

Directing National Intelligence

An Interview with The Honorable John D. Negroponte,
Director of National Intelligence, United States of America

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EDITORS' NOTE After graduating from Yale University in 1960 with a bachelor of arts degree, John Negroponte joined the U.S. Foreign Service and proceeded to serve in posts in Asia, Europe, and Latin America, as well as in senior positions at the State Department and the White House. In 1997, Negroponte joined the private sector, assuming the position of Executive Vice President for global markets at

the McGraw-Hill Companies in New York. Reentering public service, Negroponte was appointed U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations in September 2001, and U.S. Ambassador to Iraq in June 2004. He was sworn in as the United States' first Director of National Intelligence on April 21, 2005. Negroponte is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the American Academy of Diplomacy.

Streamlining the intelligence community is a very challenging task that will take a considerable amount of time to accomplish. What steps are you taking to ensure coordination of the intelligence community? Are the various departments talking to one another yet?

The most effective way to streamline any organization, or set of organizations, is to establish priorities and focus resources accordingly. That's part of the director of national intelligence's job description: establishing a mission-based strategy that takes on the really hard, really important questions. This doesn't mean that we can afford to lose what some might call our "peripheral vision," because issues of genuine concern to the United States can always emerge from unexpected quarters. But, on balance, the best way to make sure that the intelligence community is cooperating and on-task is to be sure everyone understands what that task is all about. At the head of the list, of course, is terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and certain states whose intentions and capabilities are inimical to American lives and interests.

Success in your position would seem to require a close working relationship with the president. How important do you feel that relationship is, and do you feel you will receive the time and attention necessary to address the complex issues you will be facing?

A good relationship with the president is essential to any of his senior advisers, and it's no different for the director of national intelligence. I am his principal adviser on intelligence matters. So I brief him daily and often see him more frequently than that. His commitment to America's security assures close and frequent contact with his top assistants in this field.

Most other nations of the world don't say anything about intelligence. Why does the United States feel it's necessary to tell the world about national intelligence issues? Shouldn't intelligence be secret, and doesn't this openness hurt our national security?

In a democracy like ours, everything is discussed, and that includes intelligence. That said, there are aspects of our work that serve Americans' interests much better when they are not the subject of news coverage and public debate. I'm old school about this – if it's classified, it's classified, and probably for a very good reason.

Can you describe your working relationship with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld? How receptive has the Defense Department been to working with you?

I have worked with Secretary Rumsfeld throughout this administration. Our

relationship is excellent, and there's no reason for it not to be. We both want to make sure that our national security is preserved and that our combatant commanders and troops in the field have the best intelligence possible as they carry out their missions. Remember, I began my diplomatic career in Vietnam and ended it in Iraq. I know a little bit about what the U.S. military does for our country, and it's a pleasure to work with the secretary in support of the troops.

Security is a worldwide problem. Can you describe the cooperation between the United States and foreign security services?

Implicit in your question is the recognition that we are not alone in the war on terror, nor are we the only nation that worries about things like the spread of weapons of mass destruction. That being the case, we have many invaluable intelligence relationships with foreign counterparts – none of which I'd care to characterize. The quieter we are, the more effectively we cooperate, and we want to keep it that way.

What leaders, either current or from history, do you admire most, and what attributes would you look for in an outstanding world leader of today?

I was educated in the aftermath of World War II and joined the foreign service in 1960, at the very end of the Eisenhower administration. So I studied and admired the leaders of that period a great deal: Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower. I think each of them had a broad, global view of the national interest, one that recognized the implications of developments in faraway places for life at home. That kind of vision is as essential today as it was then.

In this post-9/11 world, with its great uncertainties about safety and government responses to terrorism, what advice would you give young people who are interested in public service? How would you inspire them? Do you feel your career in public service has been worthwhile?

I have five children who ask me these kinds of questions all the time. Everyone has to make up his or her own mind, but I would think that 9/11 would drive more and more young people into public service, rather than keep them out. A career in public service has enabled me to live and work on four continents, study several languages, contribute to issues as diverse as rural development in Africa and helping democracy take root in Central America, and wake up every morning knowing that the issues that preoccupy me are the issues that preoccupy the world. A life in public service is bigger than the public servant – I'll tell you that. I would not have traded my time in government for any other career. ●

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