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Foreign Spies Are Serious. Are We?

By Michelle Van Cleave
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Back in 2002, I got an unexpected phone call from the White House. "Would you be interested in serving as the head of U.S. counterintelligence?" they asked.

The Obama administration may already have placed such a call and picked someone to handle my old job: identifying and stopping other nations' spies. But my successor will have his or her work cut out for them.

In 2003, when I began my three years as the first congressionally mandated national counterintelligence executive (known by the unpronounceable acronym NCIX), Washington seemed ready to transform the fight against foreign espionage into a focused, coherent enterprise. But today, this vital national security mission is on life support.

Think this isn't a big deal? Think again. Most Americans would be astonished to learn how successful foreign intelligence services have been at stealing our national security secrets and threatening our vital interests.

The Chinese stole the design secrets to all -- repeat, all -- U.S. nuclear weapons, enabling them to leapfrog generations of technology development and put our nuclear arsenal, the country's last line of defense, at risk. To this day, we don't know quite when or how they did it, but we do know that Chinese intelligence operatives are still at work, systematically targeting not only America's defense secrets but our industries' valuable proprietary information.

The Soviets, of course, were especially aggressive at spying -- a tradition that has roared back to life in Vladimir Putin's Russia. It was bad enough that the KGB learned so much about U.S. vulnerabilities, but scores of hostile intelligence services and terrorist groups have also been schooled in the tradecraft that the Soviets perfected.

If left unanswered, these growing foreign intelligence threats could endanger U.S. operations, military and intelligence personnel and even Americans at home. But across the government, our counterintelligence capabilities are in

decay. The struggle against foreign intelligence threats has a national leadership in name only. Nor is it driven by any overall strategy, which means that integrating the efforts of the 16 agencies that make up the U.S. intelligence community has taken a back seat to individual agencies' priorities. Meanwhile, we are losing talent at an alarming pace. Take it from me: This is as unnecessary as it is dangerous.

Given the stakes, it may seem strange that, until very recently, there was no such job as "head of U.S. counterintelligence" -- no one person responsible for identifying foreign intelligence threats to U.S. national security or economic well-being and figuring out what to do about them. Instead, counterintelligence responsibilities were divided among the FBI, the CIA and the three military services, with no central leadership or overarching structure to unite them. That created inherent seams that adversaries could -- and did -- exploit.

Then came the 1994 arrest of Aldrich Ames, a CIA counterintelligence chief who turned out to have been spying for the Soviets for nine long years. Through "dead drops" in Washington and meetings with his handlers abroad, Ames handed over comprehensive blueprints of U.S. collection operations against the Russians, including the identities of the very clandestine agents he was sworn to protect. At least nine people lost their lives because of Ames.

His treachery sparked a searching reexamination: What was wrong with U.S. counterintelligence? That anguished question became even more urgent with the February 2001 arrest of Robert Hanssen, an FBI special agent who had been working for the Russians for more than two decades -- to devastating effect. Hanssen handed over more than 6,000 pages of classified documents on some of our most sensitive national security programs, including details on U.S. nuclear-war defenses. He also revealed the identities of Russian agents working for the United States, two of whom were tried and executed.

How could such spies have operated unseen at the very heart of our national security enterprise for so long and with such success?

The answer was staring us in the face: We had no coherent game plan for identifying, assessing and stopping such threats. As the new head of U.S. counterintelligence, it would be my job to develop and execute the nation's first strategy for finding and neutralizing foreign spies.

This, I knew, would not be easy. I had worked on espionage issues for two presidents and the Senate Judiciary Committee. I knew that counterintelligence

was little understood within the national security community, where it was largely overshadowed by the far more familiar world of intelligence gathering.

I also knew that the United States is a spy's paradise. Our free and open society is tailor-made for clandestine operations. And most of the golden eggs worth collecting are found within our borders: military plans and diplomatic strategies, weapons designs, nuclear secrets, even proprietary R&D from companies such as Bell Labs or Dupont.

And business is booming. Today, most of the world's governments (even friendly ones) and roughly 35 suspected terrorist organizations run intelligence operations against the United States. The Russians, for example, still have as many spies here as they did at the height of the Cold War. That's daunting enough. But the counterintelligence challenge isn't just one of sheer numbers. The scope of these activities is an even bigger problem.

Historically, embassies and other diplomatic establishments within the United States have served as ready-made safe houses for foreign spies masquerading as diplomats, which is why the 20,000-strong diplomatic community has traditionally commanded the lion's share of counterintelligence attention. But in America today, there are thousands of foreign-owned commercial establishments, hundreds of thousands of exchange students and visiting academicians, and countless routine trade and financial interactions. Hidden beneath these open and legitimate activities can be darker purposes. With our open, rich society as cover, intelligence officers and their agents can move about freely, develop contacts and operate in the shadows -- a point no more lost on foreign spies than it was on the 19 hijackers that September morning in 2001.

As a result, foreign powers are running intelligence operations throughout the United States with unprecedented independence from the safe havens of their diplomatic establishments, leaving our counterintelligence efforts in the dust.

In the past, America's default strategy has been to wait to engage the adversary in our own backyard, rather than in his. Ninety percent of our counterintelligence resources are concentrated within the United States. We're playing goal-line defense rather than looking for opportunities to get ahead of the game.

The new national strategy approved by President Bush was a sharp departure from the past. It declared that we would no longer cede the initiative to foreign intelligence services working on U.S. soil. Following the age-old wisdom that

the best defense is a good offense, the new strategy directed the intelligence community to marshal its resources and go after the most worrisome foreign intelligence services. Our goal was to methodically disrupt their ability to work against the United States, starting by focusing on targets abroad.

But when each of the counterintelligence organizations across the sprawling intelligence community was asked to map out its programs and resource allocations to see whether they squared with these new goals, something miraculous occurred: Somehow, all of those existing plans, programs and budgets just happened to perfectly match the new national priorities. No real changes were needed -- no new starts, no hard choices. It was unbelievable -- literally.

This is where the 2003 law that created my job fell short. As the quarterback of our counterintelligence efforts, I was responsible for providing strategic direction and evaluating how well various agencies were performing. But I had no power to move funds around or establish new programs. The law created a national executive but not the means of execution.

Things got even more confused after 2005, with the creation of the nation's first director of national intelligence (DNI), an idea that arose from the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission. When my office was placed under that of the DNI, I hoped that working for the new overall leader of the intelligence community would give us more clout, especially the ability to give marching orders and fix budgets.

No such luck. In setting up his new office, the first DNI, the veteran diplomat John Negroponte, delegated the authority for much of our work to his own newly created deputies. True, I was named the "mission manager" for counterintelligence and made Negroponte's principal adviser on the problem. But an adviser is not a leader.

With no central leadership of the fight against foreign intelligence threats, the FBI, the CIA and the military services tend to go their separate ways. And my position and staff became just another layer of the weighty bureaucracy of the office of the DNI.

Seven years after we created my old office, there is no central clearing-house to support operations against the spies who are working against us around the globe or to formulate policy options for President Obama and his top aides. And we still know surprisingly little about hostile intelligence services relative to the amount of harm they can do.

How important is all of this, really? Cynics will scoff and say, "There will always be spies." But I have read the file drawers full of damage assessments; I have catalogued the enormous losses in lives, treasure and crucial secrets that foreign intelligence work has caused. The memory of what's in those files -- and the thought of the people and the operations still in harm's way -- can keep me awake at night.

So we have to choose. We can handle these threats piecemeal, or we can pull together a strategic program -- one team, one plan, one goal -- to reduce the overall danger. We can chase individual spies case by case, or we can target the services that send them here. The next devastating spy case is just around the bend. I fear that when it comes, we will all ask ourselves why we didn't stop it. I suspect I already know the answer.

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