GROWING SIGNS OF INTELLIGENCE FROM INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY, OR JUST ANOTHER TURF WAR?

On Saturday, I wrote about a remarkable about-face taken by AP's George Jahn in his reporting on Iran's nuclear technology. Instead of following his usual routine of parroting leaks from US and Israeli sources meant to put Iranian intentions on nuclear technology in the worst possible light, Jahn instead wrote about how dependent the UN's IAEA is on US intelligence to develop its evaluation of what is happening in Iran. Further, Jahn highlighted how US credibility on WMD intelligence was forever harmed by the overstated evaluations of Iraqi WMD leading up the invasion of Iraq in 2003. My post was written from the point of view that somehow Jahn had realized how badly he has been played by the intelligence community over the years and has now decided to question the reliability of the information being fed to him.

In comments on the post, Marcy considered whether the reversal could be framed in a different way:

> Not to get all 11-dimensional, but any chance his sources asked him to leak this? That is, more stenography, but to justify reversing course?

In what could be yet another framing of what is happening in the intelligence community, Lara Jakes of AP worte an article published Monday in which she described what may be a movement within the intelligence community to promote what appears to be a healthy move toward reasoned debate among the various agencies within the intelligence community. Couching the opening of the article within the uncertainty

over whether Osama bin Laden really was at the compound in Abbottabad where he was eventually killed, Jakes describes what appears to be a new movement toward debate:

> As the world now knows well, President Barack Obama ultimately decided to launch a May 2011 raid on the Abbottabad compound that killed bin Laden. But the level of widespread skepticism that Cardillo shared with other top-level officials — which nearly scuttled the raid — reflected a sea change within the U.S. spy community, one that embraces debate to avoid "slam-dunk" intelligence in tough national security decisions.

Wow. Here we have a second AP reporter making a reference to the failed Iraq intelligence in 2003 only two days after Jahn's introspective that cited the same failure. But, when she finally revisits the "slam-dunk" reference many paragraphs later, Jakes elides the most important factor that led to the intelligence failure. Here is her description:

> Congress demanded widespread intelligence reform after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, to fix a system where agencies hoarded threat information instead of routinely sharing it. Turf wars between the CIA and the FBI, in particular, were common. The CIA generally was considered the nation's top intelligence agency, and its director was the president's principal intelligence adviser.
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> The system was still in place in 2002, when the White House was weighing whether to invade Iraq. Intelligence officials widely — and wrongly — believed that then-dictator Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. By December 2002, the White House had decided to invade and was trying to outline its reasoning for

> doing so when then-CIA Director George Tenet described it as “a slam-dunk case.”
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> The consequences were disastrous. There were no WMDs, but the U.S. wound up in a nearly nine-year war that killed nearly 5,000 American soldiers, left more than 117,000 Iraqis dead, and cost taxpayers at least $767 billion. The war also damaged U.S. credibility throughout the Mideast and, to a lesser extent, the world. Tenet later described his “slam-dunk” comment as “the two dumbest words I ever said.”

This description of the developments in 2003 completely leaves out the way that Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld gamed the intelligence community through their “Team B” program:

> Over at the Pentagon, however, Rumsfeld was reprising Team B by creating his own intelligence shop. The Chalabi organization’s alarmist reports on Hussein’s nuclear weapons, which later proved to be false, bypassed the CIA and went directly to the White House.
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> “That’s why they set up an intelligence unit in [Undersecretary of Defense Douglas] Feith’s office,” said intelligence historian James Bamford. “The whole purpose was to get that kind of information and send it to Cheney.”

Jakes would have us believe that the intelligence community now relies on an open debate to get at the truth:

> To prevent that from happening again, senior intelligence officials now encourage each of the spy agencies to debate information, and if they don’t agree, to object to their peers’ conclusions. Intelligence assessments spell out the view of the majority of

> the agencies, and highlight any opposing opinions in a process similar to a Supreme Court ruling with a majority and minority opinion.

The closest Jakes comes to admitting that some players in the intelligence community have agendas that might lead them to slant their information in a particular way comes when she describes the Defense Intelligence Agency:

> Also included is the DIA, which has increased its ability during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars to gather ground-level intelligence throughout much of the Mideast and southwest Asia. In an interview, DIA director Army Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn would not discuss his agency's debated assessment on North Korea, but described a typical intelligence community discussion about "ballistic missiles in name-that-country" during which officials weigh in on how confident they feel about the information they're seeing.
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> "In the intelligence community we should encourage, what I would call, good competition," Flynn said. He added: "The DIA, in general, is always going to be a little bit more aggressive. …As a defense community, we're closer to the war-fighting commanders; it may be in that part of our DNA."

Somehow, Jakes has, within her article, a description of the DIA working to undermine the intelligence gathering and evaluation process in true Team B fashion and yet she fails to see it. The North Korea situation mentioned in the passage refers to a leaked assessment from DIA that North Korea has the capability of arming ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads. This was clearly a move by DIA to put their "more aggressive" view out front of all the others on the situation in North Korea, and yet Jakes

settles for the explanation that the DIA assessment was “mistakenly declassified” even though it was quickly touted by a Republican war hawk in a Congressional hearing.

In the end, what Jakes is describing, where we see an intelligence community being driven by “majority rule” may perhaps be a move toward a more intelligent process, but the key missing ingredient is that rather than the differing agencies simply being given votes by virtue of presenting their version of the intelligence, each agency’s view needs to be tested against all available information where that information is weighted by level at which it can be verified. In other words, until the DIA is forced to provide real, verifiable evidence for their aggressive views, those views should be discounted as coming from a predisposition in their DNA towards violence.

Let’s hope that these public references to the Iraq WMD intelligence failure are the first steps toward that ideal process where each bit of information debated among the agencies is required to be provided within a context of the level at which it can be verified. Otherwise, we may just be seeing yet another round of turf wars among the various agencies, where the always shifting balance of power can lead to disastrous consequences when the wrong groups are allowed to dominate the discourse.