25 YEARS LATER: RANGERS ON OBJECTIVE RHINO

By Joseph Votel and Tom Spahr, November 3, 2026
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00:00:38 **Tom Spahr:** Welcome to *A Better Peace, the War Room Podcast*. I'm Dr. Tom Spahr, DeSerio Chair of Strategic and Theater Intelligence at the U.S. Army War College and your host for today's conversation. On October 19, 2001, almost exactly 25 years ago, 200 Army Rangers conducted an airborne assault into a desert airstrip in southern Afghanistan, dubbed Objective Rhino. Within hours of the jump, every major television news outlet broadcasted a video of the airborne Rangers at work. These were the first overt American boots on the ground in Afghanistan after the September 11th terrorist attacks. The jump onto Objective Rhino was the beginning of a campaign of raids the Rangers conducted in southern Afghanistan during October and November of 2001, seizing desert landing strips to launch helicopter raids on targets around Kandahar, the most important city in southern Afghanistan and the home of the Taliban. This campaign was an impressive display of tactical dominance by U.S. special operations and yielded many lessons. I served as the collection management officer for the Rangers during this campaign, and General—then Colonel—Joseph Votel led the operation as the Ranger Regiment's commander. Today, I am fortunate to have General Votel in the War Room Virtual Studio to look back on these events, share some lessons about military command, linking tactical objectives to strategic outcomes, and a commander's relationship with intelligence. General Joseph Votel, U.S. Army retired, commanded at all echelons in the joint force, including leading the 75th Ranger Regiment, the Joint Special Operations Command, JSOC, the U.S. Special Operations Command, SOCOM, and finished his nearly 40-year military career as the commander of U.S. Central Command, CENTCOM. After retirement, among the many advisory boards and volunteer positions he has held, General Votel served as President and CEO of Business Executives for National Security, BENS, a national nonprofit comprised of senior business and industrial executives who volunteer their time and expertise to assist the U.S. national security community. General Votel is also a proud graduate of the U.S. Army War College. General Votel, welcome to the War Room Studio. Thanks for joining us.

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00:02:59 **Joseph Votel:** Thanks, Tom. It's great to be with you. I'm looking forward to our discussion today.

00:03:03 **Tom Spahr:** Yes, sir. And sir, when I was preparing this, I found the podcast you did with us back on March 3rd of 2021 on the role of BENS. And of course, that was right in the heart of COVID. And that organization undoubtedly is having a big impact. So you are a repeat guest for War Room. So I really want to thank you for that and point our listeners a little bit back to that one if they want some more.

00:03:25 **Joseph Votel:** Thanks, I enjoyed that. Appreciate it. Good to be back with you guys.

00:03:28 **Tom Spahr:** So why don't we start with the Ranger Regiment for our listeners who may not know exactly what that unit is and what it does. So what is the Ranger Regiment? What's its primary task, and kind of how does it fit into the Army and the Joint Force mission?

00:03:45 **Joseph Votel:** Well, yeah, it's a good way to start. So the Ranger Regiment is—think of it as a light infantry regiment, so approximately in brigade size, organized a little bit differently. But it's composed principally of light infantry organizations who possess a variety of skills that allow them to operate within the special operations community alongside some of our most elite special operations organizations. The general mission of the Rangers was then, and I presume that it is now, is basically to conduct special operations in support of U.S. national security policies and objectives. And we do that by working with other members of the special operations community, putting together special operations task forces that go out and do very, very specific missions. The organization is extraordinarily well supported by the Army. The modern-day Rangers were formed in the wake of the Vietnam experience when the Chief of Staff of the Army at the time, General Creighton Abrams, was looking for a way to set an example for the rest of the Army. It was a very difficult period in the Army's history in the early-to-mid 1970s coming out of our Vietnam experience. And so what he did was order the formation of two Ranger battalions, one on the East Coast, the 1st Battalion, and one on the West Coast, the 2nd Battalion, to kind of help set an example for the rest of the organization. He charged it with that mission. It was about being very tactically proficient, but it was also about setting the example for the Army. Eventually, we activated a third battalion and our regiment headquarters after the activities in Grenada, and that's where we have the current Ranger Regiment of today. And of course, it's gone through a few modifications since the Global War on Terrorism started, but it still maintains those main aspects of being an organization that can do

things really well, can operate within the special operations community and with the unique organizations that are part of that, but also which sets an example for the rest of the Army that they can follow and helps develop the small-group leaders, both officers and NCOs, that go out and populate the Army, and which can make the Army better, not just the Rangers better.

00:06:18 **Tom Spahr:** Abrams Charter, that's right.

00:06:22 **Joseph Votel:** Getting out, spreading that was his whole idea. It was brilliant, brilliant strategic leadership.

00:06:27 **Tom Spahr:** And nobody ever wants to leave the Rangers. Nobody ever wants to leave the Rangers, but you have to go out and uplift the rest of your Army.

00:06:33 **Joseph Votel:** Yeah, that's the whole idea. And that was a hard thing to convince people to do that. "Hey, you know, that's what the Abrams Charter is about. It's about going out and making the Army better. It's not just about making the Rangers better. They're always going to be great. It's about making the Army better."

00:06:47 **Tom Spahr:** And it was super formative to me as a young—I went down there as a young lieutenant and left there as a captain shortly after the events that we're going to talk about today. But I really, when I look back on my career, it was one of the highlights of my development. And so, great organization. So let's move on to the mission that I highlighted in my introduction, Objective Rhino. Can you just talk a little bit about what Objective Rhino is? Why did we choose Objective Rhino, this remote desert airstrip in southern Afghanistan? And what were you thinking about and concerned about as we prepared to conduct that dangerous airborne assault on October 19, 2001?

00:07:25 **Joseph Votel:** In the wake of 9/11 and the events that took place that day, obviously we knew something had changed. And very soon after that, the special operations community, which the Rangers were part of, began to undertake some planning, looking at how we were going to respond. And our civilian leaders certainly indicated to us that there was going to be a response for this. I think very quickly we recognized that Al-Qaeda had been largely supported by the Taliban government, and going after them would require us to go to Afghanistan. So that's

how we kind of got focused on Afghanistan so quickly, within just a couple days of the events of 9/11. But Tom, as you might recall from that period, I mean, it was really difficult to identify targets—or objectives—that we might go after in Afghanistan. First of all, we didn't know anything about Afghanistan. I mean, we really had a dearth of information on Afghanistan. And this was really a critical thing that entered into my mind and the mind of a whole bunch of leaders: that we were about to embark on an operation in a place on which we had very little information or intelligence or knowledge, cultural knowledge or other knowledge about the country. So we undertook in the first few days an effort to really look at what are the strategic locations that we could go after that would send a message to the Taliban, that would give us not only an information operation value, but which would be meaningful in a tactical and operational sense. And it was challenging to do that. We started looking in the northern part of the country, and eventually we arrived down in the southern part of the country. And how we actually arrived at Rhino, this desert landing strip, which by all accounts, as I recall, was under the ownership of the Sultan of Dubai—he used it as a hunting camp, frankly, to come and do falcon hunting in southern Afghanistan, as you probably recall, Tom. But we arrived at that because we looked at the other operations that we wanted to do in the initial tranche of activities we undertook, and Rhino, this desert landing strip out here, became a critical node to it. We could think of it as a transload airfield. It was a place where we could stage forces, we could recover forces back to, and in the event that we had casualties or something, we could get aircraft in and get them out. So, you know, that first mission looked very much like a very typical operation that Rangers had trained for hundreds of times: go in and seize an airfield and hold it and use it so that we can support a variety of other special operations activities that were going on in that part of Afghanistan. That's very much what the thinking was. And it's how we arrived at that particular objective for that first night on October 19th.

00:10:32 **Tom Spahr:** Yeah, so I can remember developing five or six different targets and just kind of going around and around for a couple of weeks after September 11th, figuring out where to get in there. And the location of Rhino was great in southern Helmand Province, you know, within striking distance of Kandahar. And that's I think why we landed on that. But beyond Rhino, the drop into Rhino is well known. People can read pretty easily about that. But this was just the beginning of what is, I think, a lesser-known series of operations into southern Afghanistan that contributed to the fall of the Taliban eventually in early December 2001. Can you expand upon the rest of the operations that went into southern Afghanistan? Why the raids? What were we trying to accomplish during that critical period, kind of October, November, up to the fall of the Taliban?

00:11:22 **Joseph Votel:** Yeah, you're right. So the operation into Rhino was a successful one. Our initial operations were very, very successful. But what we recognized is we needed to

undertake a campaign of operations to really create more pressure on the Taliban, to establish our presence in the area, and to gain information and gain knowledge about the environment that we were operating in. And this was a little bit different for the Rangers at that time. We were an organization that was well trained to do very discrete, kind of in-and-out operations—raids, so to speak—just all very distinct to themselves. And what we began to recognize very early is that if we were going to be successful, we needed to undertake more of a campaign approach: a whole series of operations that would lead to some broader objectives. And what we were really trying to do was—first and foremost, we were trying to demonstrate that we could operate everywhere. We could do anything. We wanted the Taliban, we wanted any Al-Qaeda that might be operating in that part of the country to appreciate, "Hey, the Americans are here and they can go exactly where they want." So that was a big part of the operation. The other thing was to kind of keep the enemy off balance—to show up, to use our advantages of operating at night, and get into desert landing strips and project forces out from there to keep them guessing and get them on their back foot, so to speak, and cause them to react. And then, of course, what we were hoping was that the reaction of the Taliban on the ground would give us more information about how we actually could go after them more effectively. So those three things were why we undertook this desert landing strip campaign that brought anywhere from Ranger platoons to Ranger companies onto the ground, along with some other special operations forces that went in, established a lodgment for a period of time, projected out, did a bunch of operations, closed it all back in, and then exfiltrated. I think it's important to appreciate, Tom, as you will remember, for the first couple of months of this, we were operating from kind of an intermediate staging base. We were projecting power into Afghanistan almost every time we went and did one of these operations. And we did that because we didn't have a real good understanding of what the lay of the land was, how people would react, how we would be able to sustain ourselves and support ourselves. So these desert landing strip operations, these raids, were a way for us to gain some confidence, gain some understanding of the environment, and help us move into what would eventually be the next phases of this, which would be much more direct, on-the-ground campaigning in Afghanistan that not only would be done by special operations forces, but by conventional forces as well.

00:14:28 **Tom Spahr:** Yes, sir. I can remember the mantra of presenting—making them think there are Rangers all over southern Afghanistan by our flexibility in the way we were able to go in and out of there. And I love the way you're leaning into ops to create intelligence. We're doing operations to learn about the environment, to inform ourselves so we can then shape the operation and the strategy from that point. You mentioned this—that next phase—and you already mentioned a little bit about adaptation, but can you go into more detail on that? How did the Rangers then have to adapt to the mission in Afghanistan after Rhino, which was, as you mentioned, a pretty standard airfield seizure that we had practiced? But the war changed, and the

Rangers had to adapt and change in the subsequent months. Could you talk through that process a little bit?

00:15:16 **Joseph Votel:** Yeah, so I think the desert landing strip portion of the campaign was successful, and I think it accomplished the things that we were looking to do that I outlined just a few moments ago. It didn't win the war, obviously. We recognized that. But it gave us the confidence to operate in Afghanistan. And we learned a lot. We learned a lot just by going in and operating in that environment about what it would take to sustain a much broader campaign. And ultimately, what it forced us to do was to look at how we would expand our tactics and our operations to have an even much more dramatic effect on the adversaries that we were going after. And we recognized after several iterations of projecting power into Afghanistan and then exfiltrating it all back out, only to do it again and again and again and again, that we needed to make adaptations: we need to get people on the ground. We need to operate within Afghanistan and be able to project power from within the country that will allow us to put even more pressure on the Taliban. So that was the big observation that came out of this: hey, we were a force that—special operations task forces—that was kind of the way we operated up to that particular point. We went to an ISB or to a forward staging base, and we built up and we finalized our plan, and we went in, did the deed, and then came back out, and then we reset again, and then we did another one. We recognized that against this adversary, we would need to do campaigning on the ground, and so we had to get into a posture that allowed us to do that, and that's what we learned out of that campaign. And there were a ton of lessons learned. I'll tell you the one that really stuck out for me as the Ranger Regiment Commander was the lesson of mobility. As I mentioned in the beginning, when we talked about the Rangers, I mean, this is a light infantry organization, and it's light in every way that you can think. People travel with their backpacks. They are moving on their feet. And we are very dependent upon U.S. Air Force mobility or the mobility from special operations aviation or other aviation organizations to get us to the objective. But clearly, when we're trying to project power across a country the size of Afghanistan, we don't have enough lift. We don't have enough aviation mobility to move that. So being able to move ourselves was really, really critical. And that was a real challenge we had in the early days. And as you'll recall, we had these specialized, very light vehicles we used for airfield seizures. It was a form of mobility. It didn't offer much protection. They were generally designed for operating around airfields. And while they were Land Rover vehicles, so they're very, very capable, we didn't have the supply system. We didn't have anything else in place to help sustain that for a long overland campaign. We just didn't have it. And so the special operations community, the Rangers, had to adapt in terms of mobility. And of course, you know, mobility wasn't just about lift. It was about how we got to the objective, it was how we moved once we got there, and it was about how we had the other elements of mobility that were in place to help. I'll tell you one real big one right now is ISR. We had to be able to connect very quickly to ISR so we could know what to do on the ground. I looked at that—that actually enabled a lot of our mobility. So this

lesson of mobility was a really, really important one for us early on, and one that I, as the Ranger Regiment Commander, was not going to repeat in any other deployments that we did. And when we subsequently went to Iraq in 2003, we had fixed this problem of mobility. We definitely weren't going to repeat that.

00:19:28 **Tom Spahr:** I can remember on the ISR question, I was in the P-3 above the airfield and talking to you on a radio that I actually carried onto the aircraft because we didn't have the radio comms set up in the joint force to talk from that P-3 Orion to the C-130 that you were in when you were about to jump. And then in the next phase, we were adapting to be able to talk directly to the AC-130s, and just those comms links hadn't been really practiced in great detail either. And the fact that I was in a Navy P-3 flying around this airfield was a statement. I think we had one Predator flying at that time in Afghanistan.

00:20:03 **Joseph Votel:** Amazing. It was amazing. I recall that one line of Predators that was available to us. And of course, everybody is fighting over getting the use of that thing. But the point I think for maybe our listeners is the importance of mobility. That's what I'm trying to drive home. It isn't just about getting in a vehicle and driving away. It's about how you actually project power, about how you sustain that power, about how you support that power on the ground so it can actually get to a position of maneuver advantage over your adversary, whether it's the Taliban or whether it's the Iranians or whoever it happens to be. I mean, this is, I think, a really, really critical aspect for us. And while we were a very well-trained organization, we were definitely challenged in the mobility aspect, particularly for a sustained campaign.

00:20:54 **Tom Spahr:** Yeah, and a great task for Army War College grads who do the operational level of war, right—figuring out how to get the tactical unit to the right time and place and to develop capabilities for the future. So I'm glad you pointed that out. So another great thing we talk about a lot here at the Army War College is translating tactical to strategic successes. And while this campaign was certainly a great tactical start—and of course combined with our Special Forces teams that were also in the country—a few years later, the Taliban surged back into the country and eventually won the war. So looking back, how should future leaders think about linking tactical success to strategic outcome? And was there anything maybe we should have been thinking about or done differently during the early days of this campaign?

00:21:40 **Joseph Votel:** Hindsight is always a little clearer than kind of when you're involved in this. Hindsight's 20/20, as we often say, so you can always see things. I think, you know, as a

military force, as a nation, I think we missed a couple of opportunities along the line that would have propelled us to move this faster and perhaps be more successful earlier on. I think about the operations in Tora Bora in late November, December of 2001. We had pretty much routed the Taliban. We were in Kabul, and we had Al-Qaeda, our principal adversary, tied up in the Tora Bora Mountains. And, you know, we had forces on the ground that could have gone after them. And for a variety of reasons, we chose not to do that. A lot of it driven by some of our policy and political objectives that we were trying to achieve. But the fact of the matter is that we had opportunities, I think, as you look back at it, where there were times we could have accomplished much more, much earlier on. And by not taking advantage of those opportunities, we prolonged the conflict. So one of the challenges that I saw, and I think in reflection on this, is that I do think we were very risk-averse. Now at the time, it didn't seem that way. I didn't think of ourselves as risk-averse, but I do think we were. A lot of it was caused by uncertainty about what we didn't know about Afghanistan. And this is where eventually the droves of information and intelligence we developed on this country gave us more and more confidence to operate. But we didn't know much about the Tora Bora Mountains. We didn't know how we would sustain forces in there. We didn't know how we'd get casualties out. We didn't know how we were going to—you know, so we chose to do other things. And in doing that, we lost opportunity. So I think one of the big things that we have to do when we try to connect tactics and operations to strategic objectives is that as military leaders, we have to ensure that with our civilian leadership, we have really good discussions about risk and about what the limits and what the capabilities are of military power in terms of the things that we are trying to achieve at a national level. So that's the first thing. And I think that really is on senior leaders. I think back to some other positions that I've had, either as the JSOC commander or at SOCOM, and certainly at CENTCOM, is that a lot of my discussions with our civilian leadership were about risk: the risk of doing things and the risk of not doing things. And so I think that's an important aspect we do. It is really clear—I mean, there's no doubt—it's really important that our military operations are really keyed towards very well-defined political objectives. I think there's a real benefit to that. And I think we've seen, at least I saw in my experience, examples where that was very clear to me. And as a result, our military operations were much more effective. So for example, when we think about the campaign against ISIS, that I had the good fortune of being in a position to lead from 2016 to 2019 as the CENTCOM commander: the President of the United States gave us very clear direction on that. Our mission was to defeat the caliphate, to defeat that physical caliphate in both Iraq and Syria. And that was the focus of the operation. The focus of the whole coalition effort was focused on that. And so the extent of our military operations was focused on accomplishing that objective. We didn't get drawn off to worrying about Iran or about anything else that was going on. It was all about defeating the caliphate. And that was very clearly articulated, starting with the President all the way down through the chain of command. Everybody completely understood that. I do think in some of our experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, we did wander a little bit, that we were not clear with our objectives. And that, of course, caused some problems. We went from going after Al-Qaeda to trying to build up the Afghan

forces to doing nation-building. And of course, those are significant shifts. And I think the discussion that perhaps didn't take place as much as it should have is: when you redefine the ends, you have to go back and look at the means and the ways, and make sure that the resources are lined up and the approaches that we are taking are very, very clear to us and very, very aligned with what our political end state is. And in that case, I don't know that we always did a good job with that. And the subsequent effect of that was, because the biggest resource we had was the military, a lot of our approach to what we were doing got overly militarized. So if everything looks like a nail and you've got a hammer, then you're going to use the hammer all the time. We weren't able to sustain the diplomatic efforts. We weren't able to sustain things like PRTs. We weren't able to leverage all of our elements of national power in terms of this, and we largely relied on the military to do that. And I think what we learned on this is that while the military can do a lot—we're learning this today in Iraq, in Iran, I think—the military can do a lot of spectacular stuff, but that does not always translate into our strategic successes, to the strategic ends that we have; that it takes a whole-of-government approach to achieve the objectives that we are after. And I think that's an important lesson for our senior leaders, and particularly our senior leaders that are in the war colleges now, to appreciate that when they leave, they'll be working for people who will be advising our civilian leaders. And very soon they will be advising our civilian leaders. And we need to make sure we are well aligned on this ends, ways, means approach here as we're trying to link our military activities to big-time strategic objectives.

00:28:19 **Tom Spahr:** That was great, sir. I want to come back to the risk point. So with Tora Bora, you're saying if our political end state is to get Osama bin Laden, then perhaps our risk threshold should have been a little bit higher, and a little bit of intel—not understanding the capabilities of our partners in that mission. If we had fully understood that and if we had the risk threshold set appropriately, perhaps we put Rangers in there, or perhaps we put U.S. forces in there and get Osama bin Laden right then in 2001, early 2002. But again, it comes back to intelligence on the ground, understanding your adversary, and then having the risk threshold set appropriately. I think you captured that very well. Did I get that generally right there?

00:29:01 **Joseph Votel:** Yeah, I think that's right. I mean, yeah, again, I don't want to be too critical. Things were moving pretty fast back in the October, November, December timeframe of 2001. And we were having very, very significant success. And it wasn't just in the south with the Special Operations Task Force that you and I were part of, but it was certainly in the north where we had an irregular campaign that was smashingly successful. And so we were doing a lot of things right. And the light-touch, the small-footprint approach, I think, convinced a lot of our political leaders that, "Hey, this is a very good way of moving forward with this." And it was at the time, but again, that kind of mindset, I think, did prevent us from taking advantage of the

opportunity that was presented to us in Tora Bora, where, hey, now we're in a different situation. This is mountains, this is difficult terrain, this is going to consume more troops, we need more in here. And the payoff could be very, very great, but we have to risk more in order to get that payoff. And that's, I think, the discussion we have. And of course, intelligence is absolutely essential to all of that. I mean, understanding that intelligence is what really helps reduce the uncertainty that commanders have as they look at operations. And the job of any commander is always to reduce the uncertainty, reduce the risk to his or her forces that are moving forward here. And intelligence, of course, plays a critical role in that.

00:30:44 **Tom Spahr:** Yeah, and you're going right where I want to go with this, sir. You are known as a great intelligence consumer. In fact, I commonly hold you up as an example in my classes. And I can distinctly remember throughout this campaign sitting with you as we're developing targets and you giving me clear guidance on what is important, what your priority is, and then having risk discussions. And this is a tactical-level example, but I think it fleets up pretty well: you know, how low do we want to fly the aircraft? Those discussions about risk towards the end state. So what I wanted to ask you is what advice do you have to offer to our Army War College students here about your relationship with intelligence and your intelligence officer, and then how your perspective on that consumer-producer relationship evolved as you progressed in rank and things changed when you were serving later at the operational and strategic level?

00:31:41 **Joseph Votel:** I think one of the great evolutions that took place over our experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, and really throughout the Global War on Terrorism has been the very strong relationship that has been built up between the military community and the intelligence community. And when you deploy with the same people over and over and you are sharing risk and sharing successes and sharing setbacks with people from all different agencies, you really get very close and you develop very deep trust between each other. And I think this has been something that is a really significantly positive byproduct of the Global War on Terrorism for how we operate—and I would extend the same thing to federal law enforcement and Homeland Security and a variety of others that we've worked with along the way. But I think as an intelligence consumer, as somebody who is putting a demand on the system, I kind of think about the three Bs here: be curious, be receptive, be engaged in this. Be curious—ask questions. Commanders can drive things by asking the questions. You want to challenge people with these things and ask the questions that are going to help you reduce the risk to your force as you contemplate this. Be receptive—be willing to listen to people who may be offering information that might be contrary to what you're expecting or what you'd like to hear, frankly. So you have to learn to be receptive to that. You have to be engaged in it. You have to be able to push. You have to be willing to push back. You have to be willing to have the discussion. You have to be

willing to let people help you understand what they're telling you, too. So a lot of this gets down to just good interpersonal skills with people. I think those are absolutely essential, particularly as you get more senior. They become even actually more important. But those things, I think, are very, very helpful. As I kind of continue to move on, building on those things—and I'll tell you, Tom, I had a lot of good examples set for me: Stan McChrystal, Bill McRaven, a whole variety of people in the circle I was in that were setting really good examples for me on how to do this. But what I found was that, as I became a senior leader, just setting up some forums—we used to have a battle rhythm of activity as a SOCOM and CENTCOM commander, where we would invite analysts down from the CIA or from other intelligence agencies to come down to Tampa and have a discussion about a particular topic, and we'd take a couple hours to do it. And I found it absolutely—and without the burden of having to make a decision at the end of it, just to learn about it, just to understand the problem better. And I found that they were very responsive to requests like that. We did it multiple times. I did it with my J2 staff as well. I'd just say, "You pick the topic. Let's just have a discussion on it. We'll devote the time to it without the burden of having to make a decision at the other end of this. Let's just learn about what we're dealing with here." And I found people to be very responsive to that. I found that they enjoyed the interchange with that. It was an opportunity for me to ask lots of questions, to interact with the people who are developing the intelligence products that I was going to rely on and that my forces were going to rely on. And we made it routine, so it became a part of our rhythm in terms of things. And I think that ended up building good lines of trust between the people I was relying on for producing the intelligence we needed and me as their client. And I just think that really worked. And again, it kind of comes back a little bit to this interpersonal skills aspect of it, but it was so darn important, I thought. And it really paid off for me. And I think the command was better served. I think when we got into situations that were fast-developing, in many cases we had had the conversation already, so we were kind of thinking in an aligned fashion. And I think it just really served the command, it served the organization, and definitely served me much better.

00:36:05 **Tom Spahr:** Yes, sir. I think the culture you created was terrific for an intel officer to enable them to understand what you're thinking, because they've had conversations with you, even down to some of the analysts that are doing the work. And we like to say the commander is the best intel officer in the unit. And that's not to let the intel officer off the hook, right? The intel officer has to be an absolute expert at their trade. But at the end of the day, the only intelligence that really matters is what's between the ears of the commander, right? He's going to make the final decision. He's the decision-maker. So that culture you create where they can have the conversation, understand where your mind is—not to be biased by your mind, but to understand it and to guide them and focus them. So we're about out of time here, but I want to give you the opportunity, if you have any additional comments or advice for our Army War College students and War Room listeners, particularly relevant to intelligence and leadership in combat, which you are the expert at.

00:36:59 **Joseph Votel:** Yeah, thanks, Tom. I appreciate it. I've enjoyed the discussion. I just would encourage our listeners that as you're getting more senior, how you interact with intelligence and how you use it and how you enable it change. Many of us have been battalion commanders or brigade commanders, and we're very focused on a very specific thing. As you get more senior, it's different. You are now trying to build the case to take action, versus just executing some distinct things. So you're trying to pull a variety of people together. So one of the things I think you have to do is kind of create platforms, create convenings, if I could say it that way, for people to come together and bring their best information, their best knowledge, or best intelligence about situations so that it can factor into the operations that we're doing. And that's the difference between leaders at the senior level and leaders at the tactical level: at the tactical level you can be very focused on a very specific thing. When you get to a higher level, you are now trying to bring the full weight of the intelligence community to bear on situations. And senior leaders have to do that. So the first thing I want to remind people is that your responsibilities change as you become more senior in terms of what you're doing. Everybody wants to know what's at the X, okay? But as a senior leader, you've got to look beyond the X. You've got to look at the big picture on things and make sure you paint it. I would just maybe finally say two things. Adaptiveness is really key, and we need leaders who can adapt on the battlefield. Things are changing. Now as a retired person, I pay a lot of attention to the current security environment. It is so different than anything that I experienced, and I think it puts a heavy premium on leaders being adaptive. And I think this is an important skill: how you begin to recognize the situation is changing, and with that changing situation, you have to change your approaches to the problems that you're trying to solve. There's a little bit of a lesson I learned being around the special operations community and hanging around with operators for a long time. They're always thinking about how they optimize to the X. How do I get faster on the way in? How do I lighten my load a little bit? How do I do better in terms of trying to provide suppressive fires? Or how do I use the intelligence resources I have to make things go a little bit faster? So in many ways, that is what adaptiveness is about. How do you become more efficient? How do you become more focused on doing the job that you've been asked to do, do it better, and try to optimize along the way—not just trying to set yourself in and say, "Hey, we're just going to do this." You're always trying to improve along the way, optimizing all the way to the X. And then the final thing I would just say is that good leadership is good leadership. The basics don't change as you get more senior. These War College graduates are going to be colonels when they depart. They're going to go back out and lead brigades, command carriers and air wings, and do all kinds of important things for the nation. And they're going to take on more and more rank. But the basics always matter: setting the example, taking care of people, being accountable. These are the basics of leadership that everybody learned as second lieutenants, as ensigns. And they are as applicable at the more senior levels as they are at the junior levels. And so it's important to appreciate that: just exercise good leadership. People are looking to you to set the example. They're looking to you for a model of how you balance personal and professional lives.

They're looking to you for the inspiration as to why they should continue to serve. And so I think a lot of that gets down to modeling good leadership for the men and women that we have the awesome responsibility of leading. I would encourage people not to forget the basics. They're always important and they're always going to matter.

00:41:18 **Tom Spahr:** Sir, I think that's a terrific way to end. And I want to thank you for taking the time to join us today in the War Room studio. I really enjoyed the conversation. I think our listeners will as well. There's so much to learn from our study of the war in Afghanistan, and hopefully we contributed today a little bit to that effort. So I want to thank you, General Joseph Votel, for joining us today on A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. It's been a rewarding and productive conversation for me, definitely.

00:41:46 **Joseph Votel:** Thanks, Tom. It's been great to be with the podcast again and really good to be with you. Thanks so much.

00:41:51 **Tom Spahr:** And thanks to all of you for listening. And please send us your comments on this program and some suggestions for future programs. If you enjoyed the podcast, I encourage you to subscribe to A Better Peace. Leave a rating, but most importantly, tell a friend about the program. From the War Room, I am Tom Spahr.

And that concludes our program. Thank you for listening. The views expressed on this podcast reflect those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views, policies, or positions of the U.S. Army or the Department of War. Let us know what you think. Provide us your feedback, comments, or suggestions through our webpage at warroom.armywarcollege.edu. And have a great day.