

U.S. Needs Longer-Term Plan on Terror

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Articles & Testimony

We are now 3½ years into the war on terror, with no end in sight.

It is time for the U.S. government to acknowledge that fact by thinking longer-term as it combats terrorism.

While not necessarily reducing the focus on the day-to-day efforts to prevent a recurrence of 9-11, the government needs to create the machinery to develop a strategy to win the war on terror in the long haul.

Though there has not been an attack within the continental United States since 9-11, Islamic terrorist groups continue to wreak havoc in many other parts of the world.

To date, the United States has had difficulty achieving the right balance between the tactical and the strategic, with the day-to-day demands frequently taking precedence over longer-term thinking and planning.

The president should create a group, headed by the newly appointed director of national intelligence, to assess what changes need to be made to improve the likelihood of long-term success.

Since 9-11, the United States has taken a very aggressive approach in pursuing individual terrorists and terrorist threats. This focus on the tactical aspects of counterterrorism goes to the highest levels of the U.S. government. Every morning, President Bush receives a secret intelligence briefing that includes details of the latest terrorist threats.

For nearly an hour each morning, counterterrorism tactics consume valuable Oval Office discussion time with the heads of the CIA, FBI and other senior officials. FBI Director Robert Mueller, in addition to his daily meeting with the president, also received twice-daily threat briefings. After 9-11, then-CIA Director George Tenet established daily afternoon meetings to coordinate tactical counterterrorism operations with other U.S. government agencies—a practice since changed by current Director Porter Goss.

Though tactical aggressiveness is an essential component of a successful counterterrorism strategy, it must be part of a broader, longer-term strategy. At this time, it appears that this fixation on the tactical side of counterterrorism has overly shaped President Bush's approach to the war on terror.

For example, he reportedly had a "scorecard" of the al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, which allowed him to keep track of who had been detained or killed. Subsequently, he referred to the fact that 75 percent of the al-Qaeda leaders had been captured or killed, which although presumably was accurate at the time, did not adequately reflect the fact that the strategic threat had changed significantly by that point.

The intelligence community's efforts to focus on the big picture have been hampered significantly by the fact that the head of the intelligence community—the director of central intelligence—was also the director of the CIA. These positions were each more than full-time jobs on their own, and it was difficult, if not impossible, to do both successfully. Not surprisingly, the day-to-day crises end up taking precedence over longer-term planning.

The United States has a good opportunity now, with the appointment of the first director of national intelligence—who is not also the CIA director—to make changes to its approach. The president should put the director of national

intelligence in charge of a high-level interagency group that focuses solely on whether we are winning the war on terror over the long term.

The group's mandate would be to assess whether we are effectively denying terrorists such assets as sanctuary, popular support, legitimacy, recruits and access. The group should have a broad focus, looking at what more could and should be done in the military, diplomatic, intelligence and law-enforcement arenas.

In fact, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld hinted at the need for such an effort in an October 2003 internal memo, in which he stated that the United States lacked metrics to know whether we were winning or losing the global war on terror. He went on to note that the United States was "putting relatively little effort into a long-range plan" but "putting a great deal of effort into trying to stop terrorists." In other words, there was too much focus on tactics and too little on strategy.

For this type of effort to succeed, the director of national intelligence will have to devise a comprehensive strategy, covering both the international and domestic arenas. Many different parts of the U.S. government will have important roles to play, and the strategy's success will hinge not only on the effectiveness of the departments of State and Defense in translating this message overseas, but on the ability of our domestic law-enforcement agencies to do so at home.

The law-enforcement agencies, such as the FBI and components of the Department of Homeland Security, must consider an important part of their mission not only to identify and pursue suspected terrorists, but to work with the Muslim communities to combat potential sources of radicalization for Muslim youth.

Putting the director of national intelligence in charge of this effort would have several advantages. First, it would send an important message to the rest of the intelligence community—and perhaps even more broadly—that the president is planning to rely heavily on the director of national intelligence for guidance in the war on terror. Second, the director of national intelligence will be well-positioned to conduct this type of review.

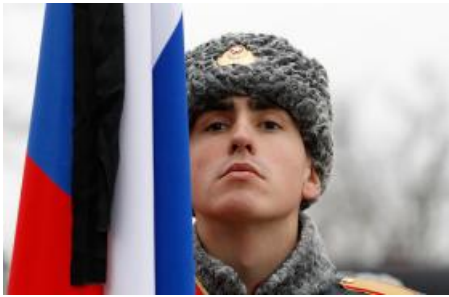
He will have regular access to the president—as his daily intelligence briefer—and will also have a broader role as the head of the intelligence community. By having this perspective on both the tactical and the strategic aspects of counterterrorism, he will be in a unique position to provide the president with advice on where the balance is and should lie. Finally, having the president and his top advisers involved in these types of discussions and decisions should send a powerful message to all agencies that long-term strategic planning is as integral to their missions as preventing the next attack.

President Bush has opened his second term with soaring rhetoric about the fight against tyranny and for freedom around the world. Having an interagency body led by the director of national intelligence that regularizes discussion about these issues—complementing the inevitable discussions about urgent threats and responses—will make sure the big picture remains a big part of every day.

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