

The Washington Post
January 7, 2007

The New Intelligence Challenge
by John McLaughlin

The Office of Director of National Intelligence, soon to be vacated by Ambassador John Negroponte, was born in controversy and never endowed with the full authority that the responsibilities of the office require. Struggling with the inherent limitations, Negroponte made some headway in enhancing U.S. intelligence capabilities but leaves much for his likely successor, retired Vice Adm. Mike McConnell, to accomplish. In an era when intelligence is at the center of nearly all foreign and many domestic challenges, an enormous amount rides on the DNI's success or failure.

The intelligence structure sprang from recommendations made by the Sept. 11 commission that were released during one of the more bitter presidential campaigns in modern history. Unlike the Goldwater-Nichols reform of the military, which took years to debate and enact, many of the key decisions associated with the 2004 intelligence reform were cobbled together in a matter of weeks, with campaign talking points often driving the debate.

I and other senior intelligence leaders at the time opposed the restructuring, arguing that the enhancements desired could be gained by augmenting the authorities of the then-senior intelligence post, the director of central intelligence. When we lost that argument, we said that if there was to be a director of national intelligence the post should be given substantial powers, including robust budgetary authority along with clear direction and control over the nation's principal intelligence agencies -- so as to bring about the kind of changes we had long argued that his predecessor needed.

Congress stopped short of granting such powers, yielding to Defense Department insistence that several of the most important agencies (the National Security Agency, the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency, the National Reconnaissance Agency) remain in its chain of command; despite popular perception, the only agency that reports directly to the "intelligence czar" is the CIA. Congress granted the DNI modestly enhanced authority over budgets and personnel transfers among agencies -- but with many caveats that can be used to slow such efforts or protect departmental equities. And Congress did nothing to reform its own cumbersome system of oversight, under which intelligence agility is limited by the requirement for as many as six committees to weigh in on some decisions.

In the summer of 2004 I told Congress that "short, clear lines of command and control are required in whatever structure you establish" and that three words

were key: agility, flexibility and speed. Negroponte did not get these in anything close to full measure.

Working with these limitations, Negroponte has had to assert his authority to establish it. He has done this effectively on some crucial budget and personnel issues. He has assembled a talented and experienced staff and has begun to focus on some monumentally tough problems, such as the need for a seamless information architecture for a diverse intelligence community. The "issue manager" system he created -- assigning a single senior officer to coordinate the work of multiple agencies on issues such as Iran and North Korea -- holds much promise for integrating analysis, collection and other intelligence activities. Finally, Negroponte must be credited with bringing a reassuring and confident demeanor to a community that had been rocked by controversy.

Many in the intelligence community perceive the new organization as a bureaucratic behemoth superimposed atop the agencies and making more work than it enables. In truth, it is simply too soon to tell what the ultimate effect will be; all reorganizations go through a rough shakedown period. Another, more important truth is this: It is now the law of the land, and for the sake of the nation's security it behooves all, both within and subordinate to the new structure, to do everything possible to ensure its success.

In that regard, the top priority for McConnell must be achieving a more integrated and collaborative effort among 16 agencies with diverse foreign and domestic missions. These agencies have worked together more smoothly in recent years than is commonly perceived, but deeper collaboration has been hindered by a shortage of critical "enablers," such as common information systems, common hiring and personnel evaluation policies, uniformly understood standards for collecting and analyzing information, and shared security policies that ensure that the right people and information flow to critical missions while guarding against penetration by foreign intelligence services.

Success in these endeavors could transform American intelligence. To succeed, any DNI will have to keep the priority on long-range strategic objectives and avoid getting caught up in the day-to-day minutiae of analysis and clandestine operations -- always hard to do, because it is the latter that generate controversy and exert a magnetic pull on the attention and energy of intelligence leaders.

President George H.W. Bush was fond of describing intelligence as "the nation's first line of defense." The challenges confronting the men and women on that line are beginning to feel as formidable as those their forebears faced when the CIA

was created in 1947. As then, much will depend on leadership.

The writer is a senior fellow at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and a CNN analyst. He was deputy director of central intelligence from 2000 to 2004.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company