

International Affairs Forum Interview

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By Jason Miks

Admiral Bobby R. Inman, USN (Ret.) is the Lyndon B. Johnson Centennial Chair in National Policy at the LBJ School of Public Affairs. Admiral Inman is a former Director of the National Security Agency and former Deputy Director of Central Intelligence. He served in the U.S. Navy from November 1951 to July 1982, when he retired with the permanent rank of Admiral.



IA-Forum: It has been suggested that the U.S. should introduce a domestic intelligence agency along the lines of Britain's MI5. Do you think this would be a good idea?

Admiral Inman: I have suggested in the past separating the FBI into two different agencies – a law enforcement agency like Scotland Yard and an intelligence agency like MI5. The reason I'm inclined in that direction is to try to develop a culture that supports the mission of intelligence, where you are looking for warnings, for prevention. The FBI's mode of operation is a careful, thorough assembly of evidence – ensuring the evidence is not tainted – leading to indictments, arrests and convictions. I don't want to disturb that. But for the world we're in, where we are not just worried about capturing foreign spies but also worried about pre-empting terrorist activity inside the US: that's a very different culture and very different mindset. The FBI is struggling to try to develop that capability in the current structure and I guess they should be given some time to do it. But I must say that I am sceptical that it will really work.

IA-Forum: Do you think the creation of a Department for Homeland Security was a good idea? Has it been successful?

Admiral Inman: It's much too early to make judgements on whether the Department for Homeland Security has been a success. I would point to the example of the Department for Defense, which was created in 1947 but was still not fully functional when we got into the Korean War. President Truman finally drafted Secretary of State George Marshall to be Secretary of Defense and under his knowledgeable leadership it finally became an effective department.

Whether Katrina was the wake-up call that Homeland needed to accelerate the integration of agencies is simply too soon to know. But I would argue that DHS is harder than the DoD. At the latter you have a separate Army, the Air force and are also pulling the Navy and Marine Corp all together into one department. At DHS you have 22 different entities being pulled in, so the integration job is much, much bigger.

IA-Forum: How successful has the current administration been at striking the balance between security and liberty?

Admiral Inman: I think the country at large is still feeling its way to the proper balance in a very different world. With the Soviet Union, in the long years of the cold war, there was a high level of confidence that containment would work, but also that Mutually Assured Destruction would work. For the terrorists – some funded by other countries, some funded through private wealth and “charitable” foundations – it is a very different and in some ways more complex problem, because many of those engaged are not only willing but eager to commit suicide. So it raises the stakes significantly for being able to detect and prevent the attacks, which are aimed at civilians. And in turn that says that some privacy will probably have to be surrendered to have any prospect of preventing attacks because these terrorists are able to travel easily and intermingle in the US. And this is a very different challenge when you are trying to track what is going on in a huge landmass which this is. Satellites and all kinds of other systems give you no help at all. So probably some additional trade-offs are going to be required, but the public is not yet sold and the media is generally hostile.

IA-Forum: How damaging has the increasingly bitter partisanship in the Congress been to the intelligence gathering process?

Admiral Inman: We have had periods in the past when the oversight process has been hampered by partisan, political bickering and we're in one those periods now. Fortunately we recovered from those in the past. In 1978 to 1984 we experienced six tough years. Then we had David Boren and Senator Bill Cohen as his vice-chairman [of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence] and it again became a very effective process. So it is recoverable. A lot will depend on the mode and the mood in Congress after these upcoming elections, and if the evolving membership of these committees will go back to the bipartisan approach which is actually critical for effective oversight.

IA-Forum: What has been the administrations biggest national security achievement since 9/11?

Admiral Inman: I think the early success of mobilizing support to go after Al Qaeda and the overthrow of the Taliban diminished the threat

of what was stewing in Afghanistan and offered the prospect that this poor beleaguered country might have a functioning central government which could effectively govern its citizens. That somewhat eroded over time, but I would rate that as the high point since 9/11 on the national security front.

IA-Forum: What has been the low point?

Admiral Inman: Well for me the low point has been events that have unfolded in Iraq. I think historians will give very high marks for the military operation that overthrew Saddam Hussein in 22 days. And I think they will give extraordinarily low marks to the absence of planning to effectively provide security and maintain some kind of functioning government of Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam.

IA-Forum: What would you like to see an administration of either party do to make the country safer?

Admiral Inman: I think we need to get rid of the partisanship to the degree that it is possible to do that. We need better collaboration. But what we really need to do is develop a long-term strategy about the role the US is going to play in this very different world. We had a strategy for fifty years called containment that effectively dealt with the Cold War. Whether Republican or Democrat, the administration since 1990 has dealt with every issue tactically. We need to go back and rebuild a strategic vision, and persuade the public to support that strategic vision of the role the US will play in the world. It's a big challenge and there is nothing going on in the current political discourse that promises that this will be accomplished soon.

IA-Forum: Admiral Inman, thank you for your time.

