

STATEMENT OF JAMES SCHLESINGER
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
UNITED STATES SENATE

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

I am grateful to the Committee for providing this opportunity to comment on the nature of intelligence and the reforms suggested by the 9/11 Commission. The 9/11 Commission has given us a detailed and revealing narrative of events leading up to 9/11. It has also proposed a substantial reorganization of the intelligence community—changes that do not logically flow from the problems that the Commission identified in its narrative. It is, therefore, incumbent upon us to examine the Commission’s proposals with care, lest in our haste we do more harm than good. The Commission has rightly observed that the events leading up to 9/11 represent “a failure of imagination.” Yet, one should not assume that changing wiring diagrams is a sure fire way to stimulate imagination. Imagination always has an up-hill fight in bureaucratic organizations. Creating an additional bureaucratic layer scarcely leads to bringing imagination to the top.

Mr. Chairman, in these brief remarks, I shall attempt to discuss the issue of intelligence reform under three headings: first, the inherent problems of intelligence; second, why control of intelligence from outside of the Department of Defense is a particularly bad idea, given the evolution of US technology and military strategy; and, third, to draw some implications for intelligence reform.

1. Intelligence is inherently a difficult business. Intelligence targets naturally seek to conceal what they are doing—and have a strong tendency to mislead you. The central problem in intelligence is to discern the true signals amidst the noise. The relevant

signals may be very weak and, without question, there is a great deal of noise. Countless events are being recorded each day—and countless events are failing to be recorded or are deliberately hidden. Moreover, false signals are deliberately planted. We talk glibly about “connecting the dots,” but that is far easier ex-post than ex-ante. It is only in retrospect that one knows which dots were the relevant dots, among the countless observations and unobserved phenomena—and how those relevant dots should be connected. Prior to that, one has only a mass of observations and possible evidence—subject to a variety of hypotheses and interpretations.

Even if there are no preconceptions, or initial biases, organizations will drift toward a structured theory of an issue under study. Thus, an organization—any organization—develops a concept of reality. Over time, that concept likely will harden into a conviction or mindset that discounts observations or evidence in conflict with the prevailing concept and highlights observations that seem to be supportive as evidence. Evidence to the contrary is regularly shaken off.

Thus, the quality of analysis becomes critical in providing good intelligence. That is why reducing competition in analysis is the wrong way to go—especially in quest of the false goal of eliminating duplication. Centralization of intelligence is inherently a dubious objective, when there is a wide range of consumers of intelligence—with a variety of interests, responsibilities, and needs.

2. Intelligence is increasingly interwoven with military operations. The advance of military technology and its embodiment in our military forces have made intelligence ever more integral to our military strategy and battlefield tactics and to this country’s immense military advantage. That military advantage is reflected in such rubrics as “information

superiority,” “information dominance,” “battlefield awareness,” and “net-centric warfare.” In brief, it relies upon rapid detection of targets through sensors, the rapid communication of those target locations to command centers, the assignment of precisely-guided weapons to those targets at the discerned locations, and damage assessment, again communicated to command centers, to determine whether additional weapons are necessary. In all of this, the accuracy, the immediacy, and the believability of intelligence is crucial.

Thus, in recent decades, intelligence, when wedded to command, control, and communications, has become the core of America’s battlefield dominance and military superiority. In short, C³I has in itself almost become a powerful weapon-system. But commanders in the field must have confidence that the intelligence assets will be available with certainty and that information will be reliably and quickly disseminated. It is for this reason that plucking intelligence away from command, control, and communications has become increasingly unwise. They should be designed and operated as an integrated whole.

To illustrate the now-enhanced role of intelligence in the system-of systems that undergirds US military advantage, I have included as a backup an illustration from Vision 2020, with which you likely are familiar. It illustrates the crucial role of information superiority in binding together the several aspects of military engagement to achieve battlefield dominance.

It has taken many years to persuade military commanders that national assets will reliably be available to them in the event of conflict. This started in the 1970’s, but did not really reach fruition until the Gulf War in 1990-91. Sustaining that confidence of our military commanders that national assets will be designed and exercised with their wartime needs in mind remains crucial. In the absence of such confidence, the temptation for our combatant commanders will be to try to develop intelligence assets under their own control, even if they

are inferior. To possess intelligence assets of one's own is time-honored for virtually all major decision-makers. That is why intelligence assets are so widely distributed. That is why the perennial quest for greater centralization has been both delusory and invariably negated.

To shift control over crucial intelligence assets outside the Department of Defense risks weakening the relative military advantage of the United States—and at the same time creates the incentive to divert resources into (likely inferior) intelligence capabilities, which would further reduce the available forces.

But that is not the end. The question is: where does one draw the line? Take one critical example. Now central to information dominance and to our military operations is the Global Positioning System (GPS). It is an information system, not normally regarded as part of the intelligence community. Nevertheless, it is critical for effective intelligence operations—and thus to the effectiveness of our military forces. Does budget control over GPS also pass to a Director of National Intelligence? In a complex system-of-systems, the perceived need to move further beyond what historically has been defined as intelligence—will not cease. Historic intelligence and non-intelligence systems are now Siamese twins. King Solomon had a comparatively easy task in proposing to split the baby in half.

3. Intelligence management, like intelligence itself, is an inherently difficult business. There are countless questions. Which are the important ones to bring to the attention of the decision-makers? There are countless observations. Some are relevant signals; most are noise. Where are the missing signals? Only in retrospect can one be sure of the answer. Regrettably, we are not clairvoyant. Predicting the future is especially fraught with difficulty.

To speak of the “failure of imagination” is really to acknowledge the limitations of the human intellect. Individual analysts will all have their slightly different interpretations of what is going on. Their views must be selected and combined. Though we regularly are urged to “think outside the box,” that is mostly an exhortation. The problem with “thinking the unthinkable” is that—nobody believes you! Analysts will temper their views within the range of acceptability. Those who stretch receptivity likely will be viewed—or dismissed—as “worrywarts, zealots, or even worse, oddballs.” That does little to enhance one’s status in the organization or one’s career.

As mentioned earlier, organizations also have their inherent limits. Different organizations will gravitate towards different ways of organizing reality—based upon their range of responsibilities and, also, their interests in a narrower sense. Most individuals make themselves comfortable in their own organizations by not challenging a prevailing consensus. The only solution within an organization is to establish a Devil’s Advocacy organization to challenge the prevailing beliefs. But, it is an imperfect solution, at best an ameliorative, and the individuals assigned to such an organization will have to be protected at the top from subsequent retribution.

Mr. Chairman, we should always bear in mind that intelligence assessments, hopefully objective, will then rise through the political hierarchy to inform the judgment of decision-makers. Politics, under normal conditions, is typically an engine to soothe and to reassure. (It reflects that political imperative known as optimism.) Until the nation is aroused, alarmist views are treated with disbelief. I recall an episode in 1950, when an intelligence analyst, examining the indicators, had concluded that the Chinese had already introduced large numbers of troops into North Korea, as the United Nations command advanced. He was

pedaling this tale around Washington and ultimately reached high into the State Department. The recipient of his briefing listened very politely. When it was over, he responded as follows: “Young man, THEY WOULDN’T DARE.”

Moreover, national perspectives frequently are dominated by political axioms—and intelligence failures, so-called, are quite frequently the failures of prevailing political axioms. In 1990, Iraq’s neighbors reassured themselves that “an Arab state would never attack another Arab state.” In 1973, a prevailing political axiom in Israel (which affected intelligence) was that their Arab neighbors would never attack as long as Israel had air superiority. And, of course, I should mention the conviction, international as well as national, that “without question, Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction.” The process of fashioning such a political axiom is strongly abetted that over time any caveats coming up from lower levels in the intelligence community get stripped away as information moves up the political hierarchy.

Mr. Chairman, I trust that the Congress will remember Hippocrates’ injunction: First, do no harm.” In altering the structure of the intelligence community, it is essential to deliberate long and hard—and not to be stampeded into doing harm. On page 339 of the Report of the 9/11 Commission, the commissioners wisely state:

“In composing this narrative, we have tried to remember that we write with the benefit and the handicap of hindsight. Hindsight can sometimes see the past clearly—with 20/20 vision. But the path of what happened is so brightly lit that it places everything else more deeply into shadow.”

Mr. Chairman, our understanding of past events becomes perfect only in hindsight—if then. There will never be any corresponding perfection in intelligence organization—which necessarily must operate with foresight. Reform may now be necessary. Yet, in the vain pursuit of a perfect intelligence organization, do not shake up intelligence in a way that does

do harm—and in pursuit of this will of the wisp, damage, in particular, those military capabilities that we alone possess.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I shall be pleased to answer any questions that you or members of the Committee may have.