From a Former CIA Officer's Perspective

On a Path Toward Intelligence Integration

Stephen B. Slick

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I appreciate the invitation from *Studies in Intelligence* to contribute to this assessment of the ongoing project to improve US intelligence through strong central leadership and closer integration. The original design of a federated community of specialized intelligence agencies housed within larger cabinet departments was regularly studied, frequently criticized, but never seriously reconsidered during the modern IC's first half-century of existence. My generation of intelligence officers, those serving on September 11, 2001, experienced fundamental change compelled by outside forces and implemented during a national emergency. Each officer will have a unique view of these changes. My perspectives are those of a staff officer at CIA and the NSC while new institutions were being designed, a field manager charged with representing both CIA and the IC in an allied capital, and now as an annuitant and teacher observing the IC from the outside while helping prepare a next generation of intelligence leaders.

Progress along this path has been uneven, but US intelligence is immeasurably more unified and effective than it was when I entered on duty during the final throes of the Cold War. US policymakers and taxpayers are entitled to the benefits of still closer integration of such a large, expensive, and crucial enterprise. The Director of National Intelligence and Office of the DNI—centerpieces of the post-9/11 intelligence reforms—confront a set of near-term challenges that will shape in large measure historical judgments on the impact and wisdom of this round of change.

Why Now?

Why ask this question on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks and not on another date linked to the work of the 9/11 Commission, the IRTPA, or the actual stand-up of the ODNI? For me, September 11, 2001, is the right benchmark because everything changed that morning for US intelligence. In the weeks and months after the attacks, IC agencies shared information without hesitation, coordinated a blizzard of collection, analytic, and policy-support tasks, and accepted direction from a single leader who was linked inextricably to an engaged commander and chief. The most tangible symbol of this unitary intelligence response was the "Five O'Clock Meeting" chaired by Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet and attended initially by officers from across CIA and the IC but eventually included senior liaison officers from DoD, military commands, and the FBI. Each afternoon, energized by a shared sense of national vulnerability and an impatient leader, the IC developed a shared assessment of the threat environment, cleared obstacles to

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priority collection and influence operations, and prioritized the information and policy decisions that would be presented to President Bush the next morning.

Although the impetus was tragic and the scope of integration limited to counterterrorism, Tenet had demonstrated the power of a unified IC harnessed to an empowered central leader. Nearly three years after the attacks, CIA was unsuccessful in arguing that the IC's agile response to the 9/11 attacks was evidence that the administration should permanently bolster the DCI's authorities rather than support proposals to establish a new position to head US intelligence. The IC's response to the 9/11 attacks, particularly its success over years in detecting and preventing planned follow-on attacks on the United States was the high-water mark for intelligence integration.

Policy Choices, Not Politics

The harshest critique of the post-9/11 intelligence reforms is that the new structures created were products of an overheated political process and succeeded only in adding a layer of inefficient bureaucracy between IC collectors and analysts and the policy customers they serve. While the ODNI must take pains to ensure that every action it directs in the course of setting priorities, allocating resources, and enforcing common standards does not overburden operations being conducted by the agencies, the claim that IC reform was a simple act of political expedience is not true.

The 9/11 Commission's delivery of its report to the White House in the last days of July 2004 was not accidental. This entrepreneurial panel drafted and marketed a superb history of al-Qa'ida and the 9/11 attacks. It also endorsed a small number of government reforms to prevent a recurrence of documented shortcomings. Organized advocacy by victims' families, a Congress anxious to legislate in response to a national trauma, and the wholesale adoption of the report by President Bush's presumptive Democratic challenger combined to accelerate the administration's endorsement of key commission recommendations: creation of a National Counterterrorism Center to fuse terror threat reports,[a] compulsory information sharing, and establishment of a new leadership post empowered with authority over the IC's budget and personnel.

President Bush fully appreciated the complexity of the intelligence process and differences that existed within his administration when he ordered an expedited interagency process to implement his decisions and inform a comprehensive legislative proposal. With CIA weakened by unfair claims of culpability for the attacks and its more recent misjudgment of Iraq's unconventional weapons, the president's staff was principally challenged by DoD's determination to protect the chain of command and military planning process from an expansive DNI role in "strategic operational planning" that the 9/11 Commission envisioned for NCTC. By the end of August 2004, President Bush signed executive orders that established NCTC, compelled information sharing, created a board to safeguard Americans' civil liberties, and strengthened the DCI's authority to lead a unified IC pending congressional action to split the roles of CIA director and IC head. The draft intelligence bill conveyed to the Congress was the product of an interagency process that was intense, divisive, and often acrimonious but untainted by partisan political considerations.

Notwithstanding the administration's lobbying, advocacy by the former 9/11 commissioners, and broad bipartisan support on the Hill, Congress failed to pass an intelligence reform bill before the 2004 presidential election. Indeed, there is no indication that fine distinctions between the candidates' positions on how to reform our intelligence agencies played any role in the election's outcome. Any political pressure was removed by his reelection, but President Bush nonetheless made passage of the IRTPA his legislative priority during the lame-duck congressional session.

Late in his second term, President Bush returned to intelligence reform and agreed to a request from DNI Mike McConnell to revise Executive Order 12333 (which enumerates the powers and responsibilities of the IC) to expand the DNI's role in "hiring and firing" IC agency heads, shaping major DoD acquisitions, and

a. NCTC built on the short-lived Terrorist Threat Integration Center, which was created in early 2003 at the direction of President George W. Bush. It was absorbed into NCTC in October 2004.

strengthening the DNI's hand in foreseeable future disputes with cabinet secretaries who host IC agencies.[a]

Integration in the Foreign Field

It would not be unfair to claim that the prospects for successful intelligence integration improve with increased distance from Washington, DC. Important models for interagency intelligence support to warfighters—and equally valuable personal relationships between commanders and their intelligence counterparts—were developed in the Balkans during the 1990s. Less than a decade later sophisticated intelligence fusion centers were deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan to inform time-sensitive counterterrorism and force-protection missions. Our IC has learned how to integrate its diverse collection and analytic capabilities in support of deployed US forces.

The promise of similarly integrated intelligence work exists in our clandestine and embassy-based platforms around the world. Notwithstanding the appeal of operational freedom in a borderless cyberspace, US intelligence continues to gain essential information, insights, and influence from overseas operations. Some of these activities are undertaken by a single agency but operational success increasingly depends on closely coordinated actions by two or more IC agencies. That sort of tactical interagency coordination occurs routinely in the foreign field.

Perhaps the least understood and appreciated resource available to US intelligence is the network of relationships IC agencies maintain with their foreign counterparts. These relationships are nurtured on a day-to-day basis by liaison officers and operational managers assigned to foreign capitals, most often as part of the US embassy staff. In the capitals of major US allies, our IC is nearly replicated locally by liaison officers who represent their sponsoring agency and engage daily with host-country counterparts and US IC colleagues. The physical proximity, common mission, and shared daily experiences (including hardships) of a foreign field assignment promote open communication and strong IC teamwork. Resistance to intelligence integration in the field can most often be traced back to desk-bound officers at an agency's headquarters who instinctively defend vague "institutional prerogatives," or a foreign liaison partner who derives prestige and influence inside their own government from an exclusive relationship with a US counterpart.

President George W. Bush signs the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act into law on December 17, 2004. Looking on were congressional figures who played major roles in the work of the 9/11 Commission and the writing of the act. White House photo by Paul Morse.

The IRTPA and EO 12333 describe a policy-setting role for the DNI in foreign relationships and a more operational role for CIA in managing them through its network of overseas stations and bases. In 2009, a disagreement between the DNI and CIA director over the DNI's prerogative to designate a "DNI Representative" to a foreign government who was not also the CIA's local chief of station was referred to the White House for adjudication. A clumsy, and leaky, process resulted in a regrettable setback for the DNI and

a. See Stephen B. Slick, "Modernizing the IC 'Charter': The 2008 Amendments to Executive Order 12333, United States Intelligence Activities" in *Studies Intelligence* 58, no. 2 (June 2014).

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intelligence integration. While CIA's senior officer will most often be best qualified to represent the US IC in a foreign capital, the policy should also recognize cases where a senior officer from another IC agency would be best able to represent the community, with commonsense safeguards to insulate the military, law enforcement, and covert action chains of command.

The proliferation of joint intelligence operations managed overseas can only accelerate the cultural shift toward closer integration of US intelligence at home.

Testing the Limits of Integration

Champions of a "strong center" and closer intelligence integration will watch closely as IC leaders grapple with a series of near-term challenges: 1) setting and enforcing new priorities; 2) defining a role in collection and analysis of domestic intelligence; 3) clarifying lead responsibility for advising the president and supporting the policymaking process; and 4) leading the response to a generational shift in digital technology.

New Priorities

The principal focus of our national security establishment is shifting from combatting terrorism to countering threats posed by peer states such as an ascendent China and a declining Russia. The simple tasks of describing the shift and elevating new topics to the top of the IC's warning brief have been completed.

What comes next? Will the DNI wield hard-won budgetary, personnel, and contracting authorities to reshape the IC to address new threats? Or, will each of the IC's 18 agencies adapt to new priorities consistent with its parochial or departmental interests? Is ODNI mature enough to make and enforce data-driven resource trades between collection disciplines (and the agencies that "own" them) or will the IC engage fundamentally different state intelligence targets with the tools developed over two decades of counterterrorism work?

The Foreign-Domestic Divide

Indeed, even the residual security threat posed by terrorism has not remained static. While foreign terror groups continue to pose a threat to US interests, focus has shifted to violent domestic groups and disaffected Americans. The FBI has been energetic in warning of the dangers they pose to public order and democratic governance. In its report, the 9/11 Commission documented strained relations between the FBI and CIA, along with an exaggerated legal "wall" that separated the law enforcement and intelligence communities, as factors that contributed to al-Qa'ida's successful attacks. Consequently, the DNI—a community leader with no responsibility for CIA's foreign operations - - was charged with "bridging the foreign-domestic divide" and leading a seamless effort to protect the US domestically while also safeguarding civil liberties. As the domestic terrorism problem grows, the DNI and IC should clarify how intelligence on domestic targets is being collected, shared, fused, and acted upon to prevent attacks. It would be a mistake for ODNI to reflexively defer to the FBI and the law enforcement community on intelligence regarding domestic extremism and not to play an active role in setting priorities, enforcing standards, and appropriately exploiting the full IC's capabilities against a new target.

"Principal Adviser" or Advisers?

The IRTPA assigned to the DNI the former DCI's role as the principal adviser to the president and NSC on intelligence matters. This was universally understood to mean the DNI would lead the president's daily briefing process and also assume the DCI's role as statutory adviser to the NSC and intelligence representative to the principals committee, deputies committee, and subordinate interagency policy coordination groups. This arrangement prevailed briefly in the mid-2000s, but ultimately the CIA's director and senior officers were included by invitation (and later orders) in NSC, PC, and DC meetings.

Because of CIA's central role combating foreign terrorism, its global covert action responsibilities, and the quality of its experts, it is unsurprising that presidents would seek CIA's advice and counsel. However, it is not clear why the practice has developed that two separate intelligence organizations participate in routine interagency policy meetings. In contrast, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff provides coordinated military advice to the president, the NSC, and the interagency policy process without the routine participation of the service chiefs. There is certainly an amicable arrangement that would reinforce the

DNI's status as the president's adviser while also ensuring the CIA's deep reservoir of expertise and worldwide presence are available to support the policymaking process.

Any changes to practice in this area cannot be directed from outside. The president is entitled to organize the national security team as he or she chooses. The president would, though, advance the cause of intelligence integration by unequivocally affirming that the DNI is the principal adviser on intelligence matters.

A Digital Arms Race

The revolution in digital technology is changing our everyday lives and transforming the practice of intelligence. Officers, teams, agencies, and communities are all struggling to seize the opportunities and minimize the national security risks posed by proliferating digital technologies. The ODNI should be at the forefront in developing a community-wide strategy and ensuring necessary coordination of the technology that is being developed, adapted, or stolen by IC agencies. Central to this challenge is the recognition that exploiting open-source and publicly available information will set the future boundaries of state-sponsored intelligence work.

Exquisite, expensive, and risky intelligence operations should only be undertaken to collect information that we know is not otherwise available. But, we are not yet able to determine fully what is available publicly or how to gauge its trustworthiness at scale. Restructuring and prioritizing the IC's open-source mission is an overdue first step in this process. The margins that separate US IC technical operations from those of our rivals are shrinking.

In this consequential race, and future such intelligence challenges, our IC's performance will be improved with strong central leadership and deliberately integrated actions.

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