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A playbook for John Negroponte

By Thomas J. Raleigh
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"Let's go back to Sen. Collins. You said that she was critical because we couldn't predict the size of the insurgency. That is the job for the intelligence community."

-- Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Feb. 6, to Tim Russert on *Meet The Press*.

This is a remarkable statement from the person who -- at that moment -- controlled 80 percent of the entire U.S. intelligence budget, and whose department continues today to be responsible for a huge share of day-to-day intelligence collection.

President Bush's decision late last month to adopt most of the recommendations of the Silberman-Robb Commission, including the creation of a National Security Service and a National Counter Proliferation Center, is a welcome development. However, his orders to date come up short with regard to reorganizing the intelligence structures within the Department of Defense.

According to press reports, U.S. officials said that the Defense Department (to include the Defense Intelligence Agency, the organization that relied so heavily on a bad source called "Curveball") would coordinate its clandestine missions with the CIA -- nothing more.

It is time for Washington to realize that the Defense Department's primary focus was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be raising armies and fighting wars -- not collecting intelligence. Rumsfeld's apparent detachment from the intelligence community, though troubling, is at the same time understandable; one person, one organization can do only so much.

It is odd that decision-makers in Washington do not recognize this and work to correct what essentially remain antiquated Cold War structures by relieving the department of most of its intelligence responsibilities.

It is exasperating that the one department most in need of intelligence reform is reform's leading obstructionist.

Those who predicted that John Negroponte, the director of national intelligence (DNI), would encounter significant challenges to his authority from the Department of Defense appear to have been right.

Even as he goes about the pedestrian but important chore of staffing his headquarters, Negroponte finds himself confronting Pentagon obstruction backed by at least one powerful ally in Congress.

Last month, Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., Chairman of the House Armed Service Committee, held up an intelligence authorization bill until the DNI met with him to discuss the transfer of personnel -- intelligence specialists -- from the Defense Department to Negroponte's new headquarters.

There is a clear distinction between oversight and meddling; Duncan's actions represent the latter.

The war against al Qaeda is, at its core, an intelligence war, one in which the traditional notion that intelligence supports operations is to a great degree reversed. The collection, analysis and dissemination of intelligence will soon become -- if it is not already -- the main effort in this fight.

The Defense Department itself acknowledges the new ascendancy of intelligence in an emerging doctrine, "fighting for intelligence," which envisions undertaking limited combat operations solely for the purpose of collecting intelligence. The idea sounds ominous to some but convincing to others, this writer included.

But the intelligence war cannot and will not be won by the Pentagon alone. It will be won only by the orchestrated and collective efforts of the entire intelligence community.

This first requires Negroonte to task-organize our intelligence forces, reorganizing and reallocating existing capabilities to best fight the next battle. The reform of Defense Department intelligence structures, which continue to represent most of the country's intelligence resources, is a *sine qua non* to reforming the intelligence community as a whole.

Lacking authority, and facing considerable resistance to change from the Pentagon, Negroonte, in order to break the cycle of obstruction, may consider countering Pentagon end runs with his own "Hail Mary."

Straight away, operating from the assumption that current departmental jurisdictions and responsibilities need not be maintained should more rational and efficient alternatives be available, Negroonte should prepare a straw man for a new intelligence institutional architecture.

Such a plan suggests stripping the National Security Agency and other technical collection agencies from the Defense Department and proposes creating a new umbrella headquarters to manage all national technical collection.

This would allow the Defense Department to focus on its core responsibilities: training, manning and equipping the armed forces, fighting the current war, planning for contingencies and -- in concert with other departments and agencies -- shaping the global strategic environment.

Were Negroonte to lay out his vision -- a new organizational paradigm for the intelligence forces -- at the start of the fall 2005 term, package his proposals in a draft "Intelligence Reorganization Bill" and present his case to the House and Senate Armed Services and Intelligence Committees, he probably would find a Congress receptive to his ideas, sympathetic to his need for broader authority and inclined to buy into substantive change and otherwise redress the shortcomings of the 2004 National Intelligence Reform Act.

This won't be the first time that Congress was called on to fix landmark legislation. More than 50 years ago, the U.S. defense community needed reorganization and reform as much as our intelligence community does today.

The National Security Act of 1947 abolished the War and Navy Departments, established the Air Force as a separate branch of service and created the Department of Defense.

However, the law proved to be lacking in providing the new secretary of defense with sufficient authority to run the Defense Department. The services routinely went to Congress when they disagreed with policy or program changes -- a situation that rings familiar today. In 1949, the law was amended to give the secretary of defense more power over the armed services.

The sweeping reforms that Negroponte needs to make within and among our intelligence forces demand analogous powers of creative destruction.

Absent meaningful and necessary consolidation and reorganization, even greatly improved inter-agency coordination will prove insufficient in overcoming the bureaucratic drag and inefficiencies inherent in the bloated, unwieldy Cold War structures that linger on -- especially at the Department of Defense.

Such structures are completely unsuited for the battle being fought today -- one in which victory will go to the swift and not necessarily to the strong.

Absent a fully empowered executive with supreme authority over policy, personnel and budgets, efforts to create a unified intelligence force will continue to founder on the shoals of inter-agency parochialism and rivalry.

The director of national intelligence needs as much authority -- clear and clean lines of command -- over the broad and disjointed intelligence community as the secretary of defense has over the defense community.

The legislation that Negroponte ought to propose may compel him to appear in the near future at yet another confirmation hearing -- one to confirm him as the first secretary of intelligence.

In the meantime, you can be certain about one thing: Al Qaeda operatives are not tied up in committee hearings and turf battles.

The tragic bombings in London bear this out.

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