

# CHOOSE THE HARD PATH

Mike Hayes

I was in Kosovo in 1999, in the middle of winter, leading a small surveillance team in the mountains just a few hundred meters from the Serbian border. Freezing cold temperatures, the darkness of night, howling winds—and both Kosovar Serbian and Albanian armies somewhere in that same snowy terrain, weapons ready, looking for an enemy to fight. As we suffered through the elements, the sun soon to rise, we knew we needed to find a place to rest and hide for the daylight hours. From our vantage point halfway up the side of a mountain, struggling to maintain our balance on the steeply sloping ground, we could see a natural line of drift below—railroad tracks, a 10-foot-wide patch of flat ground, a path that would have called out to anyone as the comfortable place we should naturally set up camp. Of course we wanted to move down there. I remember a young guy on our team incredulous that we would even be out in this kind of weather. “Humans can’t survive in this,” he said. “It’s miserable.”

The temptation to head down toward the easier path and the more comfortable site was real, but if it was calling out to us, we knew it would be calling out to anyone who happened to be coming that way. Going down there would make us more visible, more vulnerable, and more likely to run into trouble. So we set up camp a couple hundred meters up the steeply angled slope, and sure enough, within an hour and just a short time before sunrise, what looked like the entire Albanian army marched straight down that natural line of drift. Had we been camped there, they would have found us for sure. Doing the uncomfortable, exhausting thing—the hard thing—saved us that day.

When I tell that story, I call it the “this sucks, let’s stay here” lesson. It’s not always so black and white, such a direct line you can draw between the choice to struggle and your ultimate success, but I’ve seen it time and time again. Doing the hard thing is how you win, how you grow, and how you end up getting the most out of life. If there’s one principle that has shaped my career, it’s this one. Doing the hard thing, choosing the hard path, moving toward the most difficult challenges, aiming high—and trusting that you’ll either succeed or you’ll learn something, so either way it’s a victory—got me to the SEALs, to the White House, and to senior roles in the private sector. It’s the first thing I believe everyone ought to think about when approaching their life’s trajectory. Am I letting myself follow the easy path, or am I moving up that mountain, looking for the difficult campsite that will give me the best chance to achieve my ultimate mission?

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## SOMETIMES THE HARDEST THING IS STICKING TO YOUR VALUES AND BELIEFS

Choosing the hard path certainly isn't always physical, and isn't always about the amount of effort or time something will take. In fact, I think the hardest choices we make are often the ones that involve going out on a limb, bucking conventional wisdom, or standing up to people in positions of authority when they're telling you something you simply don't believe. People generally don't get in trouble for following the rules—but when the rules conflict with what you know is right, whether in a moral sense (“We shouldn't treat people that way”) or a practical sense (“There's a better way to make that paper clip”), sometimes the hard choice you need to make is to follow your instincts and accept whatever consequences might result.

In the SEALs, we're taught that if you think your mission has been compromised, you exfiltrate—you get out. That may mean canceling an entire mission, setting weeks of work—and ego—aside and saying you just can't take the risk involved with trying to accomplish what you've set out to do. In that case you need to go back to safety, come up with a new plan, and start again.

In 1997, I was in Kosovo on a reconnaissance mission to help enforce the Dayton Accords, the peace agreement ending the war in Bosnia between the ethnic Albanians and the Serbs who jointly occupied Kosovo. It was the very beginning of high-tech surveillance, where we had night-vision cameras for the first time and satellite radios to send near real-time images back to headquarters. These were huge breakthroughs at the time, cutting-edge technology. For these particular missions, we would go out in the field in groups of six—two two-person “observation posts” and one two-person “command post,”

the observation guys pushing into the dangerous areas to keep their eyes on the target and the command guys hanging back, placed centrally between the observation posts but out of the immediate danger zone, communicating via radio. I was at the command post with Jimmy G, our radio guy, and we were talking to our observation guys (Tom and Allan on one team, Chad and Steve on the other), who had eyes on a house out of which there appeared to be a huge transfer of illegal arms between the Russian forces, who were part of the peacekeeping mission, and the Kosovar Serbian forces. This was in direct violation of the Dayton Accords, and a big deal at the time. Our guys got pictures, and I communicated what we were seeing back to headquarters. We called our Green Beret counterparts, who manned a nearby location, and asked them to come search the house for confirmatory evidence.

It's important to note that we were traveling very light, as would be expected for a reconnaissance mission like this. We were not planning on getting into a gunfight, and even though we were armed, this was not intended to be an offensive, direct-action mission. I was quite young in my career, at a level known as O3—a lieutenant—and taking orders from the Army Special Forces Major (an O4-level officer, my superior at the time) back at headquarters.

I suggested to the Major that we should come off the target immediately after the Green Berets left, because we would be compromised at that point—the Russians or the Kosovar Serbians would see that someone had been in the house, and they would know that someone out there was watching them. And they would quite predictably come looking for us, putting us in great danger, particularly since we weren't armed for such a situation.

The Major said no, that we should stay in the field for 48 hours and “Charlie-Mike,” or continue mission, watching after the Army guys finished trying to gather evidence. I told him via radio that this broke SEAL doctrine, and reminded him of the adage I had learned from experienced SEALs before me: “If you think you’ve been compromised, assume you have, and exfiltrate.” I believed we absolutely needed to exfiltrate, but he disagreed, and said it was an order for us to stay in the field. What do you do when your boss gives you a bad direction? I canvassed my guys and stated my logic, and we all asked each other how strongly we felt about it. We knew that pushing back was the right thing to do, but we also didn’t want to go down the road of disobeying an order and potentially facing consequences—unless following that order was something we truly felt was going to put us in clear danger. In all honesty, we didn’t feel strongly enough about it. We didn’t think it was anywhere close to a certainty that anyone would find us where we were, and we knew that the easier path would be to listen to the order and save our fight for another day. This was an error in judgment and, in retrospect, could have cost us our lives.

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We stayed out there, hidden among the neat rows of evergreens in a several-acre manicured forest that had been planted for firewood. (We cut, bent, and strategically placed extra branches to hide ourselves during the day.) And sure enough, not two hours after the Army forces checked out the house, our observation guys saw three Kosovar Serbians approach the building and realize that windows had been broken—and then figure out that someone had been watching them. Those three ran off quickly, presumably down to their village, and came back at first darkness with nineteen armed soldiers—our guys counted—who began hunting for us in the forest. Chad, one of our observation guys, communicated back to me, “We have two armed soldiers methodically working their way down the edge of the forest. They are likely to see us. We need to either pull back or shoot them.”

“I’m behind you either way,” I told Chad, trusting him to make the right call, “but if you shoot them, just know that it will be a massive situation, and we are greatly outnumbered.” There was no easy answer. Shoot, and then everyone knows where we are. But pull back, and we’re eyes off the target, we’re not doing the mission we’re there to do, and we’re all at risk because we don’t know where the enemy is.

Chad and Steve quickly decided to pull back. After they were certain these two armed men were gone, they came back to the command post with me and Jimmy, so now the four of us were together. All of a sudden, we heard shots ring out. The Kosovar Serbians had begun shooting, an attempt to get us to shoot back and reveal our location. They sprayed the tree line with maybe thirty to sixty rounds of sporadic machine-gun fire.

Once the shooting settled down, we communicated to our other two observation guys out in the field, telling them to pull back to where we were so that all six of us could be together, do our best not to be discovered, and get picked up by our “Quick Reaction Force” vehicles, which were on standby a few kilometers away. During the hours that followed, as we tried to avoid a gunfight, we were actively hunted. I was twenty-six years old and in charge of the lives of five other men. At one point, I heard approaching footsteps—stealthy footsteps, a noise I knew well, because I was often the one making it, trying to place one foot at a time down on a forest floor without crunching a single dead leaf or breaking a single twig. I heard someone taking one step about every ten seconds. I aimed my rifle in his direction and eventually saw him—long before he could see me. I took the slack out of my trigger, just a hair away from firing, and held my aim dead center on him. He got as close as 6 feet from me as I watched him crouch, squint, scan, and hunt us. I just remember thinking, No ... no ... no ... If he had seen me, I would have had to kill him. But he didn’t, and I was relieved I wouldn’t have to give away our position to all the other men hunting us. It could not have been closer.

Carefully, silently, slowly, we got out. The intelligence we had gathered was useful, for sure, helping us figure out that the Russians were colluding with the Kosovar Serbians, support we hadn’t been aware of and didn’t have proof of until that point. But it wasn’t worth the risk to our lives. I should have stood up to the Major, done what I knew was right, and not accepted the unnecessary risk. The hardest thing in that situation would have been to disobey a direct order—but I chose the easier path. It was a mistake. (And as soon as shots were fired, I knew that the Major himself realized it was a mistake, although he never directly acknowledged it.)

Years later, in Afghanistan in 2012, I saw a similar pattern emerging. I canceled a 72-hour mission just 24 hours in because I felt we had been compromised. I looked back at what I wished had happened in 1997 and made the hard call to end that mission early, to avoid the unnecessary risk. The leader on the ground in Afghanistan tried to fight me to keep the mission going. He said they had the high ground and full visibility on the enemy, and that they were going to be able to execute if they did get into a gunfight. But I sent a helicopter and pulled his team from the mission anyway, and afterward I sat them down and explained my thinking. You could get the best intelligence, you could kill thirty dangerous Taliban fighters—but if our odds had just changed, if our 99 percent chance of success fell to 96 percent, or 92 percent, the added risk was too much to take on in this situation. It is not worth the extra risk to your lives, I said, or to the missions down the road you are yet to accomplish, and will never accomplish if you're wounded or dead. They thought the hard thing was completing the mission. I knew the hard thing was setting ego aside and canceling it.

The hardest choices we make are often the ones that involve going out on a limb, bucking conventional wisdom, or standing up to people in positions of authority when they're telling you something you simply don't believe.

We do the hard things. We never stop learning. We're objective and reflective so that we can apply our lessons in the future and never make the same mistake twice. As you look at your own life, you may not always know what the hard path is. Do you stay in a frustrating job that may get you to your goal, or do you leave for a more satisfying position that may not have as much upside? Do you start that new business you've been dreaming about, or do you convince yourself that the risks are too great and the chance of failure too high to make it worth it? The hard path isn't always obvious—clearly, I didn't have the best sense of it when I was deciding whether to push back against my superior in Kosovo. But we learn over time, and with experience.

**Now, when faced with two paths, I often find myself asking an important question: Which path makes me more uncomfortable? You may think it's smart to shy away from discomfort, but that's not where this advice is heading. Discomfort is often the biggest key to growth, and it's what tells you if the road ahead is the right kind of hard, the kind that you should be pursuing. 📖**

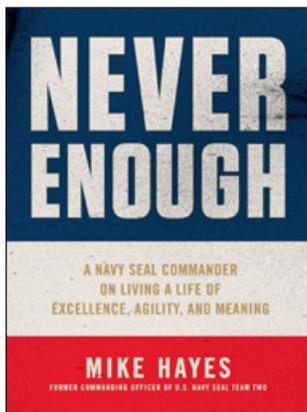
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Hayes is the former Commanding Officer of SEAL Team TWO, leading a two thousand-person Special Operations Task Force in Southeastern Afghanistan. In addition to a twenty-year career as a SEAL, Mike was a White House Fellow, served two years as Director of Defense Policy and Strategy at the National Security Council, and has worked directly with both Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Beyond his military and governmental service, Mike is currently the Chief Digital Transformation Officer at VMware. He joined VMware in October 2020, and leads the company's worldwide business operations and the acceleration of the company's SaaS transition. Hayes is a lifetime member of the Council on Foreign Relations, a member of the board of directors of Immuta, a data governance company, and of the National Medal of Honor Museum, and a senior advisor to Inherent Group, an impact investment firm. He lives in Westport, Connecticut with his wife and daughter.

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