



Confronting the “Enemy Within”

What Can the United States Learn About Counterterrorism and Intelligence from Other Democracies?

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In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was widely criticized for failing to prevent the strikes on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Critics charged that the bureau was poorly equipped to prevent attacks, largely because of its strong emphasis on reactive law enforcement and prosecution. In light of the FBI’s perceived inability to preempt terrorism, some U.S. policymakers have proposed establishing a new domestic intelligence service, separate from the FBI and dedicated solely to counterterrorism information collection, analysis, assessment, and dissemination. Proponents argue that establishing an agency of this sort would allow more proactive handling of terrorist threats. Opponents counter that it would merely undermine civil liberties and complicate the communication and coordination between the U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

To inform the debate, the RAND Corporation analyzed the structures and experiences of domestic intelligence agencies in four other democracies—the United Kingdom, France, Canada, and Australia. Drawing on extensive literature reviews and interviews with individuals in these services, RAND researchers identified critical strengths and weaknesses in each system. While significant differences exist between the United States and the four countries studied, the cases provide valuable insights that could guide initiatives in the United States should a decision be made to establish a new domestic counterterrorism intelligence agency.

The Four Security Agencies Share Important Strengths

The U.K., France, Canada, and Australia all have organizations dedicated solely to collecting, assessing, and disseminating information on domestic terrorist threats within their respective homelands. The four organizations—the U.K. Security Service (known as “MI5”), France’s Directorate of Territo-

Abstract

The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation was widely criticized for failing to prevent the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and some U.S. policymakers reacted by proposing a new domestic intelligence service devoted solely to counterterrorism. To inform the debate, the RAND Corporation analyzed domestic intelligence agencies in four other democracies. While differences exist between the United States and the countries studied, the cases provide insights that could guide policymakers if they decide to establish such an agency in the United States.

rial Security (DST), the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO)—share several key attributes.

“*Culture of prevention.*” Because the four agencies studied have no conflicting law enforcement responsibilities, they have been able to focus exclusively on gathering information to prevent terrorist attacks. Working with this clearly defined mandate, they have all devoted substantial resources to honing analytical expertise, developing foreign language skills, and establishing in-house expertise on the various threats they face.

“*Collaborative relationships with local law enforcement.*” Lacking arrest and detention powers, each of the four agencies has had to work closely with its national police force. By extending the services’ surveillance capabilities, this collaboration has served as a useful “force multiplier.” In addition, because this cooperation has been institutionalized through organized crisis management structures, it has provided greater coordination to national counterterrorism decisionmaking and planning.

Emphasis on human intelligence (HUMINT). The British, French, Canadian, and Australian agencies all view HUMINT as one of the most critical components in counterterrorism intelligence. Therefore, they have focused on recruiting terrorist insiders, a strategy that has helped to disrupt terror cells and provide valuable information on extremist groups' intentions and resources.

Development of regular threat assessments. Threat assessments have played an important role in national counterterrorism planning in all four countries. The British, French, Canadian, and Australian governments have used these assessments to aid short-term security planning for high-profile events and to facilitate long-term decision-making about how best to allocate scarce resources to prevent terrorist attacks in the future.

Ability to recruit from a wider pool of talent. Because the four agencies are separate from their national police forces, they have been able to attract many individuals who would not normally be interested in law enforcement careers. Therefore, they have access to a rich, multidisciplinary recruitment pool that has included linguists, historians, economists, psychologists, and social scientists.

The Services' Track Records Also Reveal Weaknesses

Limited operational effectiveness. The counterterrorism track records of the four agencies are far from perfect. There have been notable lapses, such as Canada's failure to act on a tip that an individual with links to al Qaeda was planning attacks in North America—an oversight that almost resulted in the bombing of Los Angeles International Airport in December 1999. MI5 was also criticized for its failure to track the activities of Richard Reid—the so-called shoe bomber—who attempted to attack an Air France plane in late 2001.

Difficulties in disseminating information to other agencies. Despite the collaborative relationships between the police and intelligence agencies in each of the four countries studied, they have all experienced the problem of ineffective information dissemination. For example, both MI5 and CSIS have been accused of failing to give

relevant authorities information that could have prevented several high-profile terrorist incidents, including the bombing of an Air India plane in 1985 and attacks against an Israeli embassy in 1994.

Violations of democratic norms. In several instances, accepted democratic norms and operational limits in the four countries have been violated in the name of domestic counterterrorism intelligence. Examples include DST's mass roundups of alleged Islamic militants regardless of whether they had any known links to terrorism and MI5's sanctioning of a "shoot-to-kill" policy against the Provisional Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland.

Questions of accountability and oversight. Significant gaps in intelligence accountability have been apparent in at least two of the countries studied. In the U.K., critics have decried parliamentary oversight arrangements as offering only the barest of "fig leaves" in terms of external scrutiny. Problems have been even greater in France where *no* independent system of legislative control currently exists. The absence of viable nonexecutive mechanisms of accountability in these two countries has sometimes translated into a "carte blanche counterterrorist mandate" that has transcended operational and judicial constraints.

The United States Must Decide Based on Its Unique Intelligence Needs

The U.K., Canada, France, and Australia share important characteristics with the United States, including liberal democratic traditions, a desire to prevent terrorism through a robust homeland security infrastructure, and a concern for balancing counterterrorism measures with the needs of an open society. However, there are significant cultural, historical, legal, and political distinctions among these countries. These differences mean that an intelligence institution cannot and should not simply be replicated from one national context to another, regardless of the institution's effectiveness in its original setting. While the four case studies offer valuable lessons, U.S. policymakers must decide for themselves whether a domestic intelligence bureau is the right solution for the United States. ■

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