

Reviewing American Intelligence

Over the coming months, an independent commission recently named by President Bush will begin the difficult task of assessing the American intelligence community—both its track record and its level of readiness for future challenges. The group, formally known as the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, is composed of members of the elite of American public life. Their job will be to determine whether and how American intelligence officials misjudged Iraq's weapons capabilities in the build-up to war, and to seek ways to improve the ability of the intelligence community to judge present and future threats involving weapons of mass destruction.

Among its other interests, the commission's attention will certainly turn to the old, familiar question of human intelligence versus high-tech intelligence. The American intelligence community relies heavily on "imagery intelligence" (collected from the country's array of spy satellites) and "signals intelligence" (collected by intercepting communications and electronic transmissions). By the late 1990s, the volume of intelligence data collected with these technologies was outstripping the ability of human analysts to study it. The U.S. assessments of Iraq's weapons programs before the war seemed conspicuously reliant on such high-tech intelligence gathering—a point brought home most forcefully when Secretary of State Colin Powell presented a wealth of photographs and intercepted conversations before the United Nations in February 2003.

It would be easy to blame any intelligence failure in Iraq on our reliance on satellites and sophisticated computer systems, and the relative dearth of human agents gathering information more directly. Past internal and congressional reviews of the intelligence community have argued just that. But it is critical that any improvement of our human intelligence capabilities not come at the expense of our sophisticated and enormously valuable high-tech intelligence resources. While our enemies often employ means much too crude for our technology to track, they also by necessity use means of communication that we are well-equipped to observe and control.

America's ability to track money transfers, for instance, has already done grave damage to the Al Qaeda network and other terrorist groups around the world. The ability to intercept e-mail and telephone traffic gives American officials and our allies warnings of potentially impending terrorist activities. And our eyes and ears in the skies severely restrict the capacity of terrorists and rogue states to act openly against us.

As its work progresses, the new commission will need to balance concerns about America's over-reliance on intelligence technology against the enormous value and effectiveness of high-tech tradecraft. It will need to avoid overreacting to the relative prominence of satellites and signals in America's intelligence arsenal. Only by keeping things in perspective can the commission avoid the fate of similar bodies before it: contributing to the causes of the *next* intelligence failure in an effort to correct the causes of the *last* one.