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Dollars and Spies

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Terrorists are more clandestine than nations, and good intelligence is more important than ever. But since September 11, critics from both sides of the aisle have blasted the intelligence community. Angry congressmen point out that the various agencies failed to share information with one another, to "connect the dots" that might have uncovered al Qaeda operatives within the United States before it was too late. They protest the agencies' pathological inability to work well together. They want intelligence professionals to reconsider how they do business.

Unfortunately, such reform is unlikely. Calls for change are commonplace; over the last ten years there have been dozens of proposals, often from distinguished blue-ribbon panels with decades of combined experience. But these proposals have little impact, and many good ideas die on the vine.

Why is intelligence so resistant to change? The reason is that unlike most government activities, the total amount of intelligence spending is a secret. This "top line" is kept hidden, though observers estimate that it falls somewhere between $30 and $40 billion. As long as spending is not subject to public scrutiny, the professionals in charge have no reason to risk their organizational interests by making hard decisions about priorities. To do so would risk cutting programs. As a result, we won't have an informed discussion about intelligence until the budget is released. And without that discussion, we won't have meaningful reform.

The military knows well the dangers of public debate over how it spends money. The Army recently lost funding for two of its prized platforms – the self-propelled Crusader artillery piece and the stealthy Comanche helicopter – because of sustained criticism about costs. Both Crusader and Comanche were impressive ideas, but both were exorbitantly expensive and not relevant to modern threats. Cutting these programs saved money for the global war on terror. It was a painful but necessary process.

Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet argues that revealing the budget might give foreign enemies the ability to discover our sources and methods. Apparently they would do this by working backwards from a raw dollar figure to figure our just how those dollars are spent. This idea, that our enemies have the ability to "reverse engineer" our intelligence practices, stretches credulity. Other nations commonly release their intelligence budgets without losing

operational security. It is also worth considering that U.S. specialists spend years poring through the military budget without ever being entirely sure how the money is spent. To believe that foreign adversaries could uncover our sources and methods by looking at a budget top line is to assign them superhuman powers. They are dangerous, but they are not omniscient.

Intelligence professionals also complain that past efforts to create transparency have made them less effective. They say that when Congress gets involved, it restricts their ability to execute covert operations and recruit spies. In the 1970s, for example, the commission led by Senator Frank Church created new rules about how and when the CIA could act. Agency officials argued that these rules made it more difficult to do the unsavory but necessary work of foreign intelligence.

This may have been the case, but it has no bearing on the budget battle. Senator Church wanted Congress to have more direct oversight because that the CIA ignored American principles in shady dealings abroad. In contrast, releasing budget figures would not give Congress or the President any additional control over intelligence operations. It would not keep the community from doing its job. It would only demand that intelligence agencies spend resources more wisely.

Activists like Steven Aftergood of the Federation of American Scientists use these arguments to call for the disclosure of the top line budget. (Aftergood has recently filed suit in U.S. District Court to have the figure released.) But the intelligence community should release more than just the top line. Even releasing the budgets of specific agencies would not threaten operational security. Suppose the CIA revealed that it spends about $3 billion each year. An outside observer would glean little from that information. It says nothing about who receives that money; it says nothing about how many agents work in the field; it says nothing about what methods they use to cultivate sources.

On the other hand, these figures would be very useful at home. Observers could finally address crucial questions about intelligence spending: How does the intelligence budget compare with the military budget? Has the community boosted funding for human intelligence since September 11? Is it spending too much on assets that were designed to spy on the Soviet Union? Is it buying flashy gadgets instead of paying decent salaries for linguists?

These questions are vital to foreign policy and national security. We should not hide the answers in order to protect the well-being of intelligence agencies.

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