

Warburg Speaker Glenn L. Carle Talks with Ambassador Bellamy

On Tuesday, October 6, 2015, Glenn L. Carle, former CIA official and acclaimed author, will deliver the [Fall 2015 Warburg Lecture](#), entitled “Collective Delusions: Losing our Way in the Fight Against Terrorism” 5:00–6:30 pm in the Linda K. Paresky Conference Center, Simmons College, Boston, MA.

Last week, Warburg Professor Mark Bellamy spoke with Mr. Carle about his work at the CIA, the so-called ‘War on Terror,’ and his advice for students.

Mark Bellamy [MB]: After Harvard and Johns Hopkins you chose the CIA’s clandestine service over other career options and initially relished the challenges and responsibilities of serving your country in this way. Why did you make this choice? Do you have regrets?

Glenn L. Carle [GC]: Two impulses have shaped my life: A desire – a calling, even – to devote myself to the great public and personal issues that shape our societies and lives, and a desire to live overseas and engage with foreign cultures, ways of life, and thought. The Odyssey is as powerful today as it was 2,700 years ago, for it relates how to be a complete man, including how to pursue meaningful external responsibilities with personal moral and intellectual fulfillment. Odysseus is impelled – it is his nature – to exercise responsibility, to reach beyond the known, and to be as faithful to his personal and public obligations as he can. He is the West’s most complete man, and I wanted to embody his virtues and character. I wanted to discover what was over the horizon. Seeking adventures was secondary for me, although fun; but trying to “shape” the great issues of the era, and to use whatever abilities I have, while challenged in foreign environments, engaged always with different ways of life and thought, has given my life meaning. I chose the Agency, rather than another profession, such as the Foreign Service, because it was the wildest career I could think of that was engaged in these public, foreign, and personally testing, issues.

Do I have regrets? Yes. By my interests, education, and personality, I was – would have been – the perfect Foreign Service Officer. It was a career more suited to who I am than espionage. The life of a spy is morally wearing, personally isolating, albeit sometimes exciting and rewarding. It is a sordid business; there is honor in accepting tasks that must be performed for the common good; but the personal cost is high. Those who do not find that to be the case, are morally impaired, or insensitive, or dim. But those are the costs. One bears one’s wounds with pride; but who would ever wish to be wounded, or diminished by what one has done?

MB: After 9/11, you were made responsible for the interrogation of a very “high-value” Al-Qa’ida suspect. You ultimately concluded that the suspect was of no value, that the CIA had made a mistake, and you dissented. What was the effect of your dissent?

GC: My detainee, whom I call CAPTUS in my book (not his true pseudonym,) did provide useful intelligence. I have always pointed out that he was not a choir boy. But he was, as you point out, not a member of al-Qa’ida, nor a jihadist. The mistake was specific; we erred with regard to who and what CAPTUS was. That was bad enough. But the error was symptomatic of much deeper problems in how the CIA and Bush Administration conceived of, and executed, the “War on Terror.” We got so much wrong. We saw a global, coherent, growing, world movement, with thousands upon thousands of highly-trained jihadists coming directly to attack the US. There were, there are, attacks planned and

carried out against the United States. We need to stop them, and act aggressively to do so. But the problem is several orders of magnitude less, more than several orders of magnitude, smaller than the paradigm that obtained, and that, for many in the CIA and the Republican party, still obtains. I pointed out our errors with regard to CAPTUS, and urged that we let him go free. I argued that we had a moral responsibility, when lives were at stake, to right wrongs if we could, and not hide them, so as to hide professional error and policy error. But, of course, to have done so would have been embarrassing for individual officers, for entire offices, for the CIA, and for the very framework and justification of the “War on Terror.” Who is one officer, equivalent to a Lieutenant Colonel, to challenge directly the leadership of the counterterrorism bodies of the United States, the leadership of the CIA, and the entire policies of the President’s administration? The Pope’s visit should bring to mind the stark, stupid reality: when one challenges orthodoxy, one is excommunicated. Doctrine is always equated with Truth. Institutions always protect themselves. So, apostates are burned at the stake, or expelled, or suppressed. My dissent, as you term it, was “pocketed.” Nothing happened. CAPTUS remained in detention for...eight years. Then he was quietly released, and cautioned to say nothing. The effect of my “dissent” was to irritate some colleagues, and that was all.

MB: In your memoir *The Interrogator* you cast strong doubt on the effectiveness of our intelligence agencies following 9/11. Did the methods used by your colleagues serve to keep us “safe,” as some politicians claim?

GC: Oh my. This “keep us safe” refrain is patent, politicized garbage. Of course the CIA, and other national security institutions, did frequently heroic, often effective, counterterrorism work after (and before) the attacks of 9/11. Much of what the national security establishment did to counter terrorist threats has been effective. There are countless former colleagues of mine whose devotion, talents, and work has literally moved me to tears of appreciation.

But the working title of my book, right until publication, was *Victims of Delusion*. Virtually the entire “Global War on Terror” conceptual framework is wrong. John Locke said the definition of insanity is to reason correctly from erroneous premises. The analogy I make in my book is to liken our counterterrorism framework – the entire edifice of the Neocons’ GWOT, especially that of Vice President Cheney – to Ptolemy’s Theory of the Spheres. Ptolemy explained in detail, and with highly predictive accuracy, the motions of the heavens. Very impressive. It took two thousand years for man to realize that the entire theory was delusional; it had nothing to do with reality.

So, we reasoned sensibly within the delusional framework, and often did fine work, for all the conceptual lunacy and Kafkaesque operational acts I describe. The GWOT framework finds political and tactical coherency, where one should see sociological phenomena. But, as my superiors told me on several occasions: Glenn, we don’t do sociology. Just find me the terrorists. The conceptual framework in which so much has been done has described an apocalyptic threat, when we have been confronted by numbers of terrorists, a much, much smaller problem. This conceptual error led to many analytical and operational errors. That said, there are jihadists who would happily slit my throat, or yours, and enslave your or my daughters. It is a nasty world.

MB: You will talk next week about our nation’s “Collective Delusion” in the the so-called “war on terror.” Where does this delusion originate and how does it affect us as a nation?

GC: The delusion originated in two places that reinforced one another: the counterterrorism bodies of the CIA, in particular, developed a framework to explain the jihadist threats we were confronting, starting really in the early 1990s. But it ascribed too much coherency to the jihadists, hideous as they are. Yet

the counterterrorism bodies of the CIA are our experts; and who can challenge the experts? It all held together. I know my colleagues to be hard-working, on the whole talented, and to check and recheck their work and conclusions. I accepted the framework, too, for years. This “global jihadist movement” framework comforted the Neocons’ views and inclinations, and who saw the projection of American military power as a solution to many problems, real and perceived. The Neocons, and the foreign policy establishment of the Republican party and Bush Administration (not quite identical groups,) continued to believe in “state-sponsored terrorism” – à la Libya of the 1980s (when, by the way, the Neocons had last exercised power...) The CIA counterterrorism unit’s “global jihadist movement” framework fit well with the Neocon views of state-sponsored terrorism. The Neocons considered the US military an unparalleled tool that could impose American will. And then, there was the unresolved Republican issue, as it were, of Iraq. These currents added up to a conviction that terrorists were an existential threat, that states – specifically Iraq – sponsored them (which was totally false!), and that the US would impose its will on...terrorists, Iraq, Afghanistan.

The problems were that 1) the conception of the jihadist threat exaggerated the threat and mischaracterized it; 2) the military is a poor tool to address terrorism; 3) state-sponsored terrorism had largely stopped by 1995; Iraq had nothing to do with jihadists – Saddam’s Iraq was a secular regime that opposed Iran and jihadists; Afghanistan and Iraq had nothing to do with one another...

So, all these conceptual and operational errors cost us on the order of seven or eight trillion dollars – about equal to two years of the entire federal budget – about 5,000 American soldiers killed, dozens of thousands of servicemen wounded in body and soul; hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans killed (I will point out, that I support the invasion of Afghanistan, and the use of the military on many occasions,) a Middle East in flames and chaos, and the erosion of our civil liberties – endlessly – in the name of national security. Almost none of this was necessary; and it originates in the delusions of the Neocons, comforted by those of the counterterrorism bodies of the CIA.

MB: What advice do you have for graduates who might be interested in career paths similar to your own?

GC: Understand that it is a calling. The career is like an order of monks, in a way. It separates you from “normal” life. It can be meaningful, important, unique, challenging, fun. But it wears, too, if you are thoughtful. Learn foreign languages. Learn foreign affairs. Learn how to write. Learn always to challenge convention; do not accept an opinion unless you have first challenged it. Do not be obstreperous; but do not accept convention. Doubt everything. Accept nothing a priori. Work abroad, or work for several years after college. It is hard to be hired right out of college. It happens, but that is very young. No one knows very much coming out of college. You think you do. But none of us do, really. Experience and maturity are important. Do not do drugs. Beware alcoholism. Read the classics! Be open-minded. Realize patriotism calls for devotion, yes, but also a critical mind. Doctrinaire anythings – political, social, religious – are antithetical to what it takes to be a good intelligence officer, or a good American. America is open-minded, doctrinaire thought betrays what it is to be American, because it excludes. The Agency seeks people who are psychologically centered, who thrive in ambiguity, who have open minds, who are self-starters and work well alone, who are willing to work very, very long hours, for not much pay.

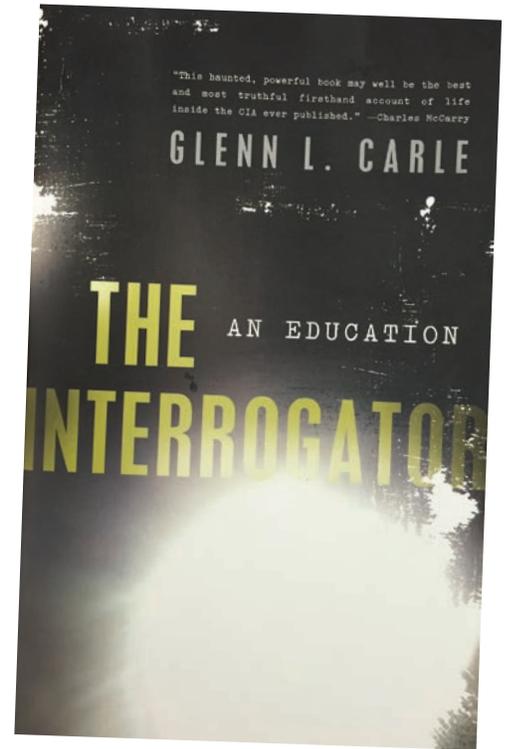
[*Glenn L. Carle*](#) is a former CIA official and acclaimed author.

[*Amb. \(ret.\) William M. Bellamy*](#) holds the [*Warburg Chair in International Relations*](#) at Simmons College.

Warburg Lecture · Fall 2015

Collective Delusions: Losing our Way in the Fight Against Terrorism

Glenn L. CARLE, former CIA official and acclaimed author, will discuss the many mistakes made by the US in addressing terrorist threats since September 11, 2001—notably our exaggerations of the actual threat we face and our resort to wrongful and counterproductive methods, such as torture, to combat it. Carle's book *The Interrogator: An Education* (2011) concerning his involvement in the interrogation of one of the most senior members of al-Qa'ida, has been called "the greatest non-fiction book about the CIA ever written." He is an outspoken advocate for outlawing torture as a method for any US government authority.



Glenn Carle was a career Clandestine Services officer with the CIA, working on four continents, on political, military, terrorism, and economic issues. His last position, for three years during the "War on Terror," was as Deputy National Intelligence Officer for Transnational Threats. In this position he authored or co-authored many of the intelligence assessments that shaped public and governmental debates on the nature of the jihadist threat, the evolution of al-Qa'ida, threats to the US "homeland," and other critical intelligence issues. His articles and interviews have appeared in CNN, NPR, the BBC, MSNBC, the New York Times, the Washington Post, the London Times, the Sydney Herald, The Economist, and other global media.

October 6, 2015 · 5:00–6:30 pm
Simmons College · Linda K. Paresky Conference Center

Presented by the *Warburg Program*, Simmons College