Date: Thu, 07 Jan 2010 12:59:07 -0500
To: "Dr. Baruch Fischhoff - Chair, National Academy of Sciences Study on Social & Behavioral Science and Improving Intelligence for National Security" <baruch@cmu.edu>
From: Lloyd Etheredge <lloyd.etheredge@policyscience.net>

Subject: Wartime Scientific Advice - 1. National Academy field observations and Fwd: Karen DeYoung

Dear Dr. Fischhoff and Colleagues:

      I am forwarding an article, for your review and the public record, by Karen DeYoung in this morning's <u>Washington Post</u>. Ms. DeYoung's article underscores the relevance of many of the social science literatures that I brought to your attention in earlier messages [reference copies are available from Ms. Chauvin at the National Academy of Sciences/NRC and at www.policyscience.net].

      The advice of our national's leading social/behavior scientists, rendered via the National Academy process, also should include site visits, technical audits, and field observations of current databases and analytic methods - for example to the NCTC, Afghanistan, and the Mexican drug war. Drawing relevant advice from the scientific literature re better databases and methods depends, in part, on knowing the nature of the most important questions that databases and software are being designed to answer; and the evolving human systems in which new information technology is used.

      Ms. DeYoung's informants may be correct that the likely bureaucratic response will be to keep expanding the 550,000 global Watch List and to demand more information in every direction. Although counter-terrorism is only one part of your mandate, you might want to include an assessment of whether this likely response is the best priority.

      This is wartime.

Lloyd Etheredge

After attempted airline bombing, effectiveness of intelligence reforms questioned

By Karen DeYoung
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, January 7, 2010; A01

The failure of U.S. authorities to detect a plot to bomb a U.S. airliner on Christmas Day has reignited long-simmering concerns that intelligence reforms implemented five years ago remain inadequate to prevent terrorist attacks.

With disaster aboard Northwest Airlines Flight 253 averted by the bomb's malfunction, rather than by astute analysis of available information, some intelligence officials have suggested that the reforms were the cause of such lapses and not the solution to them.

President Obama has not singled out anyone for blame and has said that everyone involved has "taken responsibility" for their shortfalls. But the most intense scrutiny has been directed toward the centerpiece of the 2004 intelligence reorganization: the National Counterterrorism Center.

The NCTC and its parent, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), were created to force the 16-agency intelligence community to share information in ways that eluded it leading up to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. As the central repository for "all-source" intelligence on international terrorism, the NCTC is tasked with connecting the dots and advising the government on threats.

If dots were not connected concerning the airline bombing allegedly attempted by Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab on behalf of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Obama "knows where to look" for the culprit, said one intelligence official who, like many others across the intelligence community, is worried about where the blame will fall and appeared anxious to direct it elsewhere, but would address the subject only on the condition of anonymity.

Other intelligence officials defended the NCTC, countering that some agencies appear less interested in fixing the problems than in concealing their own failure to interpret and flag information they had that might have prevented the holiday incident.

"Anyone who believes that a relatively small organization like NCTC is going to connect every electron in each of those 30 databases is either disingenuous or naive, and certainly knows very little about how intelligence analysis actually works," said a second official who was similarly reluctant to speak for attribution.

In a statement released Saturday, NCTC Director Michael E. Leiter said that al-Qaeda continues "to refine their methods to test our defenses" and that thwarting the group is "our most sacred responsibility." After Obama said Tuesday that "the system failed," Director of National Intelligence Dennis C. Blair released a statement saying that the intelligence community "got" the president's message and acknowledged failure.

Regardless of where fault is ultimately assessed, several officials and experts said the failure to uncover the plot confirmed fears that the massive amounts of terrorism-related information being gathered since the 2001 attacks might outgrow the capacity to manage it. The CIA, the FBI, the military, and numerous Cabinet departments and independent agencies are flooded every day with new data from the field that is available to the NCTC.

"The single biggest worry that I have is long-term quality control," Russell E. Travers, in charge of the NCTC database of terrorism "entities," said in a 2007 interview as his list topped 400,000 and continued to expand. "Where am I going to be, where is my successor going to be, five years down the road?"

Travers is still there, and the database has grown to about 550,000. Beyond connecting the dots, "the challenge we now face is that we are collecting so much information," Rep. Peter Hoekstra (Mich.) said last week of the system he helped devise as the top Republican on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

Former New Jersey governor Thomas H. Kean (R), co-chairman of the 9/11 Commission, which first proposed the reorganization, said the solution was not reducing the powers of the DNI and the NCTC but enhancing them. "Does the DNI have the proper tools?" he asked in an interview. "Does the DNI need to be strengthened?"

"We're not going to be so lucky next time," Kean said.

Others have drawn the opposite lesson from the failure. The CIA -- which lost its position as head of the intelligence community and analyst of all-source intelligence in the reorganization, as well as its direct role as intelligence adviser to the president -- has barely restrained itself from shouting, "We told you so."

After the Sept. 11 attacks, the federal government was radically restructured to emphasize counterterrorism, with new agencies and divisions established. Twenty-two other domestic agencies were combined under a new Homeland Security Department.

The government's intelligence components were placed under the new umbrella of the DNI after the 9/11 Commission inquiry and other investigations determined that the cultural and electronic firewalls between them had prevented information-sharing in the days before the 2001 attacks. Under the new system, agencies were restricted largely to intelligence-gathering and instructed to contribute analysts to rotating duty at the NCTC. Intelligence officials at the CIA and other agencies argued against separating collection from analysis.

At NCTC headquarters, in a massive office building not far from CIA headquarters in Langley, analysts from the CIA and FBI; the Defense Intelligence Agency and others under the Pentagon umbrella; the departments of State, Homeland Security, Treasury and Energy; and other subsidiary agencies such as the drug enforcement and transportation security administrations sift through raw and processed intelligence.

In agency-integrated teams assigned by subject matter and geography, they turn out reports disseminated to thousands of policy and intelligence officials across the government. Agency representatives sit around a table three times daily -- at 8 a.m., 3 p.m. and 1 a.m. -- to update the nation's threat matrix.

A smaller group of analysts maintains the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment, or TIDE, the entities database into which thousands of pieces of intelligence information about terrorism suspects from around the world are downloaded each day. Every evening, TIDE dumps what it deems the most important of the day's gleanings into a separate database at the FBI-run Terrorist Screening Center -- a master watch list that is used to determine who is not allowed to obtain a U.S. visa, cross a U.S. border, or board an airliner in or destined for the United States.

The failures that might have uncovered the Christmas plot occurred when analysts

failed to connect a Nov. 20 cable from the U.S. Embassy in Nigeria, reporting a visit in which Abdulmutallab's father expressed concern that his 23-year-old son had fallen in with extremists in Yemen, with intelligence last summer and fall about an al-Qaeda plot.

The intelligence included communications intercepted by the National Security Agency indicating that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was planning a holiday attack and referred to a Nigerian being groomed for the mission. At least part of Abdulmutallab's name was thought to be included in the communications.

It is unclear whether the NSA, in the parlance of the community, "formally disseminated" the information in the intercepts to the NCTC or others. Although initial reform plans to combine all intelligence databases into a one-stop searchable system remain incomplete, NSA databases are available to NCTC analysts, as is the CIA database, in which agents began compiling a biography of Abdulmutallab after his father visited the embassy.

Some of the finger-pointing centers on claims and counterclaims about who should have flagged what for others to pay attention to and who should have looked where without being prompted. Travers, the TIDE chief who also serves as deputy director of the NCTC, predicted the problem even earlier than his 2007 expression of concern about the volume of terrorist information.

"If an organization posts something to its webpage, it can claim to have shared information," he wrote in the forward to a 2005 book published by the Joint Military Intelligence College. "Whether the right people know the information/analysis is there, and actually make use of it, is entirely another matter.

"Indeed, we'll almost certainly be dealing with precisely this problem in the post mortems of our next intelligence failure; the relevant intelligence will have been posted, but the right analysts never found it among the terabytes of available information."

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