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10 Questions for John Negroponte

By MICHAEL DUFFY, Timothy J. Burger

John Negroponte was recalled a year ago from Baghdad, where he served as ambassador to Iraq, to become America's spymaster. It's not easy to run the sprawling, \$44 billion U.S. intelligence community, especially with powers that are in many ways less than his responsibilities--and Negroponte, 66, wants critics to know it's a work in progress. America's first director of national intelligence sat down in Washington for a progress check with TIME's Michael Duffy and Timothy J. Burger.

Is the intelligence the President gets every day any better than it was a year ago? First of all, I think it's good. And second, we've worked hard on making improvements, particularly in the area of analysis. We're also working hard to better validate our sources [and] improve our tradecraft. The President has put out the order that we should increase our humint--our human intelligence and analytical capabilities--over the next five years, and we've got a program well under way to achieve that. So, yeah, I think it's improving, and we intend to improve it more.

Is our intelligence on Iran better than it was on Iraq? It's good. It's solid. And I think ... what we've tried to improve since the WMD fiasco is building the safeguards. You have to build in different ways of double checking. You've got a team out there that takes the alternative hypothesis and tries to prove it with the same set of facts.

When do we think Iran could have the Bomb, and do we know where they're building it? The assessment has been somewhere at the beginning of the next decade, between 2010 [and] 2015. This remains the assessment. Intelligence that was obtained from Iran showed that they may have been

trying to conceptualize how to adapt one of their missiles to a nuclear weapon. It is cause for concern. Certainly, we know where the key installations are, the ones that have been monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency--Isfahan and Natanz. Are there others that we're not aware of at all? You don't know what you don't know.

So just what is your job? I try to put in one sentence what I think our job is about. And what I say is that our job is to effectively integrate foreign, military and domestic intelligence in defense of the homeland and of U.S. interests abroad.

Are the agencies that weren't sharing information before 9/11 better at it now? Everybody's on their toes. And I think the system has been set up in such a way now that the American people can be reassured that somebody is always watching. Any information that has a bearing on a domestic homeland threat that is acquired in Waziristan or Baghdad--you can be sure that [if] people who have a responsibility for defending the homeland should have [that information], a way is going to be found to get it to them darn fast.

President Bush wants more human spies. How's that going? We're beefing up in places where we hadn't been, where we'd allowed things to atrophy after the end of the cold war--in Latin America and Africa.

We understand you are making a catalog of all U.S. intelligence assets. Will you be picking station chiefs? Station chiefs are for [CIA Director] Porter Goss to choose. I am not interested in directing operations. I am not interested in having field commanders. That's the job of the individual agency heads. Am I interested in what they're doing? You're darn right I am.

The Pentagon wasn't keen about your office when Congress created it. Has that changed? It is by definition a joint exercise. I think it works well. I don't see how the relationship could be better, and think the division of labor is very clearly understood.

What is the endgame for the three dozen or so high-value detainees? I'm not going to get into that one really. You know, these people are being held. And they're bad actors. And as long as this war on terror continues, I'm not sure I can tell you what the ultimate disposition of those detainees will be.

Is this work harder than putting a country back together? It's very different. One is a foreign

ambassadorship, you're dealing with a foreign culture [and] nation building. This has to do with the organization of our own government and working in an interagency environment. I've done both fieldwork and homework. And this is homework.

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