

THE INTELLIGENCE COMMITTEE'S "SECRET" BRIEFINGS ON THE BOSTON ATTACK

There are 15 members of the Senate Intelligence Committee. By my count, at least 5 of them revealed some part of what they got briefed on the Boston attack yesterday afternoon to the press.

Saxby Chambliss says an agency may not have shared one piece of evidence.

"There now appears that may have been some evidence that was obtained by one of the law enforcement agencies that did not get shared in a way that it could have been. If that turns out to be the case, then we have to determine whether or not that would have made a difference," Chambliss said.

Though Chambliss would not get into specifics on the information or whether or not the bombing could have been prevented, he told Channel 2 Action News that they will find out if someone dropped the ball.

"Information sharing between agencies is critical. And we created the Department of Homeland Security to supervise that. We created the National Counter Terrorism Center to be the collection point for all of this information, and we're going to get to the bottom of whether or not somebody along the way dropped the ball on some information and did not share it in a way that it should have been shared."

Chambliss also suggested that some of the walls that had been eliminated after 9/11 may have

been unintentionally recreated.

“Post-911 we thought we had created a systems that would allow for the free flow of information between agencies,” said Senator Saxby Chambliss, a Republican from Georgia and member of the intelligence panel. “And I think there have been some stone walls .. .that have been re-created that were probably unintentional.”

Richard Burr revealed that FSB had contacted the government more than the single, January 2011 time that has been reported; it contacted us (he didn't say what agency) at least once since October 2011.

Russian authorities alerted the US government not once but “multiple” times over their concerns about Tamerlan Tsarnaev – including a second time nearly a year after he was first interviewed by FBI agents in Boston – raising new questions about whether the FBI should have focused more attention on the suspected Boston Marathon bomber, according to US senators briefed on the probe Tuesday.

[snip]

In a closed briefing on Tuesday, members of the Senate Intelligence Committee learned that Russia alerted the United States about Tsarnaev in “multiple contacts” – including “at least once since October 2011,” said Richard Burr, a Republican of North Carolina, speaking with reporters afterward.

Susan Collins revealed that one agency even had problems sharing information within its own agency and repeated that magic word, “stovepipe.”

“But I'm very concerned that there still

seem to be serious problems with the sharing of information, including critical investigative information,’’ she said after emerging from the closed-door committee briefing. “That is troubling to me, this many years after the attacks on our country in 2001, that we still seem to have stovepipes that prevent information from being shared effectively, not only among agencies but also with the same agency in one case.”

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The FBI has previously said it interviewed Tsarnaev in early 2011 after it was initially contacted by the Russians. After that review, the FBI has said, it determined he did not pose a threat.

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Marco Rubio shared details echoing those reported elsewhere, that the brothers had gotten both their beliefs and bomb instructions online. Dianne Feinstein – the only Democrat I found blabbing to the press – said to hold off on making judgments.

Now, none of these details are that informative. I'm interested in the multiple follow-up complaints from Russia, particularly given that other reports say FBI asked for follow-up information from Russia three different times and got nothing (was FSB sharing it with the CIA?). I'm interested in the agency that couldn't share information within its own agency.

Other than that, I get the impression this is more of what plagues our counterterrorism efforts in the first place: a flood of information with an imperfect ability to sort it (not to mention the very distinct possibility that there were no definitive pieces of intelligence that would have alerted authorities to the brothers' violent intent).

But I wonder, given that no one seems to take the "closed" part of "closed hearings" very seriously. Why can't we just brief this stuff publicly, so taxpayers and citizens can learn whether the billions we've spent on counterterrorism have done anything more than create even more bureaucracies.

Update: This story confirms that the second request was to CIA, which referred it back to the FBI.

Meanwhile, a review of Russia's contacts with the U.S. authorities, shows that six months after the Russians asked the FBI to review the activities of Tsarnaev's brother, Tamerlan, Russian authorities made an identical request to the CIA.

The official, who is not authorized to comment publicly, said the CIA was aware of the FBI's prior review—which turned up nothing improper—and referred the Russian request back to the FBI.

The CIA is prohibited from conducting intelligence operations on U.S. soil.

The FBI, which had closed its review on

Tsarnaev in June 2011 after sharing its results with Russian officials, again contacted their Russian counterparts, asking if they had developed additional information on the Cambridge, Mass., man.

But the official said Russian authorities never responded.

This story notes that FSB has been accompanying the FBI as it questions the Tsarnaev parents and provides background on all the ways US-Russian relations are strained right now.