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Intelligence Community: Not Perfect, but Not Bad

by John McLaughlin

As new Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte settles into office, the nation holds what might be called a "cartoon" conception of the complex intelligence community he now leads. Successive commissions and investigations have drummed into everyone the view that the community's well-documented shortcomings on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction are symptomatic of deeply rooted, long-neglected problems that cross all areas. Buzzwords and sound bites have become part of the lexicon - "stovepipes that won't talk to each other;" "captured by groupthink;" "raging turf battles;" "resistant to outside advice;" "no worthwhile HUMINT (human intelligence)."

Yet the more complicated truth is that this is a community with substantial strengths and a string of successes that have yet to be analyzed in the same microscopic way that has been devoted to its failures. It is an intelligence community, everyone forgets, that had to pull itself up from debilitating cuts in the decade before 9/11.

For example, by the mid-1990s, human intelligence cuts meant the CIA was training only about a dozen officers for its clandestine service. But with a rebuilding program that began shortly thereafter, the agency is now graduating the largest classes of clandestine service officers in its history.

Cuts hurt analysis, too

The same was true with intelligence analysis. In the late 1990s, I told congressional oversight committees our analytic resources were stretched so thin that we were close to a meltdown. Our workforce was strained by multiple tasks and too many masters. I was met with blank stares. As with human intelligence, we have been rebuilding, but there is still a long way to go.

Given the long neglect in these areas, the wonder is not that the agency had limited intelligence on Iraq's weapons programs. The wonder is that it was able to get on the ground in Afghanistan a mere 16 days after 9/11, wrap up so many of al-Qaeda's most important leaders, cripple the nuclear-proliferation network of Pakistan's chief nuclear scientist, Abdul Qadeer Khan, penetrate and help dismantle Libya's WMD programs, map Iran's nuclear intentions and uncover North Korea's covert uranium-enrichment program. These, and other accomplishments, have received only passing mention.

The other part of the cartoon depicts the intelligence community as rigidly resistant to change; the recent WMD commission report even warns President Bush to be on guard against efforts to work around or over the new director.

Agencies sought change

Many critics seem to have forgotten that it was the directors of the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency who called for sweeping changes, including direct command over their agencies by the new intelligence director. It was Congress that shrank from this reform.

Moreover, in the summer of 2003, the CIA embarked on its own "lessons-learned" exercise on Iraq WMDs. The agency scrubbed every source and every line of analysis that contributed to that failure and turned everything over to the Senate committee and WMD commission. The CIA undertook this critical self-examination long before the Senate Intelligence Committee report last July and close to two years before the WMD commission announced its findings.

Finally, it was the CIA that hired arms inspector Charles Duelfer to "find the truth." It ensured his independence and helped provide staff - including analysts who did the prewar work on Iraq. There is rich irony in the fact that Duelfer's report was the standard the WMD commission used to indict the work of those who helped him produce it.

At some point, we must abandon the cartoon and grasp the fact that we have an intelligence community that may be far from perfect, but is equally far from the image of fecklessness its critics cultivate. It is a community of people who care deeply about the integrity of their work, who are committed to continuous improvement, and who are prepared to support Negroponte's efforts to take their work to a new level of excellence.

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