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A talent for intelligence

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If your objective were to place a beacon atop a mountain, would you:

- A: Get a beacon and place it atop the mountain, or
- B: Get a beacon, suspend it in mid-air near the mountain using poles, wires and helicopters, then shove the mountain under the beacon?

If you chose Option A, you should consider a career in the private sector, where common sense often is rewarded. If you chose Option B – your future lies in Washington. For this is precisely the approach the Bush administration and Congress have taken to fix our country's broken intelligence service and get it back into action. And no, I am not exaggerating.

After the 9-11 intelligence failure and the CIA's failure to provide an accurate picture of Iraq's weapons-of-mass-destruction program, official Washington concluded that the structure of our intelligence service lay at the core of these failures. More specifically, Congress and the Administration concluded that the Director of Central Intelligence lacked sufficient management authority over the 14 agencies other than the CIA itself that comprise our intelligence service, and that it was this lack of control over budgets and programs that led to poor coordination, which in turn led to all the failures. Assuming this were an accurate assessment of the problem – and keep in mind that this lack of budget and program authority never kept great DCIs like Allen Dulles, John McCone and William Casey from doing the job brilliantly – the obvious solution would be to enhance the DCI's authority through a combination of executive orders and legislative reorganization, then appoint a new DCI to take charge.

Moving the Mountain

Instead, after two presidential commissions and a half-dozen Congressional inquiries, the Administration and Congress decided to create a new position of Director of National Intelligence (DNI), to sit on top of the DCI. He will be supported by a Deputy Director of National Intelligence, and an associate director who will serve as chief-of-staff. But since the new DNI and his two aides would be suspended in mid-air, so to speak, several positions that had been in the DCI's office have now been shifted to the DNI's office. These include a Deputy Director for Management, another Deputy Director for Collection, a third for Analysis, and a fourth to be in charge of "customer service." (This last one sounds like a job more appropriate for an executive at a cell-

phone provider than for one at an intelligence service. What's the poor guy supposed to do – run around Washington assuring that key consumers of intelligence are happy and not thinking of switching their accounts to another country's intelligence service?) It's envisaged that up to 1,000 officials will be required to support this new bureaucracy, and rather than locate the DNI and all these people at CIA headquarters – from which most of the 1,000 officials required for the new bureaucracy will be taken – they will be housed at Bolling Air Force Base, just outside Washington DC, until permanent headquarters can be established somewhere else.

Putting aside the sheer fecklessness of all this reorganizing – and the cost, time and energy it drains from the business of actually doing intelligence -- the real problem is that by focusing on structure rather than on people, we are building a new intelligence service that won't be better than the one it replaces. That's because it emphasizes management over talent. Once you grasp how this combination works, you will understand why our country's intelligence service has sometimes been razor-sharp and playing offense, and other times has just stumbled along behind the curve.

For most organizations, failure or success depends upon the quality of management. But there are some highly-specialized organizations in which failure or success depends not so much on the quality of management, but on talent. For example, a baseball team. You can have the best manager in the history of baseball, but if you don't put nine ballplayers on the field who can out-hit, out-pitch, and out-hustle every other team in the league you cannot win the World Series. 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 their labs who'll get the job done.

It's the same with an intelligence service. Of course you need someone in charge and a bureaucracy to support him. But if you don't have the world's best analysts and spies -- you lose.

We used to understand this. As the U.S. geared up for World War II, President Roosevelt set up the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and chose as its leader a Wall Street lawyer named William J. Donovan. Known as "Wild Bill" – and for good reason – Donovan didn't tell FDR that he needed ten years to get the new intelligence service up and running. For one thing, Donovan knew that without a first-class intelligence service we would lose the war in less time than that. Besides, he didn't need ten years to get the OSS into action because Donovan had the one quality leaders of highly-specialized organizations like baseball teams, research labs – and intelligence services -- must have to succeed: a talent for spotting and harnessing talent.

Donovan scrambled to recruit men and women from across the country who all had the very specific combination of qualities you need to make an intelligence service "go": the brains to figure things out fast, the street-smarts to invent solutions on the fly, an under-developed sense of fear, and the self-confidence (often mistaken for arrogance) to believe you can make things happen that others insist cannot be done. For example, when the intelligence "professionals" in Washington and London told Donovan that infiltrating spies into the Third Reich was impossible, Donovan gave the job to a young New York tax attorney named William J. Casey. By the time Hitler was dead in his Berlin bunker, Casey had organized and run 103 missions behind Nazi lines. Donovan's search for talent took him into the business community, the academic world, and into the country's leading scientific and technical establishments. He even recruited some brainy and gutsy debutantes, whose escapades and analytic achievements still haven't been fully declassified.

The Brooklyn Bombshell

The OSS broke a lot of bureaucratic furniture along the way, and occasionally a few rules, but it became the most effective intelligence organization in history. So of course when the war ended Congress insisted that the OSS be disbanded. Its veterans went on to build remarkable careers and generally to live interesting lives. Arthur Goldberg served in President Kennedy's cabinet as Secretary of Labor, then became an associate justice of the US Supreme Court and finally Ambassador to the UN. One of the OSS's brightest jewels was a Brooklyn-born bombshell named Aline Griffith; after the war she returned to the continent she had helped liberate, married into the Spanish nobility and became La Condesa de Romanones. (Years later she published her memoirs, and so implausible were the OSS exploits she recounted that some reviewers mistakenly concluded that the book was fiction.)

When the US shortly found itself in a Cold War against the Soviet Union -- and, thanks to Congress, without an intelligence service -- we created the CIA. In its early years the CIA was a larger, more formal version of the OSS. That's because the first CIA directors had the good sense to lure OSS veterans back into top-level jobs, where they not only got things going fast but trained the next generation of intelligence officers. The momentum they created powered the CIA forward for the next 30 years. But by the mid-1970s the CIA had become muscle-bound and bureaucratic. It still had a few of the world's smartest analysts and most effective "can-do" operations officers, but they were anomalies and all too often they were pushed aside by the careerists who never made a mistake because they never took a risk. By 1980 the CIA had the look, feel and body language of an insurance company.

President Reagan understood that our intelligence service was in trouble, so he named as DCI his campaign manager, Bill Casey -- who as Wild Bill Donovan's OSS protégé had organized those 103 "impossible" missions behind Nazi lines. Just like his mentor, Bill Casey didn't tell the President he needed ten years to get our intelligence service back into action -- which would have gotten the CIA up and running halfway through George H.W. Bush's presidency. Instead, Casey did something that to this day almost no one in Washington understands. He created an OSS within the CIA. In other words, very quietly he reached out to Wall Street, the business community, to Silicon Valley, to the academic world, and to our country's leading technical and scientific establishments and recruited a team of analysts and "doers" who could figure things out fast and make things happen. And, with his talent for spotting talent, Casey plucked from the CIA's bureaucracy those analysts and operations officers who were just waiting for the chance to show what they were capable of doing.

It was quite a ride. Virtually overnight the CIA was back in business, and hardly a week went by without Casey being hauled before one Congressional committee or another because its members were "outraged" or "horrified" by some leaked CIA analysis that challenged the conventional wisdom, or by some overseas operation that had gone wrong and had kicked up a diplomatic storm. And while the President worked his magic to smooth ruffled feathers in Washington -- with invaluable help from the great Rep. Henry Hyde, without whose support Casey probably couldn't have survived -- throughout the world awkward things started happening to our country's enemies.

In Central America the Sandinistas' plans to destabilize that region with the help of Cuba's Fidel Castro started to backfire, and before long the astonished Sandinistas had even lost their grip on Nicaragua itself. In Poland martial law had been declared, Solidarity's leaders had been arrested and the Russians were slowly strangling the illegal trade union. But somehow the Solidarity leaders who were still at large had all the printing presses, paper and ink they needed to keep things going while Reagan, Prime Minister Thatcher and of course Pope John Paul II worked at a somewhat higher altitude to yank Poland out of the Russians' grasp. In Afghanistan Soviet helicopters were being blown out of the sky by surface-to-air missiles the mujahadeen freedom-fighters

weren't supposed to have. And in Moscow the KGB, which for years had plotted successfully to steal western technology the Soviet Union desperately needed to support its weapons programs, simply couldn't understand why the flow of technology had slowed to a trickle – and why some of the stuff they did manage to get either didn't work, or blew up in their faces.

By the time a mortally-ill Bill Casey was carried from his office on a stretcher – literally – the Soviet Union was on its knees. But Washington is a town where failure causes such panic that success goes unnoticed. (Congress would have pulled Babe Ruth from the Yankees' starting line-up because the great slugger struck out so often.) So Casey's departure brought a bigger sigh of relief on Capitol Hill, and even at the State Department, than in the Kremlin. For most of the next 15 years the CIA was managed by bureaucrats whose objective simply was to not cause trouble, and our country itself went on a holiday from history that ended catastrophically on September 11, 2001.

A Time for Talent

If there were ever a time when we needed an intelligence service that was light on bureaucracy and heavy on talent – this is it. Taking on al Qaeda and all the other terrorist networks, stabilizing Iraq, dealing with Iran, Syria and North Korea – while also keeping a sharp eye on China's emergence as an oil-thirsty world power whose ageing leaders really, really want Taiwan, on Western Europe's growing demographic crisis, on Russia's petulance and growing instability, on Latin America's leftward swing, and on whatever other trouble may lie over the horizon – will require an intelligence service packed from the top down with men and women who have the brains to figure things out fast, the street-smarts to invent solutions on the fly, an underdeveloped sense of fear and the self-confidence to make “impossible” things happen every day.

As Bill Donovan and Bill Casey showed, our country has no shortage of such people. They are on Wall Street, in business, in the academic world, at think tanks, in Silicon Valley and Boston's Route 128. Make a list of the world's 100 leading geo-strategic analysts, and you will find that 70 are living within a ten-mile radius of the DNI's new office – and they know how to reach the other 30. And there are retired CIA operations officers living in California and even Costa Rica who would crawl back to Washington – in some cases dragging oxygen tanks – for one more shot at our country's enemies or even for the chance to pass on their skills and their knowledge to younger operations officers.

Yet the new DNI and his deputy both are career government officials. So are the three men and one woman already named to fill the jobs just beneath them. This will make it very difficult to recruit the kind of talented outsiders Donovan and Casey recruited – and remember, they were themselves outsiders. That's because talented outsiders aren't likely to quit whatever they are doing to take jobs three, four, or five levels down an org chart that's top-heavy with career bureaucrats, and in which they won't have the authority or elbow-room to move fast, sometimes make mistakes, figure out new approaches on the fly – and get the job done while the President smooths ruffled feathers and glues the broken furniture back together.

In the aftermath of 9-11, we had a chance to build a new intelligence service that looked like the OSS. Instead, we are building one that looks like General Motors. No doubt it will enjoy some successes, because the top-level officials are honorable and decent people who will be working very hard to protect our country. And they will be supported by some lower-level intelligence analysts and operations officers who really are world-class, and whose recent actions against al Qaeda have been very impressive. But it's clear from the structure of the new service, and from the personnel choices made thus far, that our new intelligence service is based on the

model that fails, rather than the one that succeeds.

Judging from all the telephone calls and emails flying around right now among intelligence veterans, the mood is one of disappointment and genuine concern. A common thread in all these conversations is that – alas -- it will take another horrific attack before the political will is there to create the kind of light, fast, razor-sharp intelligence service we used to have and now need. Perhaps. Or perhaps Washington has become so muscle-bound and partisan that even should Dallas, Chicago or another of our great cities become a pile of radioactive rubble its only response will be yet another Presidential commission which probably will conclude once again that “structure” was the problem -- and will recommend that we create a Director of Inter-Galactic Intelligence, to sit atop the Director of National Intelligence, who sits atop the Director of Central Intelligence.

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