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BEYOND GROUND ZERO: THE NEW INTELLIGENCE INFRASTRUCTURE

Six years after the fall of the World Trade Center towers, formerly independent law agencies have formed a cross-linked, information-sharing American substrata

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There is no question that Americans are safer in their offices, at home and in the air today than they were that terrible morning almost six years ago. Billions of dollars have been spent to reconfigure, broaden, strengthen and integrate the nation's security services. Laws facilitating integration of information and other resources have been passed. Federal, state, local and tribal law enforcement agencies are communicating on matters of national security with the understanding that every officer must now be an counterterrorist, and with obvious good reason.

In early August a sheriff's officer in South Carolina stopped a car with two men for speeding near a U.S. Navy base where enemy combatants have been held. After suspicious behavior by the passenger, the alert officer discovered pipe bombs in the car. Both men - now indicted on federal terrorism charges - turned out to be Egyptian engineering students at the University of South Florida, where jihadist supporters had previously been busted by the FBI.

The two Egyptians arrested in South Carolina are in the United States on student visas, even though one of them had been arrested in Egypt on terror-related charges. Had he disclosed that arrest, it is all but unimaginable that the U.S. consulate in Cairo would have granted the student visa.

Meanwhile, terrorist watch lists and tighter visa controls, although obviously less than perfect, are making it tougher for terrorists to hop a plane to America. Allied agencies are working with the United States more effectively than ever. Recent jihadist conspiracies - including a plot in Germany to bomb American soldiers, and a scheme in which terrorists would have hijacked transatlantic flights and turned them into suicide bombs - have been detected and stopped. Homeland Security is still feeling its way as an institution, but dedicated people are hard at work, and it shows.

The American intelligence community is almost unrecognizable from how it

looked and worked (and did not work) on that perfect, sunny day on the East Coast when al Qaeda operatives executed Osama bin Laden's plan by hijacking airplanes and flying them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In the run-up to those atrocities, there had been evidence of a conspiracy by al Qaeda to attack America. But antiquated laws limiting CIA-FBI information sharing - and an absence of resources that these agencies had repeatedly requested from Congress - seriously hindered the agencies' ability to mount an effective campaign against the jihadist elements that first attacked on American soil during the World Trade Center bombing of 1993. In fact, Congress was more interested in privacy rights than it was in facilitating an effective counterterrorism capability.

It would have been a lot easier in 2001, if the National Security Agency and the FBI had had enough Arabic and Urdu translators. They had very few, and that meant important, possibly actionable (this is where they are and what they intend to do, so go stop them now) intelligence literally sat on tape, untranslated for days, even weeks.

Today, FBI and CIA officers literally work side by side. They are joined by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Drug Enforcement Administration, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and military liaison officers, all under the same roof and often at the same console or desk within the National Counterterrorism Center.

Now it's a single American anti-terrorism team. If you're an agent conducting surveillance of a foreign-speaking terror suspect and you need a translator in real time, you will get the help you need, often immediately. If you're a supervisor at the CIA or FBI, and you are hoping for advancement, you had better get serious time in a joint command, or your career is going nowhere. The CIA and FBI have recruited hundreds of Arabic, Urdu and Farsi speakers.

These days, if an FBI agent learned of people training to fly jumbo jets but not land them, her report would ring so many bells up the chain of command that within minutes, senior managers of several agencies would just about trip over one another to order sophisticated surveillance followed by a swift takedown. The Patriot Act and other new laws allow decisive action that simply was not possible before the tragic events of Sept. 11. Officers from different agencies who rarely interacted are now colleagues and friends.

It isn't perfect, but it is undeniable that the anti-terrorism apparatus of the United States has been improved dramatically since Sept. 11, 2001, when defenders of our nation learned terrible lessons of helplessness and humility as hijacked planes in the hands of jihadist suicide pilots flew, unopposed, unstoppable, into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon.

Federal, state and local authorities are acutely aware that the enemy is morphing

on a daily basis and that America's security services must adapt as quickly or the next big attack could slip past them. That humility about what is not yet known but which must be discovered is another milestone in the rebuilding of the U.S. intelligence community and its credibility. Another milestone came in the form of a declassified report.

The recently released National Intelligence Estimate on the future of Iraq was a much-needed, fresh wind in a time of political fog and pollution generated by a long, messy war and by politicians on both sides of the issue. The report offered thoughtful analysis and blunt predictions on both the political future of Iraq (emphasizing the incompetence of Nouri al-Maliki's government) and the progress being made on the ground in some areas of the country by well-led U.S. Marines and Army troops.

With President Bush repeatedly declaring that al-Maliki has his full support, and with most Bush opponents claiming the military surge tactics are failing, the National Intelligence Estimate scorched the hands of both the administration and its most ideological critics in and out of Congress.

For the rest of the country, and for our allies, the National Intelligence Estimate was cause for genuine relief. The report demonstrates in the clearest imaginable terms that the system of intelligence collection and analysis is functioning untainted by political spin. After years of confidence-eroding doubt about whether the administration had abused the American intelligence community's analysis to make it appear the CIA completely supported the invasion of Iraq, it is evident that under the new management of the intelligence community, political spin of any kind is forbidden.

Bush saw the report on Iraq before it was released. Theoretically, he could have ordered Director of National Intelligence Adm. Mike McConnell to soften the report's critique of al-Maliki. Apparently, that did not happen. McConnell played a central role in getting Congress to pass the Protect America Act of 2007, which powerfully amended the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. Under the previous law, anytime a domestic phone or U.S.-located switching center was to be included in the targeting of a suspect communication originating overseas, it would cost an estimated 200 staff-hours of interpreters, analysts and lawyers just to present the case for a warrant.

Unfortunately, the government doesn't have Farsi, Arabic, Urdu and other translators and analysts to spare. So, pulling those people off the line to create the documentation that a judge needed for every intercept actually damaged the work of defending the country. Last month, it was revealed that McConnell had given the Department of Homeland Security access to spy satellites over the United States. That moved some professional civil liberties advocates to cry "police state," as they did over the intercepts.

That is the language of political hysteria. It helps raise funds from those who imagine an encroaching Big Brother instead of understanding the need for communications intercepts and real-time lockdown in a time of global jihad against Americans, their allies, and their interests. We refuse to cede to anyone the responsibility for guarding the Fourth Amendment's protections against unlawful searches. We, too, live in the United States of America, and do not want the government putting its nose into our private lives and would object strongly if it did.

But that is not what the satellites are going to be doing. Here is a probable scenario for domestic use of spy satellite systems: A group of men suspected of being part of a conspiracy to detonate a weapon of mass destruction is known to be arriving at a West Coast port along with crates of materiel, but what is not known is (a) their target and (b) the identity of their co-conspirators. To make sure they are not tipped off to our surveillance, impossible-to-detect satellite assets are focused on the group of men and their truck as they head inland. Teams of officers are in the air and in vehicles close to the suspects but far enough away to be invisible to the opposition. When the suspects link up with their co-conspirators at the location where the weapon is to be assembled, the teams of officers are dispatched to the location with pinpoint accuracy, achieving surprise and victory.

How that scenario endangers our Fourth Amendment rights is a mystery. What is abundantly clear is how it protects the very lives of all Americans. Spy satellites are only the newest advancement for keeping watch over public spaces. It wasn't so long ago that the only thing a constable on patrol (cop) could count on to aid his prevention of crime was his presence, and his own two eyes and ears as he patrolled his beat by foot, horse, bicycle or car. With modern closed-circuit television of the kind in constant use in London, every inch of observable public space is under watch. That has led to reductions in crimes against people on the streets and in the rapid solution of crimes, including the suicide bombings of July 7, 2005.

London's CCTV cameras do not point inside private homes or businesses, nor will spy satellite systems in this country. That would violate the Fourth Amendment. But anything visible from the street is fair game. It's got to be. With the anniversary of Sept. 11 upon us, we offer four urgent suggestions to local, state and federal authorities:

- Be aware of and take effective action against the recruitment of inmates in America to jihadist Islam by unmonitored official prison chaplains; most of those radicalized imams receive training and support from groups that identify with Osama bin Laden.
- Monitor, expose and request the immediate taking down of jihadist Web sites hosted by American-owned Internet service providers; the ISPs are usually unaware of the sites' recruiting and instructions for making bombs and

committing murder because they are written in Arabic and other foreign languages.

-- Train and deploy more well-equipped law-enforcement officers at airports and at other critical infrastructure facilities, which, by their nature, offer terrorists opportunities for creating shocking, high body-count atrocities and substantial economic damage to our nation.

-- Convene a White House conference on controlling the borders and get beyond political posturing to control who comes into this country.

The survival of those who cherish democracy and its institutions will depend on the effectiveness of intelligence. Today, it appears that the U.S. intelligence community, in direct support of law enforcement agencies and subject to the same legal restrictions, is on the right track.

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