IGNORANT ON INTELLIGENCE

Mr. Obama made a surprise lunchtime visit May 29 to a Five Guys hamburger joint in Washington D.C., where he bought cheeseburgers for himself and for NBC anchor Brian Williams, who was filming a "day in the life" program at the White House.

While waiting for his burgers, the president chatted up a fellow customer named Walter, with whom Mr. Obama had this exchange:

Obama: What do you do, Walter?

Walter: I work at NGA, National Geospatial Intelligence Agency.

Obama: Outstanding. How long you been doing that?

Walter: About six years.

Obama: You like it?

Walter: I do, keeps me...

Obama: So explain to me what this National Geospatial...uh

Walter: We, uh, work with satellite imagery.

The National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (NGA) is, after the National Security Agency (NSA) and the CIA, America's most important intelligence agency. It's hard to imagine a daily presidential intelligence briefing that doesn't include at least some slides from the NGA.

When Ben Smith reported the conversation in his column in the Webzine Politico, it set off a firestorm of comments.

"I teach an undergrad course on National Security," wrote Frederick. "Any student who has passed my course knows exactly what the NGA is and what they do. It is frightening that our president apparently has no clue."

If Mr. Obama is as ignorant of the Intelligence Community as this anecdote suggests, he'll be a poor referee of the turf war that has broken out between his Director of National Intelligence and the CIA.

A turf war was inevitable once Congress created the post of DNI -- who is supposed to coordinate the activities of all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies -- in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Before the

reorganization, that was the responsibility of the CIA director, who was also the Director of Central Intelligence.

During the Bush administration, his two DNIs assumed control over joint intelligence analysis centers, such as the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), where data from various agencies are analyzed.

The Bush DNIs also took from the CIA director responsibility for liaison with friendly foreign intelligence services.

As a result, the Central Intelligence Agency is no longer "central." Most technical intelligence is gathered by NSA and NGA, and is analyzed in the joint centers. That leaves the CIA responsible, chiefly, for the gathering of human intelligence.

Now, according to a report May 23 by Pamela Hess of the Associated Press, Mr. Obama's DNI, retired Admiral Dennis Blair, wants to impinge upon that.

Admiral Blair, Ms. Hess wrote, wants "to choose his own representatives at U.S. embassies instead of relying only on CIA station chiefs."

This is a potentially mortal blow to the CIA, and Ms. Hess' sources -- "former and current CIA officials" -- are up in arms about it. The Blair plan, they told her, risked "creating competing chains of command inside U.S. embassies and potentially fouling up intelligence operations. They also worry it could complicate the delicate relationships between U.S. and foreign intelligence services, and leave ambassadors confused about where to turn for intelligence advice."

But "Ishmael Jones," a former CIA operations officer, told the Atlantic's Marc Ambinder: "Anything that can be done to break up the CIA's station chief system will lead to greater safety for Americans and our allies."

"The station chief's contribution to intelligence is weak," Mr. Jones said. "We don't have them at all in key target countries like North Korea and Iran, because station chiefs exist within embassies and we don't have embassies in those places. In countries like Russia and China which have aggressive spy services, the CIA station chief is almost confined within the embassy, a figurehead."

I think the CIA's system for gathering human intelligence desperately needs reform. But I doubt creating a duplicate chain of command within our embassies is the way to bring it about.

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