

General Jack Keane (US Army Retired) Reflects on 9/11 Attacks and the Ongoing War on Terror

Featuring General Jack Keane



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ISW Board Chairman General Jack Keane (US Army, Retired) is a foreign policy and national security expert who was in the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. He went on to provide oversight and support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. On this episode of Overwatch, General Keane (Ret.) recounts his experiences on the day of the attack and gives his perspectives on the ensuing 19 years of war.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War. I'm Jacob Taylor. This episode marks the 19th anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people. General Jack Keane is a Foreign Policy and National Security expert who was in the Pentagon on September 11th, 2001, and provided oversight and support for the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He serves as Chairman of the Institute for the Study of War and the Knollwood Foundation. He is also the Executive Chairman of AM General and a director of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and the Smith Richardson Foundation. He's our guest on Overwatch today.

General Kane, you were in the Pentagon on the day of the 9/11 attacks. I was hoping we could start with you recounting your experiences of that day from your perspective.

General Jack Keane:

Yes, the day began like most other days for me with a 0700 meeting with all of my three-star generals who worked for me in the Pentagon and a couple of two-stars who dealt with special areas. About a half hour after they ended up meeting one of my staff raced across my cavernous office, that we all have in the Pentagon and turned the television on and said, "Sir, something terrible is happening in New York." The first airplane had hit the World Trade Center. I'm a born and raised New Yorker, so I recognized that that was likely a terrorist attack. I'm very familiar with what had happened in 1993, where they placed a bomb in the garage, underneath the World Trade Center and tried to bring it down and that failed. So, I called for the manning of the Army Operation Center to bring it up to full manning. We had it in a warm state or partial manning normally, and that was done in short order.

Turned out to be fortuitous because the airplane eventually hits the Pentagon, slammed into the army spaces largely. And a number of those spaces were occupied, but much of the force that went into the Army Operations Center, which is several floors below the ground level. And then the second World Trade Center was hit and the building was hit and I was in conversation with the Commander of the Operations Center, a two-star General. We were talking about what he was monitoring on the FAA net and what other things were taking place in the country, and he told me that there was an airplane that flew out to Ohio, turned around and came back to the East Coast again, flew up the I95 corridor heading towards Washington, D.C., had turned east, did not go into the city, it went south.

As he's talking about that, I'm saying, "Well, what is the procedure or is there one to evacuate buildings in D.C. and evacuate the Pentagon. We're having that discussion and the airplane hit the Pentagon. Then I asked him, "Pete, did you hear that? Did you feel it?" And he said, "No, sir." I said, "Well, that airplane you were talking about just hit us." And you know, my desk rocked, some of the debris from the ceiling came down. I mean, nothing catastrophic, but in very quick order, I was about a hundred yards, probably from the blast site. Smoke filled

the room. Told everybody that worked for me to call home and evacuate, the alarm started to sound about building evacuation. I got my two assistants, one Colonel, and one Major and I gave them shirts from my bathroom and then we all wet our shirts, these shirts, and put them around our face and we went down to the blast site to assist inside the building with evacuation.

After a while, my executive officer said, "Sir, we've got to leave this to others and let's get going. You got to get to the Army Operations Center and take control of the Army," which I knew it was the right call when we got out there and left that site. But while I was there, I saw the fear that people had on their faces, certainly, given that catastrophe that they were personally dealing with. When I got to the Army Operations Center, there were officers who were joining, that would normally be a part of it who were outside assisting with rescue. And many of them were full of blood. Some of them had used their ties and belts as tourniquets. Their shirts were hanging out and everything. So, that's how that day began and it certainly evolved with intensity during the day. The day culminated for me at the end of the day, by visiting all the five hospitals that had all of our wounded. I got to see just about every wounded person in the Pentagon on that night that was in a hospital. Some of them had horrific burns. I just didn't visit Army, I visited everybody.

Many of the first responders, interesting enough, who had come to the Pentagon to assist us in the morning was still in the building, in those hospital buildings, because they just were sort of frozen in place in a sense, they couldn't leave it. I'm assuming that some of them didn't have to work the next day. They normally pull long shifts and then have a day off or something. But they told me that, "Sir, we were there at the Pentagon site and when we arrived there, they probably couldn't have been a better place for something like that to happen because the people who were injured and laying on the ground, many of the soldiers who have experience in how to deal with wounded people had stopped the bleeding and were treating for shock." So many patients who likely would have bled to death were indeed stabilized. We were able to save their lives. We attributed a lot of that due to the experience that was in the Pentagon and dealing with something like that.

I told our people that this is the first battle of a war and it's likely that we'll stop treating terrorists as criminals now, and then we'll treat them sort of the culprits that they really are in performing an act of war and we will go to war and we will kill them by the thousands for what that took place on that day. That was day one. It certainly was gripping.

The other thing I would, day two was very interesting. It began with an update, we only went home for a few hours and came back. Streets of Washington, D.C. were deserted going home and coming back in the morning. We went home at night and came back, it was still dark in the morning, we got back there so early. It was more to get an hour or so of sleep, change of clothes, get something to eat and back we went. But after the update, I knew we had a number of people that were missing, we tried to get an accountability as best we can. We made that a requirement before we left so that people could work on it all night. We knew we had dead. I'd already seen a bunch of wounded and it took us a while to get a grip on the number that were actually missing.

The army lost 85 dead. We represented the largest number of casualties out of the 125 who were killed while in the building, not talking about those who were on the airplane, who tragically died as well, 59, and then the terrorists who were added to that. And that, by the way, we are still involved in 9/11 wars to some degree. And that number of 85 Army casualties represents the largest single day casualties in the following 19 years of 9/11 wars. So, it was the first day of the war. It had the largest numbers of single day casualties for the Army.

I took a briefing from the chief engineer who went down to the blast site and he showed me the blast site. It looked like, the best way I can describe it as a multi-tiered garage, a parking garage that had no floors, that had a

very high ceiling and that was opened up because the upper floors had collapsed. The walls were all scarred, but there were no internal walls. There were no cubicles, there were no computers, no desks. And I said, "Where is everything? Where's the airplane? How much did this airplane go in? He said, "I'll show you, General." The Pentagon is five rings separated by an alley between each ring. So we went and walked through three rings. On the inside of the third ring he showed me the strut from the airplane, which was holding up the fuselage and where the tires would be affixed to it. That made it in onto the inside of the third ring, which is more than halfway, somewhere between two thirds and three quarters of the way in that whole airplane made it inside the building. Came in on the ground floor. And the wings obviously did not go inside. The wings of the engines did not go in, but the fuselage made it all the way in.

And all of that was exterminated by the 2000 degree jet fuel as he described it. I asked him the obvious question, I said, "So, where are all of our people?" And he said, "Sir they're just all around us, they're consumed by the intensity of that fire. We will be able to recover some remains, likely, or partial remains to a certain degree." So, it was horrific, when you put your head around all of that. He said, "Sir, there's a positive thing here." I said, "What could possibly be positive?" He said, "The building itself, we renovated this wedge of the building, there are five wedges and because the renovation was complete but the office furniture had not arrived. There's normally 5,000 people that work in this wedge. About, only 2000 were there because the other 3000 were waiting for the furniture to arrive and they were working in other outlying buildings in and around D.C. and Northern Virginia, so they had not returned, only 2000 of the 5,000 were here." So, that was positive thing number one. We were blessed or else the casualties could have been something similar to what catastrophically took place in New York City.

So second, he said, "This of the five wedges, this is the only wedge that has rebars in the cement pillars." I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "In World War II, because we had an iron shortage, no steel rebars were put in the cement pillars. They were built without it. One of the things we did is we put rebars in this wedge because it had been renovated. And as a result of that, the rebars held the upper floors, part of the second, third, fourth, and fifth floors for sure. Those three floors, part of the second floor got destroyed, but held those three floors for 45 minutes." He said, "I believe as a result of that, we're going to see that most of those people were able to get out of here and have survived although some of them may indeed be wounded."

That did turn out to be the case. So I said, "So, Chief, you're telling me that if this airplane had gone in to one of the other four wedges of the Pentagon that because there were no rebars in those cement pillars, that when it went through those pillars, the upper floors would have collapsed immediately?" He said, "That's exactly what I'm telling you, General." He said, "We would have had for sure, thousands of casualties, and it would have been something on the scale of New York city is likely going to have to deal with." I said, "Oh my God, that is just absolutely extraordinary. He attacked the only possible place that those lives could have been saved." Pretty remarkable, isn't it?

Jacob:

It is. I want to ask you another question now. You mentioned that by the end of that first day, it was clear in your mind that the United States was in a state of war, at that point. Was there a point during the day where that realization became clear to you, or was it something that emerged in your mind over the course of the events of the day?

General Jack Keane:

I think when I got to the Operations Center, I began to assimilate what was happening on our large screens, what events were unfolding in New York City, in Pennsylvania, what had happened to us. The fact that we were still

tracking five unidentified airplanes that were approaching the United States and we sent up fighter jets to intercept them, authorized by the Vice-President. And if no positive contact was made, he authorized a shoot down of those airplanes. I can remember saying to the Secretary of the Army who was sitting next to me, Chief of Staff was on foreign travel during this whole period, so I said, "Sir, can you imagine that? We've got kids up there flying those airplanes in their twenties, likely, maybe early thirties and they've been given the mission to take down airplanes that they know contain innocent people, to save thousands of people on the ground." I said, "My God, what must be going through their head?"

Fortunately, they made an identification with the pilots when they got up next to them and signaled to them and they made radio contact with. But yeah, sometime during that day, when events slowed down a little bit, we talked among ourselves. I had Intel people, operational people there, we all concluded, this is going to be Al-Qaeda, this is going to be Osama Bin Laden, he dropped our two embassies in 1998, he went after the USS Cole in 2000. Now it's 2001, we never really responded in any consequence to the 1998 bombing and we just dropped some cruise missiles off in Afghanistan where he was. We kind of figured that, that's probably what it was. I don't think there was anything illuminating about that, given all the sequence of events that had led up to that, dealing with Osama Bin Laden and his pronouncements and certainly his very aggressive activity and strategically what he was attempting to achieve.

It's pretty interesting when you think about that event and what actually was taking place. When I think about the character of that military operation and the strategic perspective, I believe the nine attack was shockingly successful in terms of its brilliance, imagination and the sheer scale of the operation to turn our own airplanes on ourselves as weapons, but to prepare the people to do that, to train them to be able to fly those airplanes. Essentially, people have never even flown an airplane to be doing something like that and then coordinate it so that all of these events are occurring simultaneously. That, Osama bin Laden achieved a successful tactical operation to be sure, but it was a strategic failure. That became obvious as we learned more about what his intent was. He fundamentally believed that because we had such a feeble response to the 1998 bombings of the two embassies in Africa, that we would not shed our blood for our own people.

He also believed that the United States was a morally weak country, that we are racist drug trays, sexually perverted and we were out of control with crime and violence. He got much of this driven by Hollywood, internationally, and their films and TV construction, a very superficial narrative of the United States that he and many of his followers bought into. However, Khalid Sheik Mohammed, the mastermind of 9/11 who's still in Guantanamo Bay and through months and actually years of interrogation, we were able to determine what was actually taking place with the Al-Qaeda of leadership. I just explained what UBL's view was and I was supported by many others, the majority of these leaders, none of whom had ever been to the United States. KSM and a couple of others had been to the United States and they had an alternative narrative. They believed that if you seriously hurt Americans in the United States, it is likely, very likely they will come for us and they will keep coming for us until they kill thousands of us. And they will be very determined in doing that.

They also used World War II as an example, in terms of what the United States, who did not want to be involved in World War II, did get involved in it and helped them destroy the German and Japanese militaries, but also destroyed their people so that it would never have this kind of an experience again, and that resonated with them, but they lost the argument. And Osama bin Laden conducted the attack because he believed that one single attack tactically successful, which it was, would achieve a strategic objective, which would be the economic collapse of the United States, and would force the United States to implode morally because it's a weakened nation and it would no longer be the global leader or the international order, which is what the Al-Qaeda movement wants to destroy. That's why I describe it as a successful tactical operation on a strategic time, because he was never able to achieve

that end. We suffered economically for about 30 days at best. As we all know, it brought the country together. We had determination and resolve and resilience as a result of it. We were stronger as a result but not weaker. We were certainly humbled by the attack. I'm not suggesting we were not. At the time we had been 10 years now that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the only superpower in the world, we're the oldest and most prosperous democracy in the world. So, I mean, United States had a lot of swagger about itself, not in an arrogant sort of way, but in a very confident sort of way.

I'm proud of our achievements and there's no doubt that Osama bin Laden's attack humbled us as a result of what took place so tragically to our people, but it was a failure for the reasons I described. He did not accomplish what he wanted to do for us. And as KSM predicted, we came for them and we wound up killing just about all of their leaders with some exception and all of their successors to them, drove them out of their sanctuary in Afghanistan and they've never been able to return to the status and stature that they had at the time of the 9/11 attacks. They are not defeated. I'm not suggesting they are, because this is a powerful idea. And this country was formed by a powerful idea, freedom and liberty for all. And they have a powerful idea, we destroy the international order and replace it with radical Islam. That ideology is still in the minds of young people out there who want to prosecute that ideology. So, they're not defeated, but they certainly not the same organization they were on 9/11.

Jacob:

I want to ask you a little bit about that in greater detail regarding the current state of Al-Qaeda. There've been various points where multiple U.S. administrations have declared some level of victory over Al-Qaeda, that you've expressed that you believed that they are at a weaker point than they were before, but is that conflict with Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups over? Or is it ongoing? And if so, in what way?

General Jack Keane:

Yeah, it's ongoing because it's an ideology and the truth is as long as young people are drawn to the ideology and are willing to find purpose and meaning in their lives by being a part of that movement, and essentially subscribe to doing two things for the movement. One, you become a suicide bomber and therefore become a near term martyr for the movement or, two, become a fighter and eventually willing to become a martyr for the movement. So yes, that movement is still ongoing and, as we all know, it was al-Baghdadi who's a card carrying member on the Al-Qaeda, so to speak, in Iraq that formed ISIS as a derivative from the Al-Qaeda movement and very much connected to that radical Islamic ideology, but because they were even more brutal than the Al-Qaeda, al-Muhajir separating himself from al-Baghdadi and al-Baghdadi performed, he established the Islamic state and a caliphate.

But yes, the Al-Qaeda and it's brothers, ISIS, are still alive and functioning and certainly what Baghdadi was able to achieve in Syria and partially in Iraq is testimony for that, the Al-Qaeda organization, the so-called group that is in Northwestern, Syria, that grew out of the Khorasan Group there is a formidable organization in Syria. If they weren't so tied up with dealing with regime forces, et cetera, they would be plotting attacks in Europe and against the United States. We all know that the Al-Qaeda in Yemen has plotted attacks on the United States consistently. And that's an organization that we're still targeting and every once in a while conduct an operation against them for those reasons. We have al-Shabaab also in Eastern Africa, another organization that we target. And I do believe the strategy that was put together now by three presidents to continue to target those radical Islamic groups that have as their aspiration to attack the United States, either in the region or in our homeland, is something we need to focus on.

Therefore, we can't focus on all of the radical Islamic movements worldwide. We would provide other nations intelligence if they needed it. In certain selected cases, we'd be willing to provide some training for their military forces, depending on what the nature of the relationship with that country and the United States is. But, what we

have decided through the currency of three presidents is that we will focus on radical Islamist groups, principally Al-Qaeda and ISIS, who has as their aspiration to attack United States interests or the United States homeland. That turns out to be still ISIS in Iraq. It still turns out to be ISIS in Syria. It turns out also to be Al-Qaeda in Syria, who's preoccupied with the war, but we focus on them and we hit them once in a while. Once their focus turns from a regime focus and begins to focus externally, I believe they will become a principle target for the United States.

Yemen, for the reason I described. East Africa, for the reason I described. Libya was very important to us because ISIS was going to move in to Libya. We were concerned that they would establish another sanctuary or safe haven and we targeted that very aggressively and prevented that from happening. Libya is a failed state, as we all know, principally driven by U.S. policy failure to help stabilize the country by providing assistance to the duly elected Muslim moderate who succeeded Gaddafi and the Obama administration tragically, and unfortunately, failed to answer his call for help to train his military forces so they could push back against the radicals who he knew would come for them, even though the radicals assisted them to take down Gaddafi. He knew they would turn on him and his government and the United States would stay, which they all did. I think the United States is involved with a very focused involvement in what we're doing.

Obviously we have the same concern about South Asia and Afghanistan. That's an epicenter there for radical Islamist in that region. Hopefully, we'll maintain U.S. presence in Afghanistan indefinitely in my mind, at least at modest investment numbers, as long as there's a potential threat from the rise of Al-Qaeda or from ISIS. Afghanistan is very attractive sanctuary for radical Islamist because the terrain lends itself to hide people in the mountainous terrain and protect them from surveillance and, also, provide significant natural fortification protection for them as a safe haven or sanctuary. It's something that ISIS and Al-Qaeda aspire to, particularly if the United States departs.

Jacob:

Speaking of Afghanistan, the United States overthrew the Taliban in Afghanistan, principally because they refused to give up Osama bin Laden. And now there is the peace deal that's being negotiated between the United States and the Taliban. Do you believe that deal will achieve the goals that you just laid out of keeping Afghanistan secure from the development of groups like Al-Qaeda pre-2001?

General Jack Keane:

Certainly that's the aspiration, but I think it's unlikely. The Taliban ran Afghanistan after the Soviet Union pulled out with a humiliating defeat. Their stooge government was left in place, Afghan government that is, and then the Taliban overthrew that rather handomly, and ran the country for almost 10 years. Barbaric, fanatical control of the country, denial of all individual liberty and human rights and denial of women. Quite the contrary in their total subjugation of women in an Islamic theocracy, so much so that the people of Afghanistan today in every pole that's taken over almost two decades now reject the Taliban wholeheartedly. Somewhere in the neighborhood of 80% to 85%. They have good reason for it because they lived under the tyrannical Taliban rule, and some of the people in certain provinces and various districts inside of Afghanistan are under the control right now of Taliban forces and they're living with barbarianism, for sure. That's a problem, the Taliban themselves.

The concern I have is simply this, it's more of a political concern. We have formed a constitutional republic in Afghanistan. We've had four democratic elections, two under the first president, the second under the second one, now Ashraf Ghani. Its foundation is a constitution and fairly well crafted. The United States was bit of a model for it and we assisted them in doing it. Civil liberties are its hallmark, individual liberties, personal freedoms, protecting the rights of women who were always subjected to, as I mentioned, subjugation and that democracy,

while it's far from perfect, it is a fledgling democracy. Has made huge strides, given where they were when they began. They still have a government that's not nearly as effective as it should be. There's still too much corruption in it, but nonetheless, there's a lot of progress.

The Afghan National Security Forces are the most respected institution in the country, but I believe because of the pressure being applied by the United States to get out of Afghanistan, we made a pretty lousy deal with the Taliban back on February, the 29th, when we signed it. No cease fire. The only cease fire was the Taliban would not attack the United States, but we permitted them at complete absurdity to continue to attack Afghan security forces. Actually they increased the scale of attacks against the security forces and they've killed in the succeeding months somewhere in the neighborhood of about 3,500 and wounded about 6,000 to 8,000. That's an absurdity given the fact that we supposedly have a peace deal with the Taliban. The other thing we agreed to is that the government of Afghanistan would give up 5,000 prisoners, essentially just about all the prisoners they have who are Taliban in their jail houses and there's no cease fire and there's no peace agreement with the Afghan government. But, yet, the United States forced the Afghan government as in part of the Taliban request to do that.

The absurdity of that is that the Taliban are still wholesale killing Afghan security forces and Afghan civilians and we are releasing to the Taliban. We have released 5,000 detainees and some of the worst of the worst mass killers that we've ever encountered are now back in Taliban hands. But the Taliban, as a result of the peace deal with the United States told the United States envoys, "Of course, we will make certain that they do not return to the fight or to the battlefield." Well, independent organizations, have indicated that somewhere in the neighborhood of 60% to 70% of them are not too surprisingly are back in the fight. That's the absurdity of some of the deals that we made with the Taliban.

Tomorrow begins the negotiations over a peace deal between the Afghan government and the Taliban and all of us certainly would like to see something positive come out of that. My concern is this, it's political. We have a constitutional republic based on the constitution. The Taliban reject the constitution as being completely legitimate. And why is that? Because there's nothing in it that complies with their Islamic theocracy, nothing, and they want to replace it with what, the kind of rule that they had back in the nineties for almost 10 years. Therefore, they have pressured the United States and our envoys to suggest that we walk away from the constitution. We walk away from the constitutional republic because it's illegitimate in the Taliban's mind and we form an interim government. That would be outrageous for something like that to happen. But I know for a fact that some U.S. officials are willing to move in that the direction and that would fundamentally destroy Afghanistan as we know it.

The other thing is the Taliban have been told in no uncertain terms, by no less than the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, himself, a General Mark Milley that you guys, this is colloquial language being used. "You guys don't understand, you believe your fight is with the Afghan security forces and the Afghan government, and that through peace negotiations, you're going to have your way with them." And he said, "It's not going to happen." And he said, "The reason is, is that's not where your fight is. Your fight is with the Afghan people who don't want any part of you and reject you. And if we move in a direction where something that destroys the constitutional republic that the people have continuously voted for in pretty decent numbers, except for the last election, they're not going to put up with it and civil war will break out. And I totally agree with that conclusion.

It's aspirational that we'll have a deal. I hope the United States works not objectively between the both parties, but hopes, works to put pressure on the Taliban and to work with the Afghan government to sustain the successes that we've achieved. I don't see how we're neutral in something where the Taliban has been brutal with our own people, more so with the Afghan troops and certainly even worse with the Afghan people themselves. There is no way to be neutral here. We'll see what happens. I'm not optimistic about it.

Jacob:

General Keane, I want to thank you so much for being on the show today.

General Jack Keane:

I'm delighted to be here. Thanks for asking me.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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