

Why US intelligence has weakened

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PRESIDENT George W. Bush has proposed a new post of national intelligence director. Not part of the Cabinet or located in the White House, the director would be charged with "coordinating" the intelligence budget and "working with" various intelligence agencies to set priorities.

Sen. John Kerry has supported a more activist role for an intelligence director recommended by the 9/11 commission. Both houses of Congress are holding hearings to expedite legislation to be voted on before it recesses in early October.

The sense of urgency for action in the middle of a presidential campaign is being justified on the grounds that the country is in imminent danger; the implication is that the existing intelligence system is not capable of dealing with the immediate threats. This argument cuts both ways. Reorganization will bring with it months — and if drastic, years — of adjustment throughout the executive branch, and the more sweeping the change, the more this will be true. Whatever happens, the short-term threats must be dealt with via the improvements of the existing structure, which were instituted after 9/11. As for longer-range threats, care must be taken lest a hasty transition to a new system generate unnecessary vulnerabilities. Thoughtfulness is more important than speed.

Terrorism, forthrightly described by the 9/11 commission as an attack from

believe India was capable of concealing an actual test.

On the WMD issue — as the British Butler report on intelligence demonstrates — the assessment process broke down when the analysts jumped from incontrovertible evidence — a decade of Saddam's violations of the 1991 ceasefire agreement; building of, at a minimum, dual-purpose plants for chemical and biological agents; efforts to acquire nuclear material; elaborate measures of deception and hiding the programme — to the assumption that the demonstrated capacity to produce had been translated into stockpiles of weapons. (As early as 1998, President Bill Clinton, in an address explaining the bombing of Iraq, gave specific quantities for chemical and biological

The cause of most intelligence failures in the US is inadequate collection and coordination. The four major intelligence failures of the past three decades illustrate the point: (1) the 1973 Middle East war, which caught both the United States and Israel by surprise; (2) the Indian nuclear test of 1998, which opened a new era of proliferation threats; (3) 9/11; and (4) the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

the coordination of evidence on terrorism. But it does not follow that eliminating the distinctions altogether is the best solution.

Reorganization needs to improve the quality of intelligence at least as much as its collection. Policy stands and falls on the ability to distil trends from information. Does a freestanding director of national intelligence, charged with coordinating (in the president's proposal) or running the entire intelligence community (as in the 9/11 report) solve this challenge? Or does an excessively centralized system magnify the inherent danger of intellectual conformity on which all reports agree? What structure is most likely to achieve a sense for the intangible?

In practice, most of the proposed reorganization schemes abolish the provision of the National Security Act of 1947 that makes the head of the CIA also the director of foreign intel-

ligence for the entire government. The CIA chief has not been able to implement his theoretical powers because of the insistence of other agencies or departments — especially the Pentagon — on autonomy for their share of the intelligence process.

Other alternatives deserve consideration. For example, the coordinating and budgetary roles over foreign intelligence of the CIA director could be enhanced and symbolized by changing the title to national intelligence director. The coordination between domestic and foreign intelligence activities could be achieved by institutions like the national counter-terrorism centre proposed by the 9/11 commission and by a presidential assistant for national

radical fundamentalist Islam, is spearheaded by technically private groups basing themselves on the territory of sovereign states and impelled by a fanaticism transcending traditional political loyalties. Adapting the intelligence system to these new realities must start with an understanding of the problems requiring solution. The current emphasis is on centralization; the principal disagreements concern the locus and authority of the proposed director of intelligence — whether he should have budgetary authority, be freestanding or located in the executive office of the president.

The basic premise seems to be that the cause of most intelligence failures is inadequate collection and coordination. In my observation, the breakdown usually occurs in the assessment stage. The four major intelligence failures of the past three decades illustrate the point: (1) the 1973 Middle East war, which caught both the United States and Israel by surprise; (2) the Indian nuclear test of 1998, which opened a new era of proliferation threats; (3) 9/11; and (4) the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

In each of these intelligence failures — except possibly 9/11 — the facts were at hand. The difficulties arose in interpreting what they meant. Even 9/11 was ascribed by the commission to a failure of imagination in connecting the dots of available knowledge.

Prior to the 1973 Middle East war, the United States and Israeli governments were aware of every detail of the Egyptian and Syrian buildup. What they misjudged was its purpose. Nobody believed that the Arab armies would actually attack because every analyst at every level was convinced that they were certain to be defeated. Every event, no matter how ominous, was interpreted as confirming that premise. Even when the Soviet Union withdrew dependents from Syria and Egypt 48 hours before hostilities started, it was viewed as caused by Soviet-Arab tensions.

Similarly, with respect to the Indian nuclear test, public evidence was ignored because the intelligence community did not

stockpiles.)

That assessment went one step too far. But what we know now would not necessarily have changed the calculus for preemption. Could the United States wait until weapons were actually produced by a country with the largest army in the region, the second largest potential oil income, a record of having used these weapons against its own population and neighbours, and — according to the 9/11 commission — intelligence contact with Al Qaeda?

The answer requires a primarily geopolitical, not an intelligence, judgment. This is why, in reorganizing the intelligence structure, care must be taken to keep the assessment process distinct from geopolitical and strategic advocacy. Intelligence is most reliable about events that have happened or are about to happen. It grows less definitive about the future vision. Intelligence should be judged by its ability to collect information, to interpret it, to keep assumptions from determining conclusions and to understand underlying trends.

It is a fine line, but crucial, for effective policymaking. Most major strategic decisions involve judgments about consequences. Intelligence should supply the facts relevant to decision; the direction of policy and the ultimate choices depend on many additional factors and must be made by political leaders. A national intelligence director in the executive office of the president would erode this distinction, give intelligence disproportionate influence in policymaking and skew intelligence away from analysis.

Similarly, the merging of foreign and domestic intelligence under a single official unchecked by any institution in the executive branch short of the chief executive gives cause for concern. This is not how most democracies handle the challenge.

Until recently, the policy was to raise a wall between the foreign and domestic intelligence services to prevent the emergence of a single, dominant, unchecked intelligence service. Sept 11 showed that this effort had gone too far and impeded

intelligence, charged in addition with making certain that significant competing intelligence assessments reach the president.

There is no shortage of schemes of reorganization: the 9/11 commission; the Senate report; the Scowcroft commission; the Hamre proposal to centralize collection but leave the analytical functions in existing institutions. What is needed urgently is a pause for reflection to distil the various proposals into a coherent concept. A small group of men and women with high-level experience in government could be assigned this task with a short deadline, say six months, based on the following principles:

- Centralization must be balanced against diversity;

- Foreign and domestic intelligence should not be merged but coordinated by task forces depending on the subject;

- Special provisions must be made for the systematic enhancement of quality; it cannot be left to moving around boxes on an organizational chart.

The investigation of the 1980s, triggered by the Iran-Contra debacle, emphasized allegations of abuse of power, as did another purge in the 1990s. Inevitably, between the terms of directors William Colby through John Deutsch, the emphasis was to reduce the reliance on agents and to emphasize technical means of collection less subject to the allegations (and sometimes) the reality of abuse. This was a major contributing factor to the shortfall in human intelligence regarding the terrorist threat remarked on by all commissions dealing with recent intelligence failures.

For all these reasons, intelligence reorganization needs to bring as well some stability for intelligence personnel. Their thousands of dedicated men and women participated, at the request of their government, in some of the most important battles of the cold war and are even now at the front lines of the war with radical, ideological Islam. Their failures must be corrected. But they deserve recognition for their service even as the structures in which they function are being revised. —*Dawn/Tribune Media Services*