



Intelligence Experts Looking at Ways to Make Changes to the Intelligence Community

Morning Edition: June 4, 2004

STEVE INSKEEP, host:

In addition to George Tenet, the CIA's deputy director of operations is announcing his retirement today. James Pavitt is responsible for the division that manages case officers and spies around the world and his retirement may not be the only change coming. Intelligence experts all over Washington want to tinker with what's often called the intelligence community, but as NPR's Larry Abramson reports, the community may not want to go along.

LARRY ABRAMSON reporting:

First in line to get under the hood of the intelligence agencies will be the 9-11 Commission which releases its report next month. There are a number of indications the commission will recommend deeper reforms than a simple change at the top. Commissioner Tim Roemer.

Commissioner TIM ROEMER (9-11 Commission): Director Tenet's decision will virtually have no impact on our 9/11 report. We are focused on structure, on systems and reform, not on personnel decisions.

ABRAMSON: During hearings in April, the commission credited Tenet with trying to sound the alarm about al-Qaeda before the 9/11 attacks, but in a statement summarizing the commission's findings at that time, staff director Philip Zelikow said Tenet didn't have the power to match his passionate concerns about terrorism.

Mr. PHILIP ZELIKOW (Staff Director): He focused his energies on where he could add the greatest value, the CIA, which is a fraction of the nation's overall intelligence capability. And as a result, the question remains: Who is in charge of intelligence?

ABRAMSON: The CIA director does have the official nameplate of director of Central Intelligence but the reality falls far short of that. Author Mark Riebling has studied what he calls the decades-old war between the CIA and its intelligence counterparts.

Mr. MARK RIEBLING (Author): He's got, you know, the Pentagon to contend with which controls 85 percent of the spy budget, and then he's got the FBI which controls the domestic half of the equation. And since a lot of these threats cross borders between foreign and domestic, Tenet has to rely on a lot of people who are sort of outside his direct control.

ABRAMSON: The obvious solution for many is to put the DCI in charge of the whole deal, from the FBI and the CIA to the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. But when Tenet appeared before the 9-11 Commission, he said that proposal would just create more bureaucracy and pull the CIA leader away from his troops.

Mr. GEORGE TENET (Director, Central Intelligence Agency): Because I believe that--one of the concerns I have is you create another layer and another staff between something that's supposed to provide central organization, all-source analysis and operations. We've created another gap in the distance.

ABRAMSON: But Tenet's successor may have a hard time resisting the pressure to create an ...(unintelligible) intelligence czar. If the 9-11 Commission doesn't recommend centralization of the intelligence community, Congress might. Lawmakers will soon release their own findings on intelligence failures before the war in Iraq. Jane Harman, member of the House committee, left little doubt on where she stands.

Representative JANE HARMAN (California): When the Cold War ended, we should have retired that job and invented a new one better equipped to fight against the threats of the late 20th and 21st century which are terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, not communism.

ABRAMSON: As Tenet's resignation was being announced, his colleague at the FBI was trying to resist a reform initiative for his agency. Director Robert Mueller has been trying to convince Congress not to create a domestic spying agency. He told a House panel yesterday any domestic surveillance efforts should remain within the FBI.

Mr. ROBERT MUELLER (Director, FBI): Each of our agents knows and

understands what is allowable under the Constitution, the statutes pursuant to the Constitution, and to divorce intelligence gathering from that, I believe, would be a mistake.

ABRAMSON: While the intelligence community appears interested in moving slowly, Democratic lawmakers, in particular, want change or at least they want to talk about change in an election year. Tenet's deputy and now acting director, John McLaughlin, will have to respond to these reform proposals. Unlike Tenet, McLaughlin is not used to the public eye. He stayed in the shadows during three decades in government, but he has one avocation that could come in handy whether for managing Congress or for producing reliable intelligence. He's an amateur magician.

Larry Abramson, NPR News, Washington.

INSKEEP: You can find background material on George Tenet by going to our Web site, npr.org.

The time is 19 minutes past the hour.