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To: "Dr. Baruch Fischhoff - Chair, National Academy Committee on Improving Intelligence" <baruch@cmu.edu>

From: Lloyd Etheredge <lloyd.etheredge@policyscience.net>

Subject: Untested Theories about Databases, Analysis Methods, and Effectiveness; Fwd: Financial Times "Concern is Mounting" article, 3/10/2010

Dear Dr. Fischhoff and Colleagues:

The purpose of this message is to bring to your attention the following article from the Financial Times of 3/10/2010. The reporter restates many of the (by now, traditional) public theories and diagnoses: The problem is that needed data exist in current databases but the databases aren't shared. Agencies engage in tribal warfare and don't cooperate. Somebody - "a real sheriff" even tougher than Admiral Blair - needs to be in charge with even more authority. Etc.

I am not persuaded by the evidence presented. It would be a genuine service if your National Academy study will inventory, present, and evaluate all of the elements in the full cognitive map that we need to understand the institutional and intellectual issues, in Washington and abroad (including data capabilities of allies.) And recommend auditing/effectiveness measures to evaluate and improve each element and other components of a rapid learning system.

About learning issues: In the very small N of recent public cases of failure, I notice that a prominent feature was that alarmed and concerned parents had contacted authorities. You might want to take a serious look at the weight being given to this variable and - for example - whether it is coded separately.

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Financial Times FT.com

US intelligence: Tribal warfare [Concern is mounting about the continued failure of the myriad agencies to co-operate as they face unprecedented pressure to maintain national security.] by Daniel Dombey

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Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud (left) sits beside a man believed to be a suicide bomber who killed CIA agents in Afghanistan in December. Mehsud is presumed to have been killed by a CIA drone

It was a sombre moment, coming in the wake of the most grievous blow the agency had suffered for decades as well as an intelligence mix-up over an alleged Christmas day bomb attempt on a flight to Detroit. It was also a low point: since his visit, the news for the CIA and the 15 other US intelligence agencies has improved.

Last month, Barack Obama went to the nerve centre of the US struggle against al-Qaeda. In a convoy of sport-utility vehicles, amid heavy snowfall, the president travelled to CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, where he commemorated the deaths of seven agents in Afghanistan last December.

In triumph and tragedy, the message is the same. Rarely, if ever, have the myriad agencies that make up the intelligence landscape been as central to US national security as in the past decade, as the CIA, FBI and other services have refocused on the struggle against extremist militant groups. "This is a war," Leon Panetta, CIA director, said this week. "All of us must fight ... to protect this country."

But as the agencies wage that war, questions keep surfacing about their ability to work together – even after the most comprehensive overhaul in their history following the attacks of September 11 2001. Their very tactics also remain the subject of intense, sometimes almost tribal, disputes.

"It is hard to think of a decade in which the intelligence community has been more important for the core functions of the American government," says Philip Zelikow, formerly a senior state department official and a central figure on the 9/11 commission, which called for an intelligence shake-up. "And some of the problems have never been starker."

Although espionage and counter-espionage played central roles in the cold war, much of that struggle involved diplomacy, grand strategy and tests of military and

economic strength. By contrast, in the battle against al-Qaeda, it is the US intelligence sector that is at the forefront.

Mr Obama acknowledged as much in his Langley speech. Addressing the seven slain operatives – killed by a Jordanian double agent (thought to be the man pictured above right) – as well as the assembled intelligence agents, he spoke of the “extremists who no longer threaten our country – because you eliminated them”. He invoked “the attacks that never occurred – because you thwarted them” and “the Americans who are alive today – because you saved them”.

Indeed, as he spoke, news had already begun to emerge of a CIA drone strike that appears to have killed Hakimullah Mehsud (pictured above right), the Pakistani Taliban leader the agency partly blames for the deaths last December. Officials add that pressure on al-Qaeda’s Pakistani havens has greatly reduced the chances of another 9/11, even as lower level threats proliferate.

The real question is whether the huge intelligence sector has changed enough to prevail in the long run; or whether the CIA still hankers after its old role as first among equals while the FBI resists co-operation, and a new centre struggles to assert control. At stake is not just whether the different agencies opt for co-ordination or culture clash but the very means by which they take on their adversaries.

Graphic: America’s intelligence agencies - PDF

America’s intelligence agencies have been held responsible for two historic blunders in the past decade: failure to anticipate the attacks of 9/11 and incorrect assertions that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction on the eve of the Iraq war.

Dennis Blair, director of national intelligence, recently remarked that after 9/11 the US discovered it could not be protected by the military alone and intelligence agencies realised they had to pool information, rather than just report to different government departments.

But only this year Mr Obama himself upbraided the agencies for failing to “connect the dots” and use available information to stop Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who allegedly tried to blow up the Northwest Airlines flight over Detroit at

Christmas, from travelling to the US. There has since been an almost uninterrupted stream of criticism of the 16 agencies' problems in working together.

"You have a very large posse and no real sheriff running it," says Bruce Riedel, a CIA veteran and former White House aide.

The cultural differences go deep. In the old days, Mr Riedel says, the word was that FBI agents shopped at Sears & Roebuck – whose cheap suits went with a down-to-earth image of hunting down criminals – while DIA staff wore uniforms and CIA case officers had a penchant for fine tailoring. Today, Mr Riedel hastens to add, dress styles at the much expanded CIA look more like those of a college campus, but the old divisions between agencies have not disappeared.

"The feuding and the rivalry is a bit more on the policy level, less on actual work done," says a senior intelligence official. "There is some resentment of the CIA being the only agency that directly reports to the DNI while others report to the defence department, the Treasury and so on ... Then there are things like who gets to meetings at the National Security Council, who briefs Congress – the pecking order in Washington."

Part of the blame for the confusion may belong to legislators and the current administration. When the 9/11 commission proposed the position of director of national intelligence, it envisaged a clear hierarchy in which the CIA director would serve as the DNI's number two.

That never happened. Instead, the CIA remains an independent power base – a fact emphasised late last year when Mr Obama sided with Mr Panetta rather than Mr Blair in a dispute over whether CIA station chiefs overseas, rather than representatives from other agencies, would always be the senior US intelligence officials in foreign countries.

In a less publicised decision, the president also frustrated a bid by Mr Blair for direct authority over the CIA's covert operations – although the White House did agree that the DNI would be informed "at least concurrently" of such activities.

Intelligence officials barely bother to disguise the tension between Mr Blair, a former commander of US forces in the Pacific, and Mr Panetta, a savvy former White House chief of staff who knows the Oval Office inside out.

Washington insiders add that Mr Obama was under pressure not to aggravate relations with a demoralised CIA at a time when some operatives are under criminal investigation over torture allegations and staffers feel under-appreciated for their efforts against militant Islamists.

George Little, an agency spokesman, cites the CIA's success in thwarting al-Qaeda plots, disrupting the AQ Khan nuclear proliferation network, identifying Syria's covert nuclear reactor and discovering Iran's undeclared uranium enrichment facility at Qom. He adds that the CIA's appeal is borne out by the 180,000 job applications it received last year.

But other officials say the agency still feels discontent. It "longs for the days when it was clearly first among equals and when the director of CIA represented the intelligence world to presidents", says Mr Riedel.

Officials and experts add that it is unrealistic to expect the intelligence reforms to have taken full effect barely half a decade after they were enacted. A common comparison is with the Goldwater-Nichols act that reshaped the military from 1986, and sought to reduce intra-service rivalries and co-ordination failures by, for example, increasing the powers of the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. That process took 20 years to complete, by many accounts.

Doubts remain, however, about the classic Washington solution of designing another level of bureaucracy. It is no secret that the White House has expressed frustration about Mr Blair – who recently had to "clarify" his testimony to Congress on the alleged Christmas day attempted attack.

But many intelligence professionals say the creation of the DNI has improved co-ordination, particularly with the "fusion centres" drawing in staff from the agencies in the US and across the world.

Mr. Blair touts the creation of A-Space – short for Analytic Space – a web-based resource where analysts from different agencies can post information and ideas, an effort he compared to a classified MySpace or Facebook, complete with hyperlinks and RSS news alert feeds.

But differences between the agencies are reflected in tensions over the right balance when handling extremists between electronic surveillance (“sig-int”) and on-the-ground intelligence gathering (“hum-int”).

“The ability of adversaries talking to anyone, to give funds, to do anything, is massively constrained by non-hum-int means we have,” says the senior intelligence official. “Osama bin Laden is unable to communicate meaningfully with anyone, he is unable to give orders ... When the Taliban speak to people, we know about it.”

Adding that “55-year-olds in the CIA” may not be interested in such an approach but that young operatives in the field are, he says: “If there’s a hostile minister of defence, I can try to find out who his girlfriend is or who his barber is, but if I own his computer, I don’t need all of that.”

Still, other officials argue that sig-int can be of less use against the likes of al-Qaeda than against national governments. For example, aware that intelligence agencies regularly track e-mails, the network’s operatives have resorted to run-arounds such as saving messages in the “drafts” folders of web-based e-mails rather than sending them, minimising the electronic trail.

Indeed, even targeting for high-technology drone strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan rests on facts often much harder to obtain than during the cold war days, an agent with an engaging manner or an open ear could garner information. Such hum-int is what the CIA agents were trying to gather when they were killed.

Scott Stewart of Stratfor, the global intelligence company, says the agencies could learn from the New York Police Department, which recruited young people from immigrant communities in the US in a push against extremist plots. But, he cautions, “a lot of these young guys could never get through the FBI’s background check.”

With his experience of analysing the intelligence failures that preceded 9/11, Mr Zelikow also expresses frustration about mishaps that accompanied the Christmas day bomb attempt. But he says agencies have made great if under-appreciated progress in recent years – particularly in keeping pressure on al-Qaeda.

“We now have much of the institutional hardware that we need, but we are still trying to get the training, techniques and procedures right,” he says. “Large organisations involved in high-risk operations are going to make mistakes and are going to lose people. The question is what do they do to learn from their mistakes?”

Additional reporting by Harvey Morris

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