him in the water. And there's no body, and there's no nothing, but take our word for it, this happened." Does that not sound just a little bit weird to you?

GIRALDI: Yes, it does. I don't generally want to believe in conspiracy theories and that sort of thing, but you know, you look at a lot of these recent episodes and you have to say there's something missing from this story. For example, if you go to the 9/11 report, there's certain areas there you say, "Well why didn't they look at this? Or why didn't they discuss that?" Which is not to say that the United States blew up these buildings itself, but the fact is, there are certain things they didn't look at. And I feel the same way about the killing of bin Laden, and certainly Seymour Hersh, who as a journalist I respect tremendously, has been saying recently that a lot of the story is just flat-out false.

WOODS: Maybe this is naiveté on my part, but I guess I just found it hard to imagine that Obama could go out there and just brazenly say to the world, "We just did this. We went out and did this." When conceivably, if there's something fishy about the story, there'd be a lot of people and a lot of regimes around the world that would know the truth. But, would the idea be that no one is going to believe them anyway, they'll believe the U.S., and they won't believe some backward Middle Eastern country?

GIRALDI: Well, I think that's the kind of weighing up that goes on, obviously. When a head of state decides to tell part of a story, he's assuming that he's not going to be challenged on it, and

he can always claim that the critics are motivated by some other reasons, by political reasons. I think that's what a lot of the consensus of American policy has been since the Second World War. It has been cast that way and we've been fed a lot of lies or half-truths, and the people peddling these stories basically have assumed that they won't be challenged.

WOODS: Now you played some kind of role with Ron Paul in an advisory capacity. Is that in both of his presidential campaigns?

GIRALDI: I was a foreign policy advisor for Ron Paul in his first campaign in 2008, yes.

WOODS: Were you approached to do that? Or did you approach them with your services?

GIRALDI: I was approached to do that by his campaign.

WOODS: And why did you accept? Presumably you saw some overlap between what he was saying and what you believed?

GIRALDI: I felt very strongly that he was saying precisely what I thought, which is essentially—I'm not a pacifist, I'm not intrinsically antiwar. I served in the U.S. Army during Vietnam, just as Ron Paul served in the Air Force. And Paul was saying essentially the same things I'm saying, that there are wars that are worth fighting, but we just haven't had any lately, and we shouldn't be using the military as a tool to go off and start wars as a substitute for foreign policy. And that's essentially Ron Paul's message, that intervention doesn't work, that if you're using it instead of diplomacy, you're essentially going to come out with a bad result, and I think that what he's been saying about that has been demonstrated by the reality that we see all around us.

WOODS: I suppose you know Michael Scheuer? Did you have any professional connection when you were with the CIA?

GIRALDI: No, I didn't. He was an analyst, and I was a field operative in clandestine services, so I heard his name. I knew who he was, and I've met him since then, and we've been together on a number of shows. We were on CNN not so long ago together. And he's a very, very insightful person in terms of a lot of the things that he's seen in terms of the causes of terrorism, which goes back to the earlier question about where this all kind of originated, how it came out.

WOODS: Well, to my mind—and of course he also worked with Ron Paul—the most significant contribution Dr. Paul made to American life was his frank talk about foreign policy. I mean, he talked frankly about everything you asked him about, but with foreign policy he was saying things that nobody would say. There might be a few progressives out there who in their heart of hearts kind of believe it, but in political life they wouldn't dare say it, and now there's a lot of toothpaste that's out of the tube. But do you think there's anybody on the horizon at a national level who's really going to carry forward the pure, one-hundred-octane Ron Paul message?

GIRALDI: I'm afraid not. But again, these situations change in terms of the reality of our foreign policy and what's going on in the world. I think Ron Paul has created an opening for this kind of discussion to take place, because, as you pointed out, it never took place before that. He was the first one to open that door. But I don't see anyone having the courage or the intellectual stature that Ron Paul had to push forward this agenda. I'm afraid of that. We don't have politicians who believe as Ron Paul believes, as I believe, that our international policy, our foreign policy, is what has driven a lot of the bad things going on domestically. And I think Ron Paul understood that very clearly, and other politicians don't seem to. They seem to weigh up this against that: "well I have to say this, or I have to do that," and when they do that, of course, they lose the message.

WOODS: How do you account for how it came about that all these right-wingers out there who, by and large, have been supporting whatever military action either party has demanded of them, all of a sudden rebelled against the John McCain wing and said, "We don't want to be involved in Syria, and we protest." The Iowa GOP issued this public letter with dozens and dozens of people signing it, many of them from the Christian Right. And all of a sudden, they are deeply concerned about the fate of Christians in the Middle East, which had not caused them to lose much sleep up to that point. What do you think changed? What happened there?

GIRALDI: Well, again, I think Ron Paul started this discussion and people started looking at these issues as a result of his two campaigns, and the problem is a lot of it is hypocritical. They have been looking at Christians now, but they haven't looked at the fate of Christians in places like Israel and Iraq, where Christians have been on the receiving end of a lot of bad policies. It's a current issue; it's serious. Somehow it sent the right buttons with the public, but, again, it would not have happened without Ron Paul opening the door to this kind of discussion. And I hope and persist, but I'm not optimistic. I think that essentially all politics, even if they originate overseas, come down to being local politics, and our domestic situation is just so bad now, the economy is so bad, and Obamacare is going to be a massive failure and money pit. And, as a result, I think people will begin to focus on that more.

WOODS: Well, in a way, that's good for us, because it would be harder to persuade them that their most urgent task is abroad when everybody can clearly see our most urgent tasks are here at home. So that may be the silver lining that the wheels are coming off this thing. Now you, as a former CIA field man, how do you get your information today? If you want to know what's really going on in the world, you don't pick up *The Washington Post*. What do you read?

GIRALDI: Well, first of all I have a network of former intelligence and military officers that I communicate with frequently, so we share views. We share things that we've picked up and seen, and sometimes these people have seen things that are not evident in the U.S. media. And I also find that the overseas media is very helpful to look at what people in the Middle East are saying, what people in Europe are saying, and that sort of thing. And then the final thing is, like this story here, I picked up a number of things here and there and put them together. I said, "What makes sense out of these bits and pieces?" And essentially I put them together and said,

“This is what happened.” And this whole process is intuitive. Some of the process is essentially, you hear something from someone who is well-informed, and you kind of run with it.

WOODS: Well, before I let you go, I want to play devil’s advocate on just one aspect of the sort of Ron Paul story of what’s going on in terms of terrorism and war, and that’s the neocon answer that, “Look, if Ron Paul’s view of the world were correct, then all the terrorism would be committed against the U.S. and its most robust allies, but the fact is, we see acts of Islamic terrorism going on in the Netherlands, for example, or in other European countries that don’t really seem a thousand percent on board with the global war on terror, so it really is just as we neocons said. These are jihadists, they want to bring about the caliphate. They don’t discriminate between the U.S. and others. We’re all Western infidels, and that’s what matters, and there’s no appeasing these people, so we just need to obliterate every last one of them.”

GIRALDI: Well, that argument has a certain popularity among certain neocons.

WOODS: You don’t say.

GIRALDI: It doesn’t really pass the smell test, because a lot of the issues that we call terrorism are actually local issues. If you look at many of the countries in the Middle East, where there is what we would describe as jihadism, the fact is what motivates the groups locally are local issues, and they have a grievance with their governments, they have a grievance with their group. In Europe, the terrorism situation is a lot more complicated. Essentially, you have a number of European countries that have permitted large-scale Muslim immigration, and then essentially abandoned these people, and we Americans should understand that. The problem of creating ghettos in terms of your own country is a problem that will breed all kinds of things, and I think that certainly the terrorism we have seen in France is a result of that, and the Netherlands to a certain extent, and the same sort of things in Germany. It is easy to characterize them as Islamic terrorism, but, of course, they’re a lot more complicated than that. They come out of different issues in each place. In France, of course, the terrorists will be mostly Algerian. In the Netherlands, they’re mostly Moroccans. In Germany, they’re mostly Turks. And each of them have different grievances with the places where they’ve wound up. So I think you have to look at the roots of the terrorism in each place, and you find that it is no transnational movement in most cases.

WOODS: Where can people read columns by Phil Giraldi?

GIRALDI: Well, I write regularly for *The American Conservative*. I write for both the magazine edition and for the website. I write for Antiwar.com regularly. Those are my two most frequently used websites.