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Christmas Day Terror Plot Highlights Need to Sharpen Intelligence System

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The post-mortem on the attempted airline terrorist attack on December 25, 2009, demonstrates the importance of continually honing and refining U.S. intelligence capabilities and systems to meet ongoing terrorist threats. President Obama should ensure that American domestic and foreign intelligence agencies as well as U.S. military, diplomats, and domestic law enforcement agencies remain on a war footing in order to prevent future terrorist catastrophes.

President Obama was right to repeat yesterday that the U.S. is at “war” with al-Qaeda and to speak forthrightly about the group’s hateful, cult-like ideology that promotes only destruction and the murder of innocents throughout the world, mostly Muslims. Engaging in the battle of ideas by continually asserting America’s vision of support for religious pluralism and respect for individual freedom and human life and dignity should be a cornerstone of U.S. efforts to resist al-Qaeda’s agenda.

Empower Intelligence Analysts. In the case of the Detroit bomb plot, the intelligence system failed to work effectively. The White House acknowledges a failure to “connect the dots” as well as “human errors,” such as the delayed dissemination of a finished intelligence report.¹ What is most surprising, though, is the acknowledgement that “[n]o single component of the CT [counterterrorism] community assumed responsibility for the threat reporting and followed it through by ensuring that all necessary steps were taken to disrupt the threat.”

As President Obama put it, the intelligence community did not “prioritize streams of intelligence.”² The intelligence apparatus simply moved too slowly, and some staff failed to attach sufficient urgency to key bits of information, especially a tip from the attacker’s father given to the U.S. embassy in Nigeria in late November about his son’s radicalization and ties to Yemen. The father’s visit to the embassy should have raised a major red flag and provoked action. It is troubling that eight years after 9/11 and despite a significant re-organization of the intelligence community, such oversight could occur. The report goes on to recommend a new “process” to track terrorist threat reporting.

But perhaps instead of a new bureaucratic process to deal with the problem, the intelligence community should consider something more simple and fundamental: empowering intelligence analysts to be more proactive and urgent with their work.

Too often when faced with complex problems in the intelligence community, the answer becomes throwing more people or resources at the problem or implementing a new bureaucratic process. But merely putting more people on a problem can

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backfire by sapping the experts' initiative and ability to make sharp and instinctual calls based on their knowledge and background. Sometimes it is more effective to put a handful of the best and brightest on a problem and then empower them to take action. It is peoples' resourcefulness and ingenuity that will stop the next terrorist attack, not a bureaucratic process—and certainly not groupthink, which often results when too many people focus on an esoteric issue.

Even as President Obama and his senior advisors seek to hone the U.S. intelligence apparatus, they should remind the American public about the successful intelligence operations that have prevented numerous terrorist attacks over the last eight years. It also bears acknowledging that U.S. intelligence operatives are putting their lives on the line daily to protect their fellow Americans. This fact was sadly driven home by the tragic attack on the CIA base in Afghanistan on December 30.

Dealing with Terror Suspects. There are also major questions being raised about how the would-be Detroit bomber was classified after he was arrested and whether intelligence authorities were able to gather as much information as possible from him to prevent future terror attacks.

It is important to garner as much information as soon as possible from terrorism suspects and not treat them merely as regular criminals. Holding the suspect as an unprivileged belligerent or enemy combatant is authorized and lawful. Detaining and questioning him at first as an unprivileged

belligerent gives the government the flexibility it needs and does not foreclose a prosecution in the future in military or federal court.

Forthrightness Needed. President Obama was right to admit the U.S. is at war with al-Qaeda. But he should match that statement with actions at home and abroad. In this regard, he should strengthen and make permanent all current provisions in the PATRIOT Act; make clear that the U.S. will remain committed to stabilizing Afghanistan and not allow al-Qaeda to again find safe haven in that country; and empower and equip the U.S. intelligence community with the tools and resources it needs to fight terrorism.

Standing strong against al-Qaeda's nihilistic ideology and asserting America's world vision will also be a key element in countering the terrorists' agenda. The Administration should always be as clear and forthright as the President was yesterday on the realities of the war America is fighting against terrorists, and not only when it is lucky enough to have thwarted one of their many attempted attacks.

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1. Press release, "White House Review Summary Regarding 12/25/2009 Attempted Terrorist Attack," White House, January 7, 2009, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/white-house-review-summary-regarding-12252009-attempted-terrorist-attack> (January 8, 2010).
2. David Jackson, "Obama: I'm Responsible for Christmas Day Security Failures," USA Today.com, January 7, 2010, at <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/theoval/post/2010/01/obama-im-responsible-for-christmas-day-security-failures/1> (January 8, 2010).