

The U.S. Can't Afford to Let Negroponte Fail

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Articles & Testimony

Later this week, the U.S. Senate is expected to confirm John Negroponte, President George W. Bush's nominee for the newly created position of director of national intelligence. In this new position, Negroponte will be responsible for managing the 15 agencies comprising the U.S. intelligence community. Despite having served both as the top U.S. official in Iraq and as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations—both difficult posts—Negroponte stated that serving as the director of national intelligence will be “the most challenging assignment I have undertaken in more than 40 years of government service.” It is a good sign that Negroponte does not underestimate the difficult challenges that lie ahead. Any serious effort to control the activities, priorities, and budget of the 15 U.S. intelligence community agencies, will undoubtedly meet resistance, particularly from the Department of Defense. While the early signs are encouraging, Negroponte will need strong and ongoing presidential support to succeed in this position. The lessons of September 11 illustrate that the U.S. cannot afford for him to fail.

The position of director of national intelligence was the centerpiece of the intelligence reform legislation passed in December 2004. The legislation was modeled on the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, which released its report in July 2004. Both the 9/11 Commission and the earlier Joint House-Senate 9/11 Intelligence Inquiry (“Joint Inquiry”) concluded at the end of their investigations that the intelligence community desperately needed a strong leader, and recommended the creation of a powerful national intelligence director, who was not also responsible for running the CIA.

While the director of central intelligence (DCI) has served as the nominal head of the intelligence community over the past nearly 60 years, in reality, the DCI has historically been more of a figurehead than an actual leader. In addition to his role as the head of the intelligence community, the DCI also served as the director of the CIA and as the President's principal intelligence adviser. The 9/11 Commission found that “no recent DCI has been able to do all three [jobs] effectively.” Most DCIs have been less focused on managing the intelligence community, and more involved in running the CIA and serving as the president's chief intelligence adviser. The Commission and the Joint Inquiry both found that the DCIs were also limited in their ability to lead the intelligence community because of their lack of authority to fulfill this role. As the Commission report noted, although the DCI was officially responsible for the intelligence community's performance, he did not have budgetary control, the ability to hire or fire senior managers, or the ability to set information infrastructure or personnel standards.

The September 11 story provides a number of vivid examples that illustrate the effect of having a relatively unempowered yet overburdened DCI. Both the 9/11 Commission and the Joint Inquiry found that DCI George Tenet did not succeed in his efforts to mobilize the intelligence community against Al-Qaeda prior to September 11. In 1998, in a sharply worded memorandum, Tenet declared “war” on Al-Qaeda and announced that he wanted no resources or people spared either in the CIA or in the intelligence community. Despite Tenet's strongly worded proclamation, however, the Commission and the Joint Inquiry found that rest of the intelligence community had not closed ranks in support of Tenet's declaration of war. The director of the National Security Agency—an agency under the purview of the Department of Defense—recalled receiving Tenet's declaration of war memorandum, but thought that the memo only applied to the CIA and not to the intelligence community at large. The Joint Inquiry and the

Commission both concluded that DCI Tenet's inability to realign intelligence community resources to combat Al-Qaeda was a relatively direct consequence of his limited authority.

In the spring of 2001, the threat reporting on a possible terrorist attack reached the highest level since the Millennium time period. By the summer of 2001, Tenet noted that the "system was blinking red" and "could not get any worse." Despite DCI Tenet's concern about an impending Al-Qaeda attack, the Commission found that the FBI was not focused adequately on combating international terrorism at the time, and there was little evidence that the FBI field offices had been mobilized in response to the heightened threat.

Negroponete's ability to succeed in leading the intelligence community where many others have failed will depend in large part on the extent to which he has the president's support. The early signs are good. Bush has announced that Negroponete will be responsible for preparing and delivering the president's daily intelligence briefing, and that Negroponete will have control of the intelligence community's budget and collection priorities.

In judging Negroponete's performance, most observers will focus on Negroponete's success in managing the inter-agency conflicts. Additionally, Negroponete's ability to take on the secretary of defense will be watched particularly closely, and any time he defers to the secretary of defense—even in the most insignificant situations—will likely be blown up and seen as an indicator of potential problems. While Negroponete's handling of these issues is essential, he should also ultimately be judged by whether he and his staff have the vision to anticipate new and emerging threats to U.S. national security and his ability to ensure that the intelligence community adapts quickly and appropriately to counter whatever this new threat might be.

While the intelligence community certainly is focused now on the threat from Al-Qaeda, and has shifted significant resources to combat this threat, the international jihadist movement has been adapting rapidly. The enemy that the U.S. faced on September 11 is different from the one we face today. If Negroponete, for example, becomes convinced that groups other than Al-Qaeda are now the primary threat, the question will be whether he has the ability to order the intelligence community—including the Department of Defense agencies—to make the necessary changes in focus and prioritization. And, if Negroponete determines that an intelligence community agency has essentially ignored his instructions, the focus will be on what power he possesses over the agency and its management to enforce his commands.

An even more difficult hypothetical situation for Negroponete (or his successor) will arise if, in the future, it becomes apparent to him that the international jihadist movements are no longer the primary threat to U.S. national security and that some other unrelated threat—perhaps Iranian or North Korean proliferation efforts—pose the greatest danger. If this occurs, will Negroponete have the ability and the authority to expeditiously force the intelligence community agencies to shift their focus and resources away from the international jihadist movements and toward this entirely different threat?

In all of these (hypothetical) situations, Negroponete's success will depend, not only on his vision in anticipating new threats to U.S. national security, but on whether the president is willing to support his efforts. The greater the change that Negroponete believes needs to be made, the more resistance he is likely to face from the intelligence community agencies, and consequently, the more important the president's support will become.

There have been recent media reports that agency heads including CIA Director Porter Goss and FBI Director Robert Mueller are welcoming Negroponete's arrival and are looking forward to working with him. While these reports—and the other early signs—are promising, the road ahead for Negroponete will be a difficult one to successfully navigate. Negroponete seems to understand the challenges that lie ahead, and he will undoubtedly need to draw on the lessons he has learned over his 40 year diplomatic career. Without the president's complete support, however, Negroponete is unlikely to succeed, regardless of his bureaucratic skills. Given the stakes at hand, the president should do

everything in his power to ensure that Negroponte has, at least a fighting chance of success in this difficult endeavor.

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