

American Intelligence -- Still Stupid

We haven't been attacked since 2001, but don't thank the country's cumbersome, redundant intelligence bureaucracy.

By Amy Zegart

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FIVE YEARS AFTER the most devastating terrorist attack in U.S. history, all our worst intelligence deficiencies remain. Intelligence is spread across 16 agencies that operate as warring tribes more than a team. The CIA is in disarray. And the FBI's information technology is stuck in the dark ages.

There are more intelligence agencies to coordinate than ever but still no one in firm charge of them all. In 2004, Congress established the post of director of national intelligence. Rather than integrating intelligence, however, the job's creation has triggered huge turf wars. For the last two years, while the office of the intelligence director has been fighting over who briefs the president and who staffs assignments, the Pentagon has quietly expanded its intelligence activities at home and abroad.

This is bad. Pentagon units now duplicate such intelligence activities as conducting secret counter-terrorism operations, collecting information abroad and monitoring Americans inside the U.S. without warrants, presidential authorizations or meaningful supervision by the director of national intelligence and Congress.

One little-known Pentagon unit, the Counterintelligence Field Activity, began in 2002 to protect U.S. forces from terrorist attacks, but has since grown into a sprawling counter-terrorism agency with wide-ranging duties and authority over 4,000 active and reserve military investigators.

Information sharing among intelligence agencies has improved — but that's not saying much. The poster child of intelligence reform is a new agency called the National Counterterrorism Center, where officials from different agencies sit in the same room and draft collective reports. The center has even developed a classified website that provides synthesized terrorism intelligence for government officials.

Sounds good. But because analysts at the National Counterterrorism Center have varying

levels of security clearances and come from different intelligence agencies, they see different pieces of information. Intelligence still isn't shared even when the rules allow it. Information is stored on nearly 30 incompatible networks. To access them all, analysts must use six computers.

"It's a little scary," Sen. Mike DeWine (R-Ohio), who sits on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said during the confirmation hearing for Gen. Michael Hayden as CIA director. "It's like we have duct-taped our systems together. Surely we can do better than this."

Apparently, Senator, we can't. Information sharing outside the National Counterterrorism Center is worse. In its 2005 report card, the 9/11 commission gave such efforts a "D." A recent study by the Markle Foundation Task Force on national security found that information sharing continued to be hampered by "turf wars and unclear lines of authority," officials who "still cling" to old ways of doing business and a diminishing sense of commitment. The task force concluded that despite dozens of initiatives, guidelines and statutory requirements, "systematic, trusted information sharing remains more of an aspiration than a reality."

That's the good news. The bad news is called the CIA and the FBI.

The CIA's current strategy for penetrating Al Qaeda? More of the same. The agency has been on a hiring binge, tripling the number of clandestine operatives since 2001 rather than improving the quality of its personnel or developing new ways to recruit jihadists who skip the embassy cocktail party circuit. As one former spy put it, hiring 50% more agents without fundamentally changing how they do business just makes you stupid.

Meanwhile, the agency formerly known as Central still struggles to produce big-picture analyses about America's enemies. Last year, a presidential commission chaired by federal Judge Laurence Silberman and former Sen. Charles Robb (D-Va.) concluded that strategic intelligence was bad and worsening. "Across the board," the commission concluded, "the intelligence community knows disturbingly little about the nuclear programs of many of the world's most dangerous actors. In some cases, it knows less now than it did five or 10 years ago."

Ironically, 9/11 has made matters worse, focusing analysts on today's threat list rather than anticipating tomorrow's enemies. Many insiders worry that the CIA has become "CNN with secrets," responding to headlines rather than undertaking more over-the-horizon analysis. Even Hayden warned Congress that unless we get serious about thinking long term, the United States would be "endlessly surprised."

These surprises are not good.

Meanwhile, over at the FBI, Director Robert Mueller told Congress in May that his bureau has "expanded [its] mission, radically overhauled our intelligence programs and capabilities, and ... undergone tremendous personnel growth."

I'm not sure what FBI he's talking about. Last year, the Justice Department's inspector general found that FBI analysts — the people who are supposed to connect the dots — spent only half their time actually doing analysis. What were they busy doing instead? Taking out the trash and answering telephones, the same menial tasks they were assigned before 9/11.

It is often said that change takes time. But history is filled with examples in which more was accomplished in less. In 1865, less than five years after the Civil War began, the nation had reunited and abolished slavery. Four years after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, U.S. forces had crossed two oceans and won the war. The founders managed to draft the Constitution in 100 working days.

Speaking from the Oval Office on Monday night, President Bush delivered his annual 9/11 refrain: We are safer than before.

The president is right about one thing: Five years after 9/11, we have not been attacked. But we should not confuse luck with effectiveness.