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Why Intelligence Keeps Failing

By [Herbert E. Meyer](#)

In the wake of our country's latest intelligence failure -- allowing a Nigerian terrorist to board Northwest Airlines Flight 253 from Amsterdam to Detroit *when his own father had alerted us to the dangers posed by his son* -- President Obama demands to know why our intelligence service failed to "connect the dots."

So he's ordered investigations led by the very same officials who presided over our country's intelligence failures. That would be John Brennan, the president's counter-terrorism adviser whose job it was to keep Umar Abdulmutallab from boarding that flight, and John McLaughlin, the hapless, now-retired career CIA official who, as deputy director of the CIA and then as acting director, signed off on the two most screwed-up National Intelligence Estimates in our country's history: the NIE about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and then that preposterous 2007 NIE which concluded that Iran had abandoned its quest for nuclear weapons.

There isn't a chance that these clowns will come up with the right answer, because they're the problem. Simply put, the reason our intelligence service keeps failing to connect the dots is because the officials in charge don't know how. And the blame lies squarely with President Obama -- and alas, with President George W. Bush before him -- for appointing managers rather than dot-connectors to run our intelligence service.

To understand why the absence of dot-connectors at the top lies at the core of our intelligence failures, you must understand the relationship between management and talent.

In most organizations, failure or success depends on the quality of management. That's why in the business world, competent chief executives are so highly compensated; they're rare, and they're worth every penny they're paid. But there are some highly specialized organizations in which failure or success depends not so much on the quality of management or the structure of the organization, but on talent. For example, an opera company. You can have the best manager in the history of the performing arts, but if you're staging *La Bohème*, then you'd better put two superstars like Anna Netrebko and Rolando Villazón on the stage, or you'll have a flop on your hands. Likewise with a scientific research institute: It isn't the administrator setting budgets, monitoring grants, and assigning parking spaces who will find the cure for cancer. It's the world-class scientists working in the labs.

Talent at the Top

And if you're running one of these specialized organizations whose success depends more on talent than on management, then you put a talented individual in charge. First, he or she can actually do the job, rather than run around looking important while managing people, who in turn manage other people, who themselves manage the people who are actually doing the job. Second, he or she will be able to recognize and recruit other talented people. This is why organizations whose success depends on talent tend to be led by people who themselves have it and have proven that they have it. For example, the Washington National Opera's general manager is the great tenor Plácido Domingo. The president of Rockefeller University is Paul Nurse, himself a Nobel laureate in biology.

An intelligence service is one of these highly specialized organizations whose success depends more on

talent than on management. And the precise talent that an intelligence service needs is the ability to connect dots -- to spot a pattern with the fewest possible facts -- not only to intuitively grasp what lies in the future, but to grasp it soon enough, and clearly enough, so that there's time to change the future before it happens.

We used to understand this. Our country's World War II intelligence service, the Office of Strategic Services, was led by William J. Donovan. He was a brilliant Wall Street lawyer with a razor-sharp analytic mind and a talent for spotting talent. For example, when all the experts told Donovan that it was impossible to get spies into Nazi Germany, he gave the job to a young tax attorney he'd worked with who seemed to have a knack for accomplishing impossible things. His name was William J. Casey, and from his base in London as head of secret operations for the OSS, he organized 103 missions behind Nazi lines. The OSS was perhaps the greatest intelligence service in world history, and its roster of stars included Arthur J. Goldberg -- later President Kennedy's secretary of labor, Supreme Court justice, and U.N. ambassador -- and even Julia Child.

After the war, we formed the CIA, and among its great directors were Allen Dulles, John McCone, and Bill Casey himself during the Reagan administration. These were men of enormous intellectual firepower. Time and again, they saw the future before anyone else could, and they spotted patterns when everyone else saw dots. I had the great privilege of serving under Bill Casey -- I was among those few people he brought into the CIA to help redirect the agency's analysis. Here's my favorite story of Bill's extraordinary talent for connecting dots:

On the day the Soviet Union's long-time leader Leonid Brezhnev died, the CIA went into massive overdrive to analyze what his death might mean for U.S.-Soviet relations -- and more importantly, who might emerge as the Kremlin's next boss. Top-secret telexes were pouring in from CIA stations around the world, and throughout the building, analysts were churning out reports and sending them up to the director's seventh-floor office. By late afternoon, there was literally no more room on Bill's massive desk for another document, and his secretary started making piles on the floor.

Boiling It Down for Reagan

At about 6pm, when I walked into Bill's office to ask if there was anything he wanted me to do, he was leaning back in his swivel chair, calmly writing on a yellow pad. "Just leave me alone for a few minutes," he said, pointing with his pen at the piles of paper. "I want to boil all this down for the president."

A few minutes later, he called me back into his office and handed me a typed copy of his note to President Reagan. It was a short, informal, but amazingly comprehensive summary of what we knew about the goings-on in Moscow -- and it ended with what may be the breeziest and most brilliant prediction in the history of intelligence: "As for me, Mr. President, I bet Andropov on the nose and Gorbachev across the board."

Now you can see why President Reagan was so fond of the man he liked to call "Director Bill." A president wants one thing from his intelligence service, and that's to connect the dots and get it right -- to tell the president the future. And how do you get an intelligence service that can connect the dots? You put a world-class dot-connector in charge of it.

Our country has no shortage of world-class dot-connectors. They're in politics, in business, at think tanks, in the academic world, and at our leading research institutes. You catch glimpses of them in articles they write, speeches they give -- and sometimes even as talking heads on television. Ask a dozen smart people to make lists of people they consider to be world-class dot-connectors, and you'll get a wide range of names, some of which will appear on more than one list. Now, do you really believe that any of these lists will include, say, counter-intelligence chief John Brennan, or CIA director Leon Panetta, or Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, or Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair? Are you kidding?

No one among us is perfect, or even close to perfect. In the real world, intelligence failures will happen from time to time no matter how honorable, hardworking, or talented the men and women are on whom we rely to keep us safe. But after so many intelligence failures in such a short time, we have got to stop making the same mistake over and over again. This week's Washington cliché is that our system failed. No. Systems don't fail; people fail. Put the right people in charge, and the "system" will fail much, *much* less frequently.

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