



Written by on July 19, 2010

Washington Post Investigates U.S. Intelligence

On July 19, the Washington Post published the first installment in a series of investigative reports looking at the U.S. intelligence community's massive growth since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The Post titles the series, posted on a special website established for the project : "Top Secret America."

The lead reporters on "Top Secret America," the result of two years of research, are William Arkin and Pulitzer Prize-winner Dana Priest.

The voiceover narrating the introduction to the report at the *Post's* website is ominous: "We are all aware that there are three branches of government in the United States, but in response to 9-11, a fourth branch has emerged. It is protected from public scrutiny by extraordinary secrecy: Top Secret America."

The *Post* reports that "33 building complexes for top-secret intelligence work are under construction or have been built since September 2001," occupying about 17 million square feet of space — the equivalent of nearly three Pentagons.

Some 1,271 government organizations and 1,931 private companies work on programs related to counterterrorism, homeland security and intelligence in about 10,000 locations across the United States," reported the *Post*.

Additionally, "an estimated 854,000 people, nearly 1.5 times as many people as live in Washington, D.C., hold top-secret security clearances."

Defense Secretary Robert Gates, in his interview with the *Post*, denied that the intelligence network has become too big to manage. But he admitted that getting precise data is sometimes difficult. He also said that he intends to review those programs for waste, noting: "Nine years after 9/11, it makes a lot of sense to sort of take a look at this and say, 'Okay, we've built tremendous capability, but do we have more than we need?'"

"There has been so much growth since 9/11 that getting your arms around that — not just for the DNI [director of national intelligence], but for any individual, for the director of the CIA, for the secretary of defense — is a challenge," Gates told the *Post* last week.

The *Post* said that its investigation was "based on government documents and contracts, job descriptions, property records, corporate and social networking Web sites, additional records, and hundreds of interviews with intelligence, military and corporate officials and former officials," noting that most of the latter had requested anonymity.





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A second story, to be published on July 20, will explore the federal government's dependence on private contractors and how this practice "degrades" the quality of the federal workforce. The *Post* estimates that the number of contractors who work on Top Secret programs to be 265,000.

And a third story, to be published, on July 21 will focus on the "economic and cultural impact" of locating a high concentration of Top Secret work within a community located around the National Security Agency. The implication was that it is inequitable to create all these jobs near D.C., while the rest of the country struggles with an economic recession and high unemployment.

The volume of research and amount of effort going into the *Post*'s reports are impressive and revealing. However, the main focus of the material uncovered centers on the pitfalls of creating yet another massive government bureaucracy, fraught with all of the inherent waste and inefficiencies such bureaucracies generate. In an era of ever-growing federal budget deficits, the economic argument against waste is of no small importance.

The next area of concern expressed by the reporters is that such inefficiency actually *reduces* the ability of government intelligence agencies to do the job they were created for — protecting the American public against terrorist attacks of the 9/11 sort.

One of the authorities cited in "Top Secret America" is retired Army Lt. Gen. John R. Vines, who once commanded 145,000 troops in Iraq. Vines said that despite massive increases in spending and personnel in our nation's intelligence community, it is impossible to measure the results. "Because it lacks a synchronizing process, it inevitably results in message dissonance, reduced effectiveness and waste," noted Vines. "We consequently can't effectively assess whether it is making us more safe."

So despite the vast amount of money being spent, according to the general, we cannot even be sure if we are any safer than before this massive buildup of our intelligence community began.

Thus far, however, the report does not address a danger to American even greater than any posed by al-Qaeda or other foreign terrorists — the danger posed to our freedom by building an increasingly larger and more powerful secret intelligence network that's exempt from congressional oversight. Agencies such as those cited in the report, such as the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the CIA, are all executive branch agencies that operate independently of Congress. The only power Congress maintains over them is control of their budgets.

An excellent case can be made that one reason the 9/11 terrorists were able to circumvent our national security measures is that the former congressional committees previously responsible for security (such as the House Un-American Activities Committee, abolished in 1977 and the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, abolished in 1977) were dismantled. These committees did an excellent job of protecting America from sabotage and espionage originating within the old Soviet Union, which was a much more formidable adversary than Middle East-based terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. In fact, the Soviet-era KGB was actually the parent organization of terrorist groups worldwide.

Transferring national security responsibility from the congressional committees answerable to their constituents to the top-secret, executive branch spy agencies threatens America with far worse than poor national security, however. Abuses such as the [NSA warrantless surveillance controversy](#) were an indication that many in our executive branch of government viewed "national security" as carte blanche to suspend the Bill of Rights.

As important as fiscal responsibility and national security are to the welfare of our nation, the constitutional protections that safeguard our freedom are paramount. As Germans learned when their



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government suspended freedoms through the [Enabling Act](#) (which took power away from the legislature and granted it to the cabinet) in response to the [Reichstag fire](#) of 1933, trading freedom for security is never a good deal. The *Post* would perform a real public service if it were to explore *that* threat stemming from the bloating of our intelligence network as well.

Photo: James Clapper, right, Presidents Obama's choice to oversee the nation's 16 spy agencies as director of national intelligence: AP Images



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