



## Forum for American Leadership

### Leading the IC: Why It's Hard to Be the DNI and What's Next for the Role

June 5, 2023

Every Director of National Intelligence (DNI) since the office's creation in 2004 has been faced with an impossible challenge—leading a community he or she does not own and cannot direct. This mismatch between responsibilities and authorities is a defining trait of the office. The DNI is responsible for setting the strategic direction for the Intelligence Community (IC) and is the principal intelligence advisor to the president, the National Security Council, and the Homeland Security Council. However, the DNI has limited budget and personnel authority over IC elements beyond the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) and cannot direct intelligence operations. As a result, the DNI's tools to mobilize toward any goal are limited and are largely dependent upon his or her personal relationships and soft power.

Despite these shortcomings, the ODNI has made significant progress on a few major pre-9/11 problems—most importantly the integration of foreign, military, and domestic intelligence to protect the U.S. homeland. The most visible and representative ODNI work product is the Annual Threat Assessment, which is briefed during Congress' Worldwide Threat hearings. The bulk of this work derives from IC agencies' analysis of various topics, and ODNI crafts the overarching narrative while stitching the analytic efforts together. The less visible but more resource intensive part of ODNI's work comes from analytic integration efforts at its centers, to include the National Counterterrorism Center (produces analysis and maintains the authoritative database of known and suspected terrorists) and the National Counterintelligence and Security Center (supports government counterintelligence and security activities and advises the private sector).

As we enter the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of the DNI next year, this Forum for American Leadership brief explores:

- The defining moments that led to the creation of the IC and to the formation of the DNI;
- The roles and responsibilities of the DNI and its limitations; and
- How we should be thinking about the future role of the DNI for the decades to come.

### **Intelligence Leadership: A Multi-generational Challenge**

Prior to World War II, the Department of State, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the U.S. Armed Services collected intelligence with no direction or coordination. In July 1941, [frustrated](#) by the piecemeal, stove-piped information he was receiving, President Roosevelt created the Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI) under General William "Wild Bill" Donovan. Five months later, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Prior to the attack, the U.S. Army and Navy utilized signals intelligence [services](#) to collect Japanese diplomatic and military messages, but nobody put the full picture together.

As World War II progressed, Roosevelt and Donovan transformed COI into the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), America's first centralized intelligence agency. After the war, President Truman disbanded the OSS but eventually worked with Congress to create the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as an independent, civilian intelligence service.

The idea of a DNI [dates](#) back to 1955 when a blue-ribbon study commissioned by Congress recommended that the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) employ a deputy to run the CIA so that the director could focus on coordinating the IC. This notion emerged as a consistent theme in many subsequent studies over the next five decades.

- It was the failure of intelligence agencies to share information with each other and the inability of DCI George Tenet to mobilize IC resources (despite a 1998 [memo](#) calling for a war on terror) that led the 9/11 Commission in its 2004 report to recommend that Congress create the DNI.
- According to the [9/11 Commission](#), “The DCI should be replaced by a National Intelligence Director: (1) to oversee national intelligence centers and (2) to manage the national intelligence program and oversee the agencies that contribute to it.” Intense [negotiations](#) ultimately led to the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004.

### **The Role of the DNI: Leading an Anomaly, Wrapped in Bureaucratic Battles**

The IC is the only “community” in the U.S. government. Other executive branch leaders lead departments or independent agencies with clear authorities, responsibilities, and budgets. The DNI oversees 18 agencies and 16 of them reside within a department. Only CIA and the ODNI are independent, and 10 agencies are part of the Department of Defense. Notably, the National Security Agency, National Geospatial Intelligence Agency, and the National Reconnaissance Office each have large budgets and support both national and military missions. Putting aside laborious [debates](#) about the DNI’s authorities, practically speaking, the DNI does not exercise operational control over anything but the ODNI. As a result, the DNI primarily exercises his/her authorities through process.

For example:

- The DNI writes a National Intelligence Strategy and IC policies, but agencies write their own strategies and policies with little oversight.
- The DNI coordinates and usually delivers the Presidential Daily Brief, but the process operates out of CIA Headquarters, is staffed primarily by CIA officers, and the President often asks for the CIA Director (DCIA)’s views. The DCIA has a direct line to the President on covert action.
- The DNI runs the National Intelligence Program (IC budget) process but has only rarely forced an agency to significantly increase or decrease investments in specific capabilities or missions. For the Military Intelligence Program, which covers NSA, NGA, NRO, and others, the DNI must negotiate every major initiative with the Secretary of Defense.
- The DNI also helps Congress bring together the IC agencies on national intelligence assessments or cross cutting issues. This is particularly useful when it comes to solving for major flaps (e.g., the Snowden disclosures) or advocating for authorities (e.g., FISA).

Most DNIs had achievements despite limited resources and authorities, but their limited tenures and ability to manage power struggles, politics, and expectations of the role essentially placed a ceiling on what the DNI could do.

### **Going Forward: How to Shape the DNI's Role in the Decades to Come**

The best outcome is a strong DNI who has the ear of the President and works in close collaboration with the DCIA and Secretary of Defense but does not interfere in operational missions. With this structure, the DNI should lead a significant redistribution of resources towards countering China and improving the IC's adoption of emerging technology as the next great intelligence imperatives. Neither imperative will be achieved without a DNI, and every major intelligence reform proposal also has significant drawbacks if seriously pursued.

- If you eliminate the ODNI, history has shown that the DCIA will be too consumed with the Agency's mission to drive the community and coordinate DoD intelligence activities. Things will fall through the cracks—leading to intelligence failures.
  - Success in this scenario would still require additional authorities for DCIA that the DCI and DNI never possessed.
  - If we were operating under this structure in 2023, it would be hard to argue that anyone other than DCIA Burns could have led the response to the Discord leaks—meaning that it would have distracted DCIA Burns from other priorities.
- If you empower the ODNI, the DCIA and Secretary of Defense will fight back hard—leading to years of infighting and an even larger IC bureaucracy that will take up too many resources, time, and attention, at the expense of intelligence officers and warfighters.

Therefore, as we consider what the role should be in the coming decades, the aim should be to strike a delicate balance between serving the function of bringing together the IC on cross-cutting issues while helping to plug any critical gaps on key collection areas, and do so by reducing the amount of red-tape in the larger bureaucracy so that each intelligence element can continue to operate its mission.

### **Recommendation: Use the DNI to Implement IC-wide Initiatives and Leadership**

Policymakers should publicly lean on the DNI to force IC-wide initiatives—the redistribution of resources and people against the China mission, supporting FISA reauthorization, ensuring a strong counterterrorism posture, and improving the IC's understanding and adoption of emerging technologies.

- By holding more public hearings and directing these requests at the DNI, policymakers can lean in to the DNI's strengths—the DNI's budget authority and role as principal advisor to the President.
- To achieve these goals, policymakers should force the DNI to be more public (e.g., give more speeches, testify more often) and demonstrate closeness to the President and responsiveness to Congress.

At the same time, policymakers should also look to reduce government bureaucracy, regularly challenge ODNI on its headcount, and seek to push as many resources as possible back to IC agencies. With a more public role, the DNI should use leadership, rather than bureaucracy, to drive change. This would help push back a counter view that the ODNI creates a significant bureaucratic burden that is unnecessary, wasteful, and counterproductive and should be dissolved.

In sum, as we enter the 20th anniversary of the creation of the DNI next year, we should start to reevaluate its role, mandate, and resources, and the authorities it needs to see if there are any required changes to fully meet our current national security mission. At the end of the day, it will also be incumbent on the next administration to choose a DNI who will set the tone and responsibilities for the role, which will ultimately determine what shape it will take, and how effective it will be, in the coming decade.

*This paper is a product of the Forum for American Leadership's [Intelligence](#) Working Group.*

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