



All Americans should read Michael Hayden's Playing to the Edge

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It isn't often that I finish a book by concluding that it should be required reading for all Americans. Some books are great only for policy geeks like me. But Michael V. Hayden's book, [Playing to the Edge: American Intelligence in the Age of Terror](http://www.amazon.com/Playing-Edge-American-Intelligence-Terror/dp/1594206562/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1460750921&sr=1-1&keywords=hayden) (http://www.amazon.com/Playing-Edge-American-Intelligence-Terror/dp/1594206562/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1460750921&sr=1-1&keywords=hayden), all Americans would benefit from reading.

First, all too often today, the upper echelons of American governance are populated with men and women who went to elite colleges and spent every day thereafter in the bubbles of elite institutions. Gen. Hayden has lived the American Dream. He was born into a blue collar family in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he spent his life until graduating from Duquesne University with both his BA and MA in history. He then entered the Air Force as a second lieutenant, beginning his career in national security. I hope the millions of young Michael Haydens currently living in lower and middle class families across America learn about his inspiring story, as it vividly shows what is possible in America with hard work, integrity, and sacrifice.

Gen. Hayden has lived the American Dream.



(http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/RTR2145E_michaelhayden-e1460755953332.jpg)

President George W. Bush and then Director of the CIA Gen. Michael Hayden at the CIA Headquarters, August 14, 2008. REUTERS/Larry Downing.

In terms of his book, I liked the memoir style Gen. Hayden used to write it. It personalized many issues that should make it difficult to attack him and his former colleagues as spies hell-bent on riding roughshod over our civil liberties. He goes to great lengths to describe the various conversations he had with lawyers and privacy advocates to ensure that the NSA and CIA did their work as carefully as possible. You still may disagree with what those entities did, but you can't demonize the people who did it.

Next, his insights into issues like enhanced interrogation techniques, rendition, Stellarwind, and PRISM were profound, especially in framing how the media, the Left, and Edward Snowden falsely portrayed what exactly we did, why we did it, and what it provided us. His wise, but unheeded, advice throughout the book on the importance of ambiguity as it relates to official US policy struck me as spot-on given the impact it would have on terrorists. The fact that terrorist groups now teach their members our limits in order to harden them if captured is proof of Gen. Hayden's warning. I wish every American would read his book so they knew the facts versus the popular fictions surrounding the most controversial issues in America over the last fifteen years. Unfortunately, our citizenry seems to have forgotten Thomas Jefferson's plea for eternal vigilance...

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On a related point, Gen. Hayden's version of events involving the other players, such as Attorney General Eric Holder, US Senator Barbara Boxer, and former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, in this era is a critical one to make it into print. The media and critics may choose to ignore what he injected into the debate, but history won't. As President George W. Bush noted, things will look a lot different in twenty-five years when the sobriety and detachment provided by time, along with the declassification of documents, allow for more rational judgments.

Finally, I first met Gen. Hayden in February 2013 at a lunch at The Heritage Foundation when he talked to a small group about some of the issues in his book. He was the most impressive principal I'd met during my stints with two governors, the US Department of Homeland Security, and my post-government career. He can speak about fairly complex and controversial issues without a hint of ego, dismissiveness, and hubris. I had the same sense as I read his book.

From his humble beginnings in Pittsburgh to his weekly intelligence sessions with President Bush, Gen. Hayden's life as told in his book is a story worth reading. America needs more men and women like him.

Learn more: [American intelligence in the age of terror: A conversation with retired General Michael V. Hayden](http://www.aei.org/events/american-intelligence-in-the-age-of-terror-a-conversation-with-retired-general-michael-v-hayden/)
(<http://www.aei.org/events/american-intelligence-in-the-age-of-terror-a-conversation-with-retired-general-michael-v-hayden/>)

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