

TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL O'HANLON BEFORE THE HOUSE PERMANENT SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE, AUGUST 4, 2004

“THE LIMITATIONS OF IMAGINATION”

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ms. Ranking Member and Other Members of the Committee, for the honor to testify today on the 9/11 Commission's findings and the critical question of our nation's security against terrorism.

The Commission report was riveting and rigorous, and many of its suggestions seem sound. In keeping with the theme of today's hearing, I would like to focus on the role of imagination in intelligence work and policymaking. Certainly it is of critical importance. Certainly I would join those who advocate more of it. But we must also avoid the temptation of thinking that if we just now remember to be creative and imaginative, we will be ok. Good intelligence work is not always about stretching the limits of one's creativity. It is also about good judgment, common sense, patrolling the streets, walking the beat, and proper allocation of the nation's resources. We also need to retain a dose of national humility about the inherent difficulty of predicting the future, and to avoid scapegoating the intelligence community when it fails again in that enterprise—as it surely will.

FAILURES OF IMAGINATION FROM THE RECENT PAST

To be sure, there is much truth to the 9/11 Commission's finding that a lack of imagination was our biggest failing prior to the terrible attacks of three years ago. We allowed ourselves a certain degree of complacency since past terrorist attacks had not killed huge numbers of people and since past airplane hijackings had typically been conducted to bargain for the release of prisoners.

But prior to 9/11, there were good reasons to think that things were changing. Not only the Oklahoma City bombings led by Timothy McVeigh, but also the 1993 World Trade Center bombing suggested that a more apocalyptic form of terrorism was emerging in modern times. Al Qaeda's unsuccessful 1995 Manila plot to bomb a dozen airliners over the Pacific vividly raised the possibility that future hijackings might not end safely. Yet few thought through the appropriate responses, which might have included reinforcing cockpit doors, increasing numbers of air marshals, and developing new protocols for how to handle hijackings that in certain cases would not have pilots passively surrender their aircraft. Such measures might not have stopped the actual 9/11 attacks for a range of reasons. But as a country we did not even make the attempt to improve our preparations.

Of course, this was not the first time that a form of tunnel vision had afflicted the American intelligence community and U.S. policymakers. Consider North Korea's ballistic missiles. Few in the intelligence world suspected that the DPRK could quickly develop a three-stage intercontinental-range missile (though Donald Rumsfeld, Barry Blechman, Richard Garwin, and

other members of the 1998 commission on the ballistic missile threat got it right). They assumed a developmental program like those in the United States, forgetting that North Korea might not require the same level of reliability or accuracy we would insist upon. They were surprised.

In the 1980s, the intelligence community did not push its mental horizons to consider the various ways Iraq might pursue a nuclear weapons program. As a result, when the United Nations weapons inspection teams gained access to Iraqi territory in 1991 after Operation Desert Storm, they were surprised at the rapid progress in Saddam's nuclear weapons programs.

Even in the post-9/11 world, the problem persists. In our 2002/2003 study, *Protecting the American Homeland*, several of us at Brookings argued that we should be imaginative in protecting against future attacks. One of our overall arguments was that any attack that could cause massive casualties or enormous economic damage and be carried out by a relatively small group of individuals should be defended against to the extent possible. This logic leads, among other things, to considerable concern about the nation's chemical industries, hazardous trucking industry, large skyscrapers (and their vulnerabilities to explosives as well as biological and chemical agents introduced through air circulation systems), private aircraft (with their potential for being used as guided missiles), train travel, and the surface-to-air missile threat to aircraft.

Al Qaeda was innovative once; we must assume, despite the disruption to its command and control from recent military, intelligence, and law enforcement actions, that it could be ingenious and original in its mode of attack again. Yet to date, the United States has not done enough to address a number of these threats, perhaps because we are again lacking in imagination about how al Qaeda might strike next. The 9/11 Commission report does us a service in encouraging us to wake up.

## FAILURES OF JUDGMENT

But lest we rush to arrive at a single, incorrect diagnosis for intelligence problems, it is important to remember that not all failures are the result of narrow thinking or lack of creativity among analysts.

Consider some other recent intelligence failures. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991 was not anticipated by most American intelligence experts even in the days just before it occurred. But that was not a failure of imagination. The idea that Saddam might invade had been contemplated within the U.S. intelligence community and had its (relatively few) adherents. So by definition, it had been imagined. Rather, what happened here was mistaken judgment about how the Iraqi dictator would assess the pros and cons of an actual move to seize Kuwait versus the use of large-scale military exercises to intimidate its leaders.

On another note, the nuclear tests by India and Pakistan in 1998 were hardly beyond the realm of the American intelligence analyst's imagination. The two countries had been known to have nuclear weapons programs for many years. Yes, we were surprised by the timing of the tests, and the lack of advance warning. But that is because intelligence analysts miscalculated how those two countries would assess the relative benefits of testing at that moment in time. We

knew the possibilities; we had thought the unthinkable; we just guessed wrong about which path New Delhi and Islamabad would take.

## FAILURES OF INSUFFICIENT FOCUS

Many intelligence failures occur because as a nation we do not devote enough resources to a particular problem—not because we fail to anticipate the possibility. In other words, imagination is not the problem so much as lack of concentration, attentiveness, and in some cases resource allocation.

The recent warnings about possible attacks against the New York Stock Exchange, World Bank, and other financial institutions remind us of the need for two things—tactical intelligence on local al Qaeda cells and site defense of critical assets. Not much imagination is needed to know that al Qaeda may again strike with truck bombs or other explosives (or firearms) against large, prominent buildings with high symbolic value and lots of important people inside. The core group and its various affiliates have already done so many times since 9/11, from Morocco to Saudi Arabia to Tunisia to Pakistan to Iraq and Indonesia and Spain.

One important implication is that the United States needs to beef up its local police intelligence and counterterrorism operations. The FBI, due to its modest size and institutional strengths and weaknesses, cannot do it all. New York devotes some 500 officers to these tasks, but it is an exception. Los Angeles has about 35 such personnel; Chicago less than 10. This is the case even though Los Angeles, in particular, is now known to have been a possible target in the original version of the 9/11 al Qaeda plan (and in the millenium attacks). Part of the problem is that too many major localities assume that they will not be targets in the future simply because they have not been the sites of successful attacks in the past. Part of the problem is money; given the dearth of federal funds for such preventive activities, municipalities must typically fund at least half of any such efforts out of their own coffers. At a time when declining federal tax receipts, terrorism alerts, and other trends have squeezed state and local budgets, the additional local monies have been hard to find. Not a failure of imagination, but something much more mundane—a failure of persistence and of proper budgeting.

## THE OCCASIONAL SUCCESS IN USING OUR IMAGINATIONS

We should also recall that sometimes the intelligence and policymaking world gets it right. Imagination is not entirely lacking in our current system, though we may need to find ways to encourage and increase it.

One successful case was President Clinton's thinking about what a biological pathogen attack could do to the United States. He read important books on the subject, convened scientists' meetings, and—with the help of this Committee and the Congress in general—dramatically expanded American preparations for the possibility of such an attack even before any such threat had become palpable. (Of course, the steps taken after 9/11 and the anthrax attacks were even

more dramatic, including the recent creation of Project Bioshield, but they do not constitute a success of imagination so much as a needed response to a clear threat.)

Some might say that the country's slow response to the anthrax attacks of 2001 actually reflected a failure of imagination in our biological preparations before that time. But stopping every possible attack is too high a standard. We will never be able to prevent all terrorist attacks that could kill relatively few numbers of people in an open society. The important thing, from the national security standpoint, is to prevent large-scale catastrophes. And against this standard, at least for the attack that was experienced in 2001, we were relatively capable. We could prescribe the Cipro antibiotic for those potentially exposed and devise quick means for making the mail safer. We could also further accelerate other biological protection programs in subsequent months and years, as was indeed accomplished.

To the extent this was indeed a success, it suggests that the intelligence community can assist the imaginative process more effectively when political leaders are involved and engaged and themselves imaginative.

#### THE RECENT IRAQ CASE—TOO MUCH IMAGINATION?

But lest we think that imagination is the be all, and that our intelligence agencies would perform best if only staffed by the next generation of science fiction writers, we must remember that it can work the other way as well. Too much imagination—by which I mean assuming things to be real just because they could be—can cause enormous problems.

Perhaps most interesting of all in this context is the Iraq experience. Here, ironically, too much imagination may have gotten the Bush administration into trouble. Specifically, as I argue in the attached *New York Times* oped from last month, the intelligence community stayed closer to the facts on the alleged link between Saddam and al Qaeda—and got it basically right, as best we can tell. By contrast, the Bush administration, *imagining what might plausibly be*, rather than what it could document to be so, adopted a worst-case approach. It described the invasion of Iraq as part of the global war on terror and otherwise insinuated that Saddam and al Qaeda might have had a strong relationship—perhaps even including collaboration in the 9/11 attacks.

While critical of their willingness to spin, I do not believe Bush administration officials lied. Knowing Saddam's capacity for evil and for revenge, they interpreted the available evidence in the most extreme and indeed most imaginative way. But it appears to have led them to incorrect views and perhaps some policy errors.

The Bush administration also badly overestimated Iraq's progress in pursuing a nuclear weapon. Again, however, while the Bush administration seems guilty of deliberately worst-casing the available evidence to support its existing policy agency, its approach was not entirely unreasonable. We would have been well served as a nation by more worst-case analysis about Iraq's nuclear program in the 1980s. And the same type of analysis that led us to an overestimation of Iraq's likely nuclear program in recent years seems to have been correct in regard to North Korea's.

## CONCLUSIONS

The broad moral here is to avoid simplistic solutions. Members of this committee know that, but other Americans sizing up the 9/11 Commission report may forget. Intelligence work is inherently judgmental, inherently unsure, and inherently bound to be wrong much of the time, no matter how well it is done, and no matter how creative the analyst undertaking the mission. Among its other implications, this means we must continue to expect to be incorrect sometimes in the future and plan policy accordingly. And while being willing to reform our intelligence community, we must avoid equating mistakes with incompetence. There were plenty of the former in recent years, but only a relatively modest amount of the latter.

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### **Can The C.I.A. Really Be That Bad?**

By Michael O'Hanlon

WASHINGTON — The Senate Intelligence Committee has had its say on the debacles leading up to the Iraq war, and America's intelligence agencies have come in for the lion's share of the blame. Some of the committee's findings were useful and constructive. But over all, the report's scathing indictment of American intelligence is seriously unfair. Leave aside the broader political issue, that of whether the report was designed in part to find a convenient scapegoat for the failings of political leaders. Simply on the technical merits of the case, the intelligence community's performance, while far from superb, was hardly as bad as the senators assert.

There are three main issues to consider. Did Iraq possess chemical and biological weapons in the period just before the American-led invasion? Had it reconstituted its nuclear weapons program? And did it have meaningful, operational links to Al Qaeda?

As we have been learning over the past 15 months, and as the Senate report has just reconfirmed, the intelligence community indeed did get its answers to the first two questions wrong. But it clearly got the third right. Moreover, on the vital matter of chemical and biological agents, the agencies' overall assessments were entirely reasonable. Yes, with the advantage of hindsight and complete access to Iraqi territory we now know they were largely wrong. But we did not have such hindsight or access in 2002 and early 2003.

Let's face it, it would have taken an overwhelming body of evidence for any reasonable person in 2002 to think that Saddam Hussein did not possess stockpiles of chemical and biological agents. Admittedly, the intelligence community was too quick to believe the Iraqi exiles who told stories about mobile biological weapons laboratories and the like.

But the basic facts still suggested strongly that Iraq had plenty of weapons of mass destruction. The United Nations and most European and Middle Eastern intelligence outfits had the same incorrect beliefs as our agencies, for the same understandable reasons. Saddam Hussein had used

chemical weapons in war and against his own people in the 1980's. For more than a decade after the Persian Gulf war, he obstructed international inspectors' efforts to find and destroy such weapons, ensuring that United Nations sanctions that cost his country more than \$100 billion would remain in place. He had his underlings confront the inspectors on several occasions in ways that led to military strikes against his security organizations. It certainly looked as if he valued chemical and biological agents a great deal, and was prepared to do a lot to hold onto them.

As for the supposed links between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, the available evidence points strongly to one conclusion, the same conclusion that the intelligence community consistently reached: the Bush administration's frequent insinuations that Saddam Hussein may have had an active collaboration with Al Qaeda, perhaps even assisting the 9/11 hijackers in some way, are without foundation. The intelligence community clearly stated this throughout the debate over Iraq. Even when Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was talking about "bulletproof" evidence of strong linkages in the summer and fall of 2002, the intelligence community demurred — within the halls of the executive branch and in public.

It is only on the nuclear question — admittedly a very important one — that the Central Intelligence Agency and other agencies truly dropped the ball. They bought into the idea that Saddam Hussein had reconstituted his nuclear weapons programs largely on the basis of flimsy reports of possible Iraqi efforts to obtain uranium and centrifuge components from abroad. Even if those reports had all been true, the imports would have been nothing more than raw materials for a nuclear program that would have required several more years to produce even a crude bomb.

Again, less-than-credible reports from less-than-credible people were used to confirm assumptions that intelligence analysts should not have allowed themselves to believe so strongly in the first place. It seems likely that the intelligence community, which had been surprised in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf war at how far Saddam Hussein had gotten in his nuclear programs before 1991, did not want to make the same mistake again. So it overcompensated. And the mistake by George Tenet, the director of central intelligence — letting the famous 16 words about Iraq's purported pursuit of African uranium into President Bush's 2003 State of the Union speech — made things even worse.

But even on the nuclear issue, enough information was available for others to reach their own assessments. That the Bush administration had a clear agenda and interpreted all intelligence on Iraq in the most inflammatory way possible was its failing. But members of Congress, including those on the Senate Intelligence Committee, had enough information to reach their own conclusions, and yet the unnecessarily hasty march to war went ahead.

The point is not to excuse the intelligence agencies for their failings — a score of 33 percent is not a passing grade. They deserve a stern rebuke for their sloppiness and gullibility, and reforms are on the way. In particular, the agencies' willingness to trust human sources whose credibility should have been much more suspect was a serious institutional error. And, on the status of Iraq's nuclear program, the agencies clearly stopped looking at the evidence and bought into

Washington groupthink. Even if they were not directly pressured by the Bush administration, many analysts do seem to have wanted to please the White House a bit too much.

But before we excoriate the work of our intelligence analysts — demoralizing their ranks and discouraging recruits from joining organizations that are being slammed by the right as well as the left — we need to take a deep breath. Intelligence is a difficult craft, and getting things wrong is an occupational hazard, not necessarily a sign of negligence or incompetence.

Blaming the intelligence community for the government's (and most Americans') mistaken views about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein would seem to reflect a desire on the part of Congress and the administration to pass the buck. When the morale and effectiveness of our intelligence organizations are at risk, scapegoating is unacceptable and unworthy.

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