INFERENTIAL FOCUS BRIEFING

Special Briefing
April 26, 2004

HEARING AND ACCEPTING INTELLIGENCE: SOMETIMES IT'S NOT ABOUT ACQUIRING AND DELIVERING INTELLIGENCE

"Imagination is more important than knowledge."
—Albert Einstein

Depends on What the Meaning of 'Inkling' Is

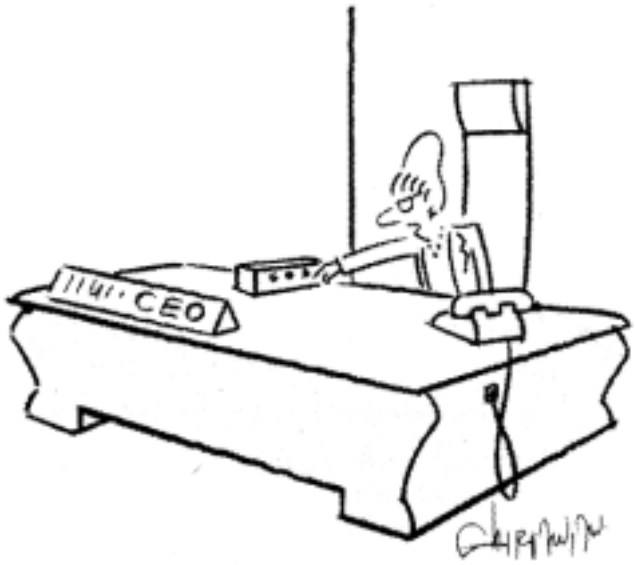
The hearings of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (better known as the 9/11 Commission) have provided a seldom-seen peek behind the secure doors of American intelligence systems and a survey of the way political leaders listen to that intelligence. Condoleezza Rice, President George W. Bush's National Security Advisor, told the commission, "If we had known that an attack was coming against the United States, that an attack was coming against New York and Washington, we would have moved heaven and earth to stop it." Less than one week later, President Bush told a press conference, "Had I had any inkling whatsoever that the people were going to fly airplanes into buildings, we would have moved heaven and earth to save the country." (*New York Times*, 4/9/04 and 4/14/04)

Although the threads of common rhetoric, the folksy-sounding "heaven and earth," draw listeners' attention, the real issue revolves around the meaning behind two other words used by the president and his advisor: "known" (Rice) and "inkling" (Bush). In other places in their presentations, both shared their frustrations over not getting precise intelligence that "required action" or that was "actionable." They wanted intelligence that told them specifically what was going to happen, when it was going to happen and where it was going to happen. President Bush and Security Advisor Rice may misunderstand what exactly intelligence can provide.

Even as the commission pieces together what was known before September 11, 2001, who knew it and what should have been done, a deeper problem of intelligence has yet to be discussed. A clue to that problem surfaced during the 9/11 terrorist hijackings. A flight attendant on one of the planes that terrorists flew into the World Trade Center called her company and with surprising calmness explained what was taking place, who was doing it, what seats they had occupied and where the plane was headed. On the ground, those listening to the flight attendant could not bring themselves to hear what she was saying or to believe what she was seeing. They wondered aloud if she was actually just misinterpreting another example of "air rage." (*New York Times*, 4/18/04)

Sometimes, the receiver of intelligence is just not ready to hear what is being presented. A traditional American aphorism insists "I'll believe it when I see it," a claim associated with the "show me" mentality of a practical people who move in a material world. However, when intelligence counters a listener's worldview, perspective on reality or ideology, the phrase becomes "I'll see it when I believe it." Condoleezza Rice in her commission testimony and President Bush in his news conference hinted that their perspective on reality prior to 9/11 made it difficult to grasp the intelligence they were getting of imminent terrorist attacks. "We weren't on war footing," they both proclaimed verbatim. Indeed, when Attorney General John Ashcroft first outlined his top priorities for the Justice Department he would lead, terrorism did not appear on his list, and on September 10, 2001, he cut $58 million from the FBI's counterterrorism budget. A wartime point of view, they believe, might have made everyone more sensitive to information that was flowing through the intelligence community. In short, many might have listened to the intelligence but few, if any, heard it.

The keys to intelligence "failures" may indeed involve bureaucratic entanglements, legal constraints, stalled communications, information "silos" and other structural impediments the 9/11 Commission has found disconcerting. But a lesson any institutional leader, whether in the public or private sector, can learn from the failure of intelligence in thwarting the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil is that intelligence must be heard, not just listened to, and it can only be heard when listening without a vested interest in some belief, point of view or preconceived notion.



Hold all my calls. I don't want to know what's going on."

Hearing Problems

John Keegan, in his book *Intelligence in War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napolean to al-Qaeda* (2003), reports that throughout modern history, surprise attacks have taken place despite the fact that prior to the events reliable information pointing to just such eventualities was available. He suggests that to be effective good intelligence must be acquired, delivered and **accepted**. (*World & I*, 4/04)

Much of the 9/11 Commission's attention has focused on the institutional problems of acquiring and delivering intelligence, and not surprisingly, members have found much to alarm them. But the commission has spent little time examining how intelligence was or was not accepted as real and usable (or "actionable") as it moved through the system. Yet that is the key for any decision maker. Listening to good intelligence is important, but receiving or accepting good intelligence is critical. We have noticed several problems that hinder a leader from accepting good, especially challenging or unanticipated, intelligence.

Certainty, or the "Houston, we have a problem" Problem – Since the inception of NASA's space shuttle program in 1981, every one of the 113 shuttle launches caused small pieces of foam insulation to pull away from the vehicle's external fuel tank. In 112 of those launches, nothing disastrous subsequently happened. After the *Columbia* launch in 2003, Rodney Rocha, at the behest of fellow engineers, asked launch managers to use spy satellites or any other space-based observation system to look closely at the shuttle because the engineers felt something could be seriously wrong. Six times Rocha appealed to NASA managers, and six times they rejected his request. In the end, those foam pieces slamming into the vehicle on the program's one-hundred-and-thirteenth launch brought down the *Columbia*, killing all aboard. To the engineers, something was wrong. To the managers, statistical probability made them certain that nothing was wrong. Catastrophe resulted. (*Scientific American*, 8/03; *Washington Monthly*, 11/03)

"If I were you at this point, I think I would hate myself, too."

In the early days of the anthrax scare that spread across Washington late in 2001, doctors did not know that the flu-like symptoms they were encountering in patients at hospitals near a postal station in Virginia were derived from exposure to the deadly toxin. As a result, they diagnosed their patients as having the flu and sent them home. One patient persisted. His doctor had seen the symptoms and was certain that they were the same as those exhibited by the hundreds of flu patients he had been seeing in the recent past. But Leroy Richmond, the persistant patient, felt something else was amiss. "I knew something was wrong with my breathing because it was getting shallow," he explained later, "and that coughing yellow phlegm meant something." He persisted and was eventually treated correctly, while two other patients who acceded to their first doctor's diagnosis returned home and died within a week. Richmond insists that the difference between living and dying during the critical few days after his exposure involved accepting what he was sensing while questioning and challenging what he was told. (*New York Times*, 12/3/01)

For the managers at NASA and the doctors in suburban Virginia, certainty was an egregious error in judgment. The managerial certainty that 112 foam-hazard results ensured the same result in the next launch and the medical certainty that flu-like symptoms are always indicative of flu were disastrous. In the months before 9/11, intelligence sources intercepted 34 specific messages claiming imminent attacks. But the government often intercepted these kinds of messages, and because they were not specific enough and the listeners were not "on a war footing," at some point along the bureaucratic trail, the warnings lost their potency. Skepticism toward accepted wisdom and the status quo and open-mindedness toward contrary and unanticipated information, which both engineer Rodney Rocha and patient Leroy Richmond expressed, are critical to accepting new intelligence. Certainty can hinder hearing and accepting unusual intelligence. (*New York Times*, 4/11/04)

"For the hundredth time, I didn't see anything!
…And I can't call what I don't see"

Focus, or the Missed Ape Problem – Two researchers, Daniel J. Simons of the University of Illinois and Christopher F. Chabris of Harvard University, have created a videotape to test what happens when watchers focus with great determination. In the video, two teams of three people, one team wearing white and the other black, move around a room tossing two basketballs among themselves. Viewers are asked to count the number of times the ball is passed among members of the white team, a difficult task. Halfway through the one-minute video, a man in a gorilla suit enters the frame, thumps his chest and after 9 seconds exits the frame. During post-viewing debriefings with the viewers, Simons and Chabris learned that half never even saw the gorilla. They were so deeply focused on the task at hand, they missed a huge change in the image right before them. (*Scientific American*, 3/04)

After the October 2000 terrorist attack on the *U.S.S. Cole* in Yemen, investigators learned about two members of a terrorist cell, Khalid al-Midhar and Nawaq Alhazmi, who would later participate in the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. They were part of a critical meeting of terrorists in Kuala Lumpur in January 2000. But agents were most interested in another attendee at that meeting, known only as Khallad, who, it was later learned, gave the go-ahead signal for the *Cole* attack. Even though officials raided al-Midhar's apartment in Dubai and learned that he had acquired a visa to enter the U.S., nothing was done about it, and both al-Midhar and Alhazmi flew to the U.S. shortly after the Kuala Lumpur meeting. Investigators were focusing on finding the terrorists from the last attack. In doing so, they missed a chance to capture two known terrorists who were yet to act. "What we were not able to do was focus on Alhazmi and al-Midhar," admitted one CIA official. "We were focusing on Khallad and the *Cole*, and not on them. We just didn't get there." (*New York Times*, 4/11/04)

Early in the Bush administration, Condoleezza Rice put together her foreign policy advisors, whom she dubbed the Vulcans after the Roman god of fire. She gathered together seven specialists on Cold War issues. Given that her expertise was on the Soviet Union and the Cold War, the group's inevitable focus was on big power politics, the push and shove of U.S.-China and U.S.-Russian relations. As one journalist who studied the group's interests prior to 9/11 explained, "They were caught looking in the wrong direction." (*Guardian Weekly*, 4/1/04)

Overload, or the Perfect Information Problem – "I can't make good decisions," President Bush said at his April press conference, "unless I get valid information." The lure of more and better information as a means to make better decisions has become the stuff of managerial and MBA legend. Not surprisingly, this legend has led to an obsession with more information, which, it has been assumed, will lead to better decisions. But more of the wrong information – valid or not – does not help generate good intelligence. For example, the CIA funded a task force charged with identifying key elements that lead to a country's economic and political collapse. Zealous in their endeavor, members soon assembled 2 million different data points. As one pundit quipped, "Obviously, they had too much funding." After much rethinking, the task force discovered that just 3 points (infant mortality, level of democracy and extent of international trade) were sufficient to predict nation-state collapses. (*Nature*, 11/29/01)

Collecting more data is not the same thing as identifying critical information – one task of intelligence.

For instance, in 2002, the world's airlines experienced 40 fatal crashes, killing 1,022 passengers, up from 33 crashes and 778 fatalities a year earlier. Of those 40 crashes in 2002, 18 (45 percent) resulted from what industry officials call controlled flight into terrain (CFIT), which involves "mechanically sound airplanes flown by skilled pilots who maintained perfect control over the airplanes as they flew into the ground or mountainside." CFITs are the largest cause of death from airline accidents in the world. (*Asian Wall Street Journal*, 4/28/03; *Boston Globe*, 7/25/00)

The information pilots were receiving just prior to these crashes was plentiful and accurate. Moreover, it came from the most sophisticated technology. The only problem was that these mountains of information did not include an "eye" looking straight ahead to see real mountains in front of the plane. The information acquired was valid, but the intelligence – the dynamic of what is happening – was incomplete. The resulting actions were disastrous.

Shortly after 9/11, former President George H.W. Bush publicly complained that the CIA, which he had headed in the 1970s, had become too dependent on technology and that human intelligence was the only way to penetrate and understand terrorist groups. His observation had precedents. In 1998, the CIA's over-dependence on spy-satellite technology misled U.S. officials into thinking that India, despite the new government's public claim to the contrary, would not detonate a nuclear bomb. Budget cuts in Washington had eliminated all on-the-ground intelligence officers in India and had overloaded remaining analysts with a contextless avalanche of information. Saturated with satellite data, behind in analyzing any of it and bereft of any cultural context about the new fundamentalist party in power, the agency simply assumed that, going forward, India would behave as it had done in the past. As a result, India's detonation of a nuclear weapon caught America's leaders by surprise. (*Los Angeles Times*, 9/14/01; see also "CEOs and the CIA: Lessons Learned?" **IF 1920**, 6/30/98)

At one point in her testimony before the 9/11 Commission, Condoleezza Rice insisted: "No one could have imagined them taking a plane, slamming it into the Pentagon." In fact, such an imagined possibility had led security officials at the Atlanta (1996) and Sydney (2000) Olympics to close airspace above competition sites during the games, and a similar imagined outcome had prompted Italian officials to close the airspace above Genoa when G-8 leaders met there in the summer of 2001. In early 2001, the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) proposed a war-game exercise to defend against terrorists hijacking a plane and flying into the Pentagon. So intelligence gatherers before 9/11 had established the possibility that terrorists might use planes "as missiles." One CIA National Intelligence Estimate even stated that buildings in Washington, D.C., and around Wall Street could be targets. (*Dallas Morning News*, 4/14/04*; Associated Press*, 4/19/04)

"What is it, girl? What are you trying to tell us?"

Hierarchy, or the Campfire-Lag Distancing Problem – Hierarchical structures put layers of bureaucracy between those who acquire intelligence and those who need it to make decisions. The process is reminiscent of a traditional Boy and Girl Scout campsite entertainment. With the troop members seated in a circle around a campfire, a scout master whispers a detailed story to the person next to him or her. That person then whispers the story in the ear of the one next in the circle and so on. By the time the story completes the circle, it inevitably contains curious elaboration, emendations and misinterpretation. Like that scout game (also called "Telephone"), intelligence starts at

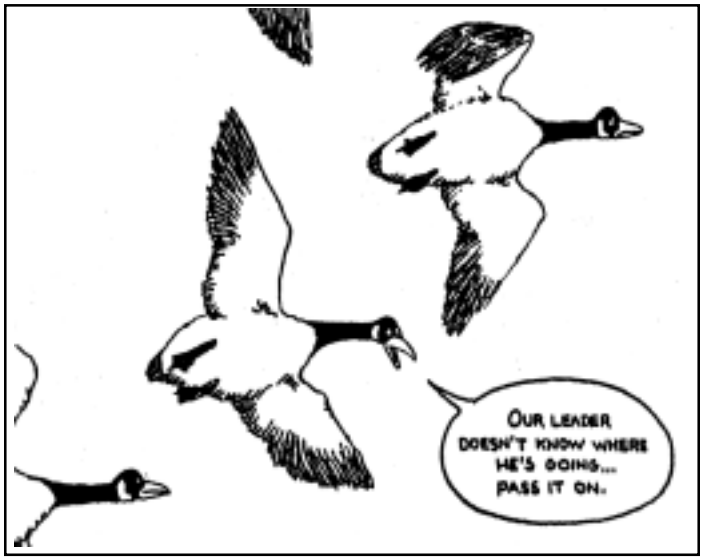
the point of observation and moves through multiple levels of recapitulation, which in the inner politics of any bureaucracy results in the campfire problem's elaboration, emendations and misinterpretation.

Lewis C. Solman, an economist and former dean of the graduate school of education at UCLA, has identified "lags" in the process of realizing education reform. He got the idea from the lag time in monetary policy – the time between actions taken and their effect on the economy. But he could have been identifying the lags between acquiring and accepting intelligence and between accepting intelligence and responding to it. In this "lag structure," he identified 14 different areas where bureaucratic friction slowed the awareness of and reactions to real change. Among the most interesting lags were the recognition lag (how long it takes to identify the problem), buy-in lag (overcoming resistance to the identified problem and possible response), learning lag (developing the ability to execute a response), impact lag (time it takes before the response has an effect) and interpretation lag (resistance to the response). (*Education Week*, 12/10/03)

These lag hindrances complement the errors associated with the campfire problem. The campfire problem distorts the information as it moves toward the decision maker, and the lag problem weakens the response as it moves from the decision maker to those who will ultimately execute a response.

A classified memorandum sent to Condoleezza Rice by the counterterrorism group led by Richard Clarke claimed that "all 56 FBI field officers were also tasked in late June to go to increased surveillance and contact with informants related to known or suspected terrorists in the United States." Yet the 9/11 Commission, while questioning agents from those field offices, learned that no one could remember ever receiving such an order. Also, the official "Appraisal of the Threat Posed by Bin Laden," delivered to President Bush on August 6, 2001, stated that "the FBI is conducting approximately 70 full field investigations throughout the U.S. that it considers bin Laden-related." But that has proven illusory as well. At the time, the FBI had become distracted by the arrest of its agent Robert Hanssen on espionage charges, and it was adjusting to a new acting director, Thomas Pickard, who was replacing long-time Director Louis Freeh. The bureaucracy itself was broken, further distancing the White House from the points of contact in the field. As a result, individual agents who uncovered critical intelligence in Phoenix and Minneapolis never got a hearing – casualties of the campfire-lag problem. (*New York Times*, 4/10/04)

The campfire problem becomes more troublesome when one of the people transferring the story intentionally distorts it. For example, on December 21, 2002, CIA Director George Tenet went to the White House to brief the president on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. After listening to the information, President Bush responded, "I've been told all this intelligence about having WMD and this is the best we've got?" The President was concerned that such sparse information would not be convincing to the American public. Rather than add information or qualify his conclusions, Tenet said simply, "Don't worry. It's a slam dunk." (*New York Times*, 4/18/04)



Linearity, or the Change Blindness Problem – Researchers at the University of Utah recently completed a study comparing the driving habits of people under the influence of alcohol to those of people driving while talking on cellular telephones. Using driving simulator facilities, researchers discovered that **legally drunk drivers performed better** in road tests than did sober drivers using cell phones. That is, drivers whose minds were drugged did better than those whose minds were distracted. Transferring mental focus from the road to the conversation and back forced drivers to assume that what was in their field of vision would remain constant

during the focus shift until their attention returned. As a result, they were slow to recognize changes that happened during their break in attention. This assumption of continuity in action – linearity of events – caused the CIA to miss India's 1998 decision to detonate a nuclear device. (*USA Today*, 3/5/04)

Vision researcher Ron Rensink of the University of British Columbia calls these lapses "change blindness," which he has found to be a common phenomenon in many different situations. When he showed subjects an image on the computer, then distracted them momentarily while he made a substantive change to the image, rarely upon returning their gaze to the image did anyone identify the change. Rensink first noticed this problem when he discovered an increasing number of automobile accident reports that categorized the cause as "driver looked but failed to see." What surprised the researchers the most, however, was how sure all participants were that they were seeing everything they should see – that is, they missed the change but were confident that no change had taken place. Researchers labeled this effect "change blindness blindness" (that is, they are blind to the fact that they are blind). In one study at Ohio State University, 90 percent of participants said they would certainly notice when researchers removed a colorful scarf from around a woman's neck in a video. In fact, **none** of them noticed. (*Boston Globe*, 4/15/03)

In March 2001, journalist Bethany McLean published an article in *Fortune* magazine raising numerous questions about the legitimacy of Enron's balance sheet. She was so challenging in her questions that Enron's chief executive, Jeffrey Skilling, called the magazine to charge her with ethical lapses for not doing more research before writing such an exposé. In the months that followed, Wall Street's perception of the company did not shift. Essentially, McLean challenged the accepted image of Enron, but the business community, like distracted cell-phone users and like the change-blind study participants, ignored the change and, in effect, refused to acknowledge that such a change was real. Like cell-phone users who eventually caused accidents, those with a stake in Enron paid for their inattentiveness. (*New York Times*, 1/28/02)

Researchers studying the ways East Asians and Americans watch events discovered that Asians tend to look more "holistically," that is, they see the whole scene together, while Americans tend to isolate a specific part of the image and watch it more intently. Asians try to grasp the overall context, while Americans narrow their focus to one specific item or area – typically focusing on the fastest or biggest unit in the field.

A second part of the study learned that when researchers challenged Americans' interpretations of what they had seen, they were more likely to resist altering their positions and grew more intense in defense of their positions. Meanwhile, Asians, when given similar challenges, were more likely to modify or adjust their perspectives. (*New York Times*, 8/8/00)

The tendency of Americans to be certain of their positions leads back to the beginning of this list of hindrances to accepting new intelligence: Certainty creates barriers to new intelligence. When confronted with challenges to their perspective on reality, NASA managers resisted hearing the contrary evidence…six times…and the doctors outside Washington, D.C., could not imagine the symptoms they were seeing indicated anything other than flu. Concentrating on their given tasks, viewers missed a man in an ape suit stretching and strutting across a video image they were watching because the interruption in the image distracted them from their goal. Also, gathering more and more information for the purpose of generating perfect decisions can confuse leaders, and that encourages them to "connect the dots" in ways consistent with historical patterns, a change-blindness problem. All of these hindrances – certainty, focus, overload and linearity – are exacerbated when passed through a bureaucracy intent on completing the work to a superior's satisfaction (the hierarchy hindrance). The system defeats itself.

Is It Ever Possible?

Condoleezza Rice, appearing before the 9/11 Commission, claimed that "until there is a catastrophic event that forces people to think differently, that forces people to overcome old customs and old culture and old fears…you don't get [structural] change." (*New York Times*, 4/9/04)

The culture of intelligence in the U.S. has come under serious scrutiny recently, and the first two parts of the intelligence process – acquiring and delivering intelligence – will face further reviews in the future. But the third part of the intelligence process – accepting intelligence – deserves closer scrutiny as well. Rice is correct in asserting that cultural interference makes the process difficult at any time. But a leader who is too certain, too focused, too overloaded, too top-down oriented and too linear makes accepting and using new intelligence even less likely. Every leader, whether in business or government, needs to understand the problems that hinder hearing and accepting new intelligence and to work to minimize the effects of those problems.