

One Year After a Major Realignment, The Intelligence Community Is in Disarray

By Max Holland

In the short space of five years, Americans have witnessed two major intelligence debacles: first, a sin of omission in 2001 (failure to detect and prevent the 9/11 attacks), followed by a sin of commission in 2002–03 (the estimate that Saddam Hussein had stockpiled weapons of mass destruction). These failures produced four major investigations, two by Congress and two by special commissions, and eventually the most drastic restructuring of the intelligence apparatus since 1947.

The press is currently focused on the White House's calculated leaks, undertaken to mask their misuse of bad pre-war intelligence. Yet the reordering of intelligence agencies is vastly more significant, albeit less titillating. This reorganization shows signs of creating a system more dysfunctional than the one it replaced. If nothing else, the revamped intelligence apparatus is going to cost U.S. taxpayers a lot more money with no discernible gains.

The centerpiece of the reorganization enacted into law in December 2004 was the creation of the Office of Director of National Intelligence (ODNI). It had been argued that the three-hatted job of Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) was too much responsibility for any one person. Managing the CIA, along with serving as the president's principal intelligence adviser, was said to be a full-time job, one that left the DCI too little time for, and not enough authority over, the 17 other agencies that constitute the "intelligence community."

The 9/11 Commission made reallocation of these three responsibilities one of its top recommendations in its effort to "rebuild the bloated and failed intelligence bureaucracies," as John Lehman, one of the commissioners, put it in a November 2005 op-ed article. "We wanted a strong national intelligence director to smash bureaucratic layers, [and] tear down information stovepipes."

After George Bush appointed John Negroponte, a career diplomat, as the first DNI in March 2005, all eyes immediately focused on whether Negroponte would assert for himself the role of principal intelligence briefer of the president; that was not a foregone conclusion, not having been legislated. Negroponte did in fact step into that role—"face time" with the president being the single most precious commodity in Washington—and that marked a turning point. Besides representing a demotion for the CIA director and the agency as a whole, it turned the ODNI away from the lean structure touted by the 9/11 panel. Instead of presiding over the intelligence community as an overall coordinator, the DNI suddenly needed troops, and lots of them.

The ODNI now reportedly boasts 1,000 employees, including a principal-deputy DNI, three associate DNIs, four deputy DNIs, and 19 assistant-deputy DNIs; not to mention its own general counsel, inspector general, and all the other accouterments of any self-respecting federal entity. The restructuring has led (some would say all too predictably) to an entirely new bureaucracy on top of the already swollen bureaucracy that was supposedly a prime cause of the intelligence failures.

The ODNI has grown so quickly that in late March it even roused the anger of the House Intelligence Committee. Republicans and Democrats on the panel, several of them full-throated supporters of reorganization, voted to reduce the ODNI's budget pending receipt of an "architecture study" from Negroponte. "We don't want more billets, more bureaucracy, more buildings," Rep. Jane Harman, the panel's ranking Democrat, told the *Los Angeles Times*.

Apart from the issue of more bureaucratic layers, of course, are questions of bureaucratic loyalties, lines of authority and responsibility, and overlapping duties. The new legislation mandated the creation of "national centers" to work on high-priority topics like terrorism and proliferation, and then placed these in the ODNI. As Paul Pillar, a 28-year veteran of the CIA, recently asked, where do the new National Counterterrorism Center's responsibilities begin, and those of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center, in existence since 1986, end?

Negroponte has also now asked that CIA station chiefs abroad report to his office as well as to their superiors at the CIA, which carries the potential of getting ODNI involved in operational matters. Pillar succinctly summarized the situation for *The Washington Spectator* when he said that the implementation of the 9/11 Commission's plan was "not really a consolidation or unification of the intelligence community but rather the grafting of what amounts to a new agency on top of existing ones." Ironically, the problems long attributed to the impossible job of being DCI may be in the process of being replicated in the DNI.

The flip side of the intelligence reorganization, in many ways, has been the demotion of the CIA into just another agency. As U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Richard Posner, a reorganization critic, pointed out in a March 24 speech in Washington, while the "names of government agencies often don't mean a lot," there was "a special significance to the word 'Central' in the CIA's name." The agency was meant to be the hub of the intelligence community, not just a spoke, the place where data collected by all the other agencies was sifted and integrated before being presented to the White House.

The CIA's fall from grace would be difficult to manage under the best of circumstances. But it is suffering a double-whammy under the directorship of Porter Goss, an undistinguished CIA case officer for ten years before he ran for Congress in 1988. In its nearly 60-year existence, the agency has never seen the kind of turmoil it has experienced in the 18 months since Goss took over.

The former Florida congressman, who chaired the House Intelligence Committee for seven years, has run the agency with a bevy of inexperienced aides—derisively referred to as the “gosslings”—that he brought with him from Capitol Hill. Goss is viewed internally as the most partisan CIA director ever, brought in to discipline an unruly agency that has failed to toe the administration line, notwithstanding appearances, on Iraq. As a direct result, the senior ranks have been decimated during Goss’s short tenure. Twenty of the highest posts in the clandestine service have been vacated by career officials, largely because they believed they were being “disregarded or mismanaged,” according to a February article in *U.S. News & World Report*. An earlier account, in the *American Prospect*, estimated that as many as 90 senior officials have exited, agency-wide.

A revealing indicator of Goss’s philosophy that has so far escaped notice in the press concerns *Studies in Intelligence*, the agency’s widely respected journal. When *Studies* was initiated in 1955, the literature on intelligence was almost nonexistent. It was thought that the intelligence profession would not become a real discipline without a literature that could be shared and accumulated. Over the decades, several of the CIA’s most esteemed minds served on the editorial board of *Studies*, which became a venue for wide-ranging and often self-critical articles. The only criterion for publication was whether the article made a “contribution to the literature of intelligence,” in the editorial board’s opinion (disclosure: this writer has had two articles published in *Studies*).

But at Goss’s CIA, free expression and thoughtful criticism have been trumped by political correctness. The problem erupted in the fall of 2005, when *Studies* published an excerpt from a postmortem on the intelligence community’s failure to assess accurately Iraq’s WMD capabilities. The postmortem had been ordered by former DCI George Tenet, who wanted at least one inquest done by experienced officers, without a special ax to grind, and beyond the glare of publicity. Tenet contracted a group of outside consultants headed by Richard Kerr, a much decorated former deputy director of the agency, to conduct the review.

It is not apparent why Kerr’s postmortem incited Goss and the gosslings, since the published portion was far more critical of the intelligence community for feeding policy-makers erroneous estimates than it was of the policy-makers for allegedly cherry-picking the intelligence or pressuring analysts. Perhaps Kerr’s major transgression was to point out that the other intelligence assessments about Iraq have proven to be right on the mark; the most important being the forecast of sectarian violence after Saddam Hussein’s overthrow. Under the Goss regime it is apparently forbidden to depict the intelligence community as being anything other than in lockstep with the administration’s rosy scenarios.

Seven months later, the offending issue still has not been posted on-line, even though unclassified articles in *Studies* are normally put up within weeks of publication. Paul Johnson, the director of the office that publishes *Studies* and chairman of the editorial board, has resigned, along with the editor, Barbara Pace. The most chilling aspect is that there are newly established editorial hurdles at the journal. Merit is no longer the sole

criterion governing publication.

It is hard to determine which circumstance is worse: the poorly implemented, even ill-conceived makeover of the intelligence community, or the demoralization and resignations that have been the signal feature of Porter Goss's tenure as CIA director. Both will take years to overcome.

In the meantime, the sheer volume of U.S. intelligence resources that have been devoted to Al Qaeda may make another surprise akin to 9/11 unlikely. Yet, as Judge Posner points out in his new book, *Uncertain Shield: The U.S. Intelligence System in the Throes of Reform*, intelligence is imperfectible, and failures are endemic to even the best clandestine services. What remains to be seen are the costs of a dysfunctional intelligence apparatus, particularly one that is viewed with the utmost suspicion by the White House.

Postscript: Porter Goss was forced to resign as CIA director in May 2006. Meanwhile, John Negroponte's brief tenure as DNI ended on January 2007, when he resigned to become deputy secretary at the State Department.