

# Clarity in Crisis: Leadership Lessons from the CIA

Marc Polymeropoulos

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## Social Media Handles



[Marc Polymeropoulos \(@Mpolymer\) / Twitter](#)



[Marc Polymeropoulos | Facebook](#)



[Marc Polymeropoulos - Leadership Speaker - FindingClarity4 LLC](#)

# Associated Websites

- [Marc Polymeropoulos - Ex CIA intelligence service officer](#)
- [Marc Polymeropoulos](#)
- [Marc Polymeropoulos – The Cipher Brief](#)

## Profile

Marc Polymeropoulos worked for 26 years at the CIA before retiring at the Senior Intelligence Service level. He was one of the CIA's most highly decorated operations officers who served in multiple field assignments for the U.S. government. He specialized in counterterrorism, the Middle East and South Asia, including extensive time in Iraq and Afghanistan.

With extensive and substantive expertise on leadership under pressure, as well as geopolitical and transnational issues, as well as counter-intelligence, Marc has become a sought-after speaker and trainer of corporate groups seeking leadership guidance.

Marc is frequently interviewed by the Washington Post, The New York Times, GQ, Yahoo, CNN, MSNBC, and other media outlets on intelligence matters. He is the author of the 2021 book, *Clarity in Crisis: Leadership Lessons from the CIA*.

# Clarity in Crisis

## Synopsis

Marc Polymeropoulos has had to live with the consequences of decisions made under the most high-stress circumstances you can imagine as a senior intelligence officer in the CIA, retiring from his 26 years of service as one of the CIA's most decorated field officers.

Though your crisis situations may not entail international counter terrorism as Marc's did, in our age of social media and a 24-hour news cycle, the consequences of mishandling a crisis can escalate quickly, leaving irreparable damage to a company's reputation and bottom line in its wake.

In Clarity in Crisis, Marc shares how true leaders need to lead in and through times of crisis and thrive under conditions of ambiguity, rather than message their way out or duck from hard decisions.

This book provides proven strategies and core principles that leaders can apply to meet any crisis head on and lead through it, including:

- The critical elements to managing crisis, such as knowing who you can always count on to execute under high-stress situations.
- An understanding of the importance of following and stressing key fundamentals and avoiding shortcuts that often do more harm than good.

- Implementation guidance from the “Mad Minute” section at the end of each chapter that summarizes key points and action items you can begin applying right away.
- How to gain confidence that you are ready for the next crisis and embrace any situation with no fear.

Far from mere theory, *Clarity in Crisis* outlines the unique mindset and strategies Marc himself practiced and honed throughout his remarkable career. The core principles outlined in these pages will help you find unshakeable clarity in crisis and lead when others want to flee.

## [Book Review](#)

Polymeropoulos outlines nine principles to guide better leadership in the private and public sectors. Reflecting an obvious baseball obsession, Polymeropoulos cleverly begins each chapter with an example from that sport's history and lore. Then offering vignettes from his time at the CIA, the author blends spy stories with hard-hitting leadership lessons.

Describing the need to accept failure and loss, Polymeropoulos explains how he once pushed an Iraqi agent (a CIA source) too hard and lost him to Saddam Hussein's security apparatus. "I learned a damn hard lesson. The pressure to collect intelligence was such that I did not rein him in. And a man lost his life. I pushed too hard, the agent wanted to please, and, in the end, he was caught, tortured, and killed. This tragedy

remains ingrained in my psyche and weighs heavily on my heart. I had failed. I alone owned this mistake."

This intersection of loss and leadership sustains throughout the book. Imploring leaders to innovate and take risks, the author holds a mirror to his own failings. The key is to accept them head-on and learn from them. A chapter on the importance of "processes" bears particular note here. Pointing out why well-developed and consistently refined processes are crucial to any successful CIA endeavor, such as always completing a surveillance detection run before meeting an agent, for example, Polymeropoulos notes that leaders must set the contours for action. This allows their subordinates to innovate within an understood framework.

Among the eight other lessons, we understand why and how leaders must empower those below them...

Just as important, leaders must be equally ready to enforce consequences for failure, reward successes, and offer second chances. In what will surely earn nods from readers at CIA headquarters and at stations around the world, Polymeropoulos pushes back against the idea that seniority or time served should be the determining factors for promotion. He outlines why promoting exceptional officers in the field is good for both morale and the mission...

We also learn something else — that leaders must have values.

# Havana Syndrome

## [Havana Syndrome](#)

The symptoms of Havana syndrome—ringing ears, headaches, and fatigue—are fairly common. The exact source of the illness is still unknown. And extensive investigations seeking answers have resulted in confusing and seemingly inconsistent reports.

But Havana syndrome sufferers—so named because the first cases were reported by Central Intelligence Agency employees working at the U.S. embassy in Havana, Cuba—can take comfort in a new report released Wednesday that says the syndrome could be the result of pulsed electromagnetic energy directed via focused radio waves...

More than 1,000 U.S. employees in the intelligence community—which includes the CIA, the FBI, and the U.S. State Department—have complained of the symptoms since it was first reported in 2016.

## [Polymeropoulos and Havana Syndrome](#)

Marc Polymeropoulos, a 26-year CIA veteran, who retired in 2019, ... felt betrayed by CIA leadership, accusing the agency of failing to respond appropriately to a vertigo-inducing incident in Moscow in December 2017 (Polymeropoulos said the event was an attack and "the most terrifying experience of my life", worse than experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan). Polymeropoulos fought with the CIA for years to obtain specialized medical treatment, after the agency cast doubt on the similarities between the symptoms he experienced and those experienced by the diplomats in Havana.

Polymeropoulos was ultimately diagnosed at the U.S. government's Walter Reed Medical Center with traumatic brain injury; attorney Mark Zaid, who represented almost a dozen clients who had also become ill under similar circumstances, said that Polymeropoulos was the only one of his clients who had received treatment at Walter Reed, with others obtaining treatment only from personal doctors or academic medical centers.

### [CIA officer suffered crippling symptoms in Moscow. Was it 'Havana Syndrome'?](#)

Over a 26-year career with the CIA, Marc Polymeropoulos recruited spies in the back alleys of sketchy neighborhoods, chased terrorists across the Middle East and helped run operations against Russia.

But nothing in his tenure scared him as much as the symptoms that knocked him flat in a hotel room in Moscow in December 2017.

“I couldn't stand up,” he said. “I was falling over. I had an incredible sense of nausea and ringing in my ears. I was, frankly, terrified.”

Polymeropoulos, who granted his first television interview to NBC's Andrea Mitchell for the TODAY show Monday, never felt right again, and he came to believe he was among the American diplomats and spies who suffered from the so-called Havana Syndrome, the mysterious affliction that first cropped up among officers at the American embassy in Cuba in 2016.

Former CIA officer Marc Polymeropoulos, who said fatigue and chronic headaches forced him to retire. NBC News

He became so debilitated from fatigue and chronic headaches that he retired from the CIA last year, still unsure of what exactly had hit him.

Now, a study by some of the world's most prominent brain experts — first reported Friday night by NBC News — has validated what some American intelligence officials have long believed, by concluding that the most plausible explanation for the symptoms suffered by at least some of the affected American officers is “directed, pulsed radiofrequency energy,” a type of energy that includes microwaves.

While not definitive, the report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine is the most authoritative examination of what may have caused the mysterious illnesses. It validates the belief by those affected that something significant happened to them, and repudiates skeptics who chalked “Havana Syndrome” up to psychosomatic illness or distorted the findings of a research paper to blame the symptoms on sounds made by crickets.

The study didn't directly conclude that Americans were targeted in a Russian attack by a microwave device, as some American intelligence officials believe, but it raised the possibility, because Russians have done the most work on microwave energy.

## In the News

- [An Open-Source Brief: former CIA Officer Marc Polymeropoulos](#)
- ['A classic David-vs-Goliath story' | eKathimerini.com](#)
- [Most 'Havana Syndrome' Cases Unlikely Caused by Foreign Power, C.I.A. Says](#)  
[- The New York Times](#)