

August 2nd, 2005

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## An Open Memo to the Homeland Security Secretary

August 2nd, 2005

A few weeks ago, when you announced your long-awaited reorganization of the Department of Homeland Security – including creation of a new Intelligence Division – the general reaction was a great big yawn. But the deadly terrorist attack in London on July 7, followed by that second (and mercifully failed) attack on July 21, have jolted Americans awake to the very real possibility of similar or even more deadly bombings here in the US. Now they understand why a new Homeland Intelligence Division is precisely what we need.

This memo is designed to help get the intelligence division going by outlining how to develop and “turn on” a *Homeland Threat Profile* that you and your key officials can use, both to monitor threats and to decide how best to allocate the Department’s people and money.

### Why Intelligence Fails

There are two parts to every intelligence service: collection and analysis. But when an intelligence service fails, it’s because one of three things went wrong. First, the collectors fail to collect what’s needed, in which case the analysts have nothing to work with. This, of course, is a collection failure. Second, the collectors do their jobs well, but the information they collect fails to reach the analysts. This would be a management failure. Third, the collectors do their jobs well and their information does indeed reach the analysts – who are unable to connect the dots and spot the pattern they form. This would be an analytic failure. Of course, there are variations of all this, and sometimes even combinations. But all intelligence failures fall into one of these three categories. (It’s unfortunate that the 9-11 Commission never got to the core of it, and was content to conclude that our intelligence service suffered a “systemic failure” without ever figuring out precisely which kind of failure took place.)

Most managers, when faced with the prospect of starting up an intelligence service, believe that the first step is to get the collectors collecting. In fact, this guarantees eventual failure because the collectors don't know what to collect. Without specific guidance, they will guess at what's wanted, or use their own judgment – sometimes very good, sometimes not – or just collect more of whatever it is they already are collecting and thus know how to collect.

In fact, it's the analysts who must take the first step. More precisely, the analysts must answer the question: *What do we want to know about?* In other words, they must tell the collectors what to collect. The document through which this is done is called an Intelligence Profile. Every organization has its unique *Intelligence Profile* – its unique outline of what its leaders need to know to accomplish their objectives -- and the more specific is this Profile, the more likely are the collectors to understand precisely what's wanted from them and thus to get it.

### ***The Homeland Threat Profile***

Start by listing those governments which pose a threat to our Homeland – e.g. North Korea and Iran. Then list those non-government organizations which pose a threat – e.g. al Qaeda. Add to this list any other entities, or individuals, who comprise a threat. The objective is to compile one list of all those governments, organizations and individuals which, if they ceased to exist, would leave no threat to our Homeland except natural disaster and invasion by aliens.

Then, *as precisely as possible* outline the specific kind of threat each of these governments, organizations and individuals pose. For instance, the threat from North Korea might be a nuclear-tipped missile lobbed across the Pacific into San Francisco or Seattle. The threat from al Qaeda might be another 9-11 type attack, a Madrid/London type attack, or the setting off of a radioactive device in one of our major cities.

The first trick is to separate capability from intention. For example, France has enough nuclear weapons, and the means to deliver them, to wipe out much of our Homeland. So a French nuclear attack is a theoretical possibility. But while Mark Twain had it absolutely correct – he said that “mankind is halfway between the angels and the French” -- this sort of attack just isn't going to happen, so France wouldn't be part of the Profile. On the other hand, North Korea and Iran may currently lack the operational capacity to hit us with nuclear weapons. But they are moving toward this capability, and nuking us is just the sort of thing these governments might do when they can. So these governments would be on the *Profile*.

The second trick is to separate imagination from intelligence. During the Reagan years, I doubt a week went by without some geo-strategic genius showing up in my office to outline some deviously brilliant move the Kremlin could make that would floor us – a diplomatic or military maneuver, for instance, or a covert action. My first response was to call an emergency meeting to figure out how to block or counter this brilliant move. But over time I learned to think it through more carefully. Just because one of our geniuses can think up some deviously brilliant move by the Kremlin, doesn't mean one of the Kremlin's geniuses will think of it. More important, very often the deviously brilliant move, which really would be devastating to us, just wasn't the sort of thing that Kremlin leaders did. In other words, based on our knowledge of their past actions, of their nature and character, and of the incoming intelligence, it was highly unlikely, or just plain implausible, that the Kremlin actually would do what the genius was imagining they would do. Of course, this is always a judgment call and sometimes you really must prepare for the unexpected. (I had on my office wall a framed

quote from President Eisenhower that should be plastered all over the Department of Homeland Security's offices: "*The surest way to achieve strategic surprise is to do something absolutely stupid.*" It's true, and worth keeping in mind.) Still, the Profile should be based more on judgment, and on intelligence, than on imagination.

This *Homeland Threat Profile* should be as specific as possible, and while of course it will be modified over time the final draft is worth quite a bit of intellectual effort. It should be approved at the Department's highest level and perhaps even by the White House.

## Turning it On

With the *Profile* in hand, the next step is to bring the collectors on-board and get them moving. Intelligence collectors are among the hardest-working and most effective group of people I've ever known. But they hate it when you say to them, in effect: "You go collect, and if we're all lucky whatever you collect also happens to be what we analysts want to know." The *Homeland Threat Profile* outlines precisely what's needed, which means the collectors now have the road-map they always want but so rarely are given. The problem arises when the collectors read the *Profile* and discover that what's now wanted is different from what they have been collecting. Like all human beings, intelligence collectors don't like changing course. They just want to keep going; to keep collecting what they've been trained to collect, what they know how to collect, and what they are confident they can collect. When you ask them to change course, they tend to blow you off.

During the Reagan years this happened all the time. For decades the CIA's Directorate of Operations had – very properly – focused on the Soviet Union's strengths. They collected all they could on missiles, warheads, tanks, troops and so forth. But because we held a radically-different view of the Soviet economy, we wanted to know about Soviet vulnerabilities, such as that country's collapsing health-care system. (I've described all this in a series of essays published on *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial page and elsewhere, all available at my company's [website](#))

Ask a spook who has risked his life time and again sneaking onto missile launch-sites to start looting files from the Ministry of Health and you are lucky not to wind up head-first in your own burn basket. I often had to get help from Bill Casey himself, President Reagan's great Director of Central Intelligence, to re-orient the spooks' activities.

And even Bill, with all his "oomph," couldn't always make it work. Some collectors dug in their heels and resisted, hoping to outlast the current regime. And others simply weren't capable of learning a new skill-set, in which case we had to recruit a whole new team of spooks who knew how to loot medical reports but probably wouldn't know an ICBM from a cruise missile.

Getting the collectors going will be a special problem for the Department of Homeland Security, because the Department doesn't control the primary collectors. They are at the FBI and at the CIA. (Or whatever our foreign intelligence service is called these days; even I cannot figure it out.) This means the issue will need to be dealt with at the highest levels, which is another reason the *Homeland Threat Profile* should be approved at the top.

The objective is to match each specific item on the *Profile* with a specific collection unit, or even with a

specific individual. For example, it's probably the FBI that will monitor terrorist groups within the US, while the CIA or one of those new counter-terrorism threat centers will monitor al Qaeda overseas. If the *Profile* requires intelligence about North Korea's nuclear capability, whatever unit and individuals will be doing that also need to be identified, or assigned to the task. And if there is an item on the *Profile* for which no unit or individual in our government is currently gathering intelligence, this will become apparent so the gap can be filled by whichever official in whichever department or agency is responsible.

Do this right, and you have a *Homeland Threat Profile* that outlines what the Department needs to know, along with a very precise match of each item to its assigned collectors, along with a detailed grasp of where the gaps may lie.

### **Making the Profile GO**

To understand how to make the *Profile* "go," think for a moment of what happens if you have one television set in your living room, and now want a second set in your bedroom, hooked up to the same cable or satellite service. A technician shows up at your house, understands precisely where you want the second set placed in your bedroom, then crawls under your living room floor to splice into the cable, run it beneath the flooring to your bedroom, bring it up the bedroom wall and into a new outlet he's cut precisely behind the spot you've told him you want the new television to sit. It's a messy business, and there is nothing very glorious about it. But if the wiring job isn't done properly, your new television set won't work.

It's the same with intelligence. When you know which intelligence unit or individuals are collecting information about a specific item on the *Profile*, you must, so to speak, wire them to the analysts who are assigned to this item in the Department's new Intelligence division. In other words, there must be an agreed procedure through which the collected information is passed forward – not only how, but when and to whom. The collector and the analyst must be in touch and develop a working relationship.

Sometimes the collector will come across something he or she thinks is relevant but isn't sure. Now this collector can call the analyst directly, and informally, to chat about it over a cup of coffee and figure out whether the new bit of intelligence is irrelevant – or vital. Sometimes the analyst will have a new idea, or read something that makes him want to ever-so-slightly re-orient a specific collector or collection unit. If they're wired together, it's easy for the analyst to raise the issue informally and either get it resolved or know there's a problem that must be brought to a higher level.

In other words, the collectors must know not only *what* is wanted of them, but also *who* wants it. Telling collectors to "just ship whatever you've got over to us" doesn't work, because all too often they have questions to ask about what they've collected. And you cannot get an answer from a building; you get it from a human being. So each collector, or collection unit, needs an office, a name, a telephone number and perhaps an email address to work with.

I have a strong suspicion that the failure to wire things up properly lies at the core of the 9-11 failure. When those FBI agents in Minneapolis and Phoenix discovered that single men from the Mideast were paying cash for flying lessons, they had no specific CIA officials to alert or even to talk with; all the FBI agents could do was write it up and toss their reports into their out-boxes and hope that someone, somewhere, would notice – which, of course, never happens. The 9-11 Commission's failure to delve deeply into the wiring issue really is

distressing.

Since wiring the collectors to the analysts is crucial, people often wonder why it's rarely done. The answer is that – well, Washington is Washington. The officials who have the authority to actually make it happen deem themselves too important to crawl beneath the floor boards. They are too busy setting strategy, holding meetings, giving speeches and testifying before Congress. Besides, wiring is messy work and not very interesting to talk about at Georgetown dinner parties. Unfortunately, it's crucial. (Bill Casey, who couldn't operate a two-button telephone, was in fact a superb wiring technician. When I got stuck he would, so to speak, grab the pliers from my hands and do the job himself. It was embarrassing – and also very, very impressive.)

### **A Radar in your Cockpit**

What all this gets you and your key officials is – metaphorically if not literally – an icon on your computer desktops labeled *Homeland Threat Profile*. Double-click – any time, from any where – and what pops on-screen is the actual, real-time status of the Homeland threat. It's all in one place, usefully organized, so you and your key officials can literally see the environment through which you are moving. It's the radar in the cockpit of the 747. The job of the new Intelligence division now is obvious: to monitor the *Homeland Threat Profile*, to modify and update the *Profile* as needed, and to assure that you and your top officials are alerted to any changes or new developments that require your immediate attention.

If this is done properly, you and the Under Secretary – like the 747 captain and his co-pilot – will be set to use your judgment, experience and skill to make the decisions only you can make in light of the current, real-time situation. After all, the purpose of any intelligence service is to illuminate the future early enough, and clearly enough, so that those in charge can change the future before it happens.

In a broader sense, the *Homeland Threat Profile* provides the Department with an intellectually solid, intelligence-based rationale for its allocations of people and money. For instance, if the *Profile* judges that al Qaeda prefers to attack large metropolitan areas rather than small ones, now there's a reason to spend more money defending Chicago than Topeka; one which can be defended against an onslaught from – to pick an example at random – the senior Senator from Kansas. On the other hand, if the judgment that Chicago is a more likely target than Topeka is based on imagination more than on hard intelligence, either the allocation really is open to argument or must be based on another reason, such as the number of probable casualties. And – most important of all – if the judgment is based solely on imagination you now know precisely what intelligence gap must be filled.

Intelligence by nature is a sloppy and risky business. No one gets it right all the time, and the cost of failure is huge. By establishing a *Homeland Threat Profile*, turning it on, wiring it up and making it “go,” you wrench order from chaos and thus increase the chances of success.

One final, rather personal point: My intention was to send this memo to you privately. Since I have no way of reaching you directly, I sent the memo to two well-connected contacts in Washington and asked for their help in getting it onto your desk. That didn't work, which is why I've turned to this “Open Memo” format in hopes of, so to speak, leaping over a wall I cannot breach. Oddly, while waiting for word from my Washington contacts, three former colleagues of mine from the Reagan administration separately got in touch with me.

Each had a piece of information he felt strongly should be sent to key officials of the Bush administration – two of these items were intelligence-related, and the third dealt with another subject entirely – and none of the three had been able to make contact. They were hoping I had a way in.

Perhaps we're just a bunch of has-beens looking for some action. Or perhaps -- with all respect, Mr. Secretary -- there's a worrisome pattern emerging here. Namely, that this administration is becoming a hermetically-sealed box. An administration generally, and its intelligence service in particular, should be sealed off to its enemies – but open to its friends. Please make a special effort to assure that when the new Intelligence Division is up and running, its leaders don't surround themselves with a bunch of officious, know-it-all munchkins who control what, and who, gets through to them.

I hope this memo is helpful, and I wish you and your colleagues good luck and Godspeed in your work to protect us all.

Respectfully yours,

Herbert E. Meyer

*Herbert E. Meyer served during the Reagan Administration as Special Assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence and Vice Chairman of the CIA's National Intelligence Council. His DVD on [The Siege of Western Civilization](#) has become an international best-seller.*

***Herbert E. Meyer***

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