

**Interview of Ambassador John D. Negroponte  
Director of National Intelligence**

**With Mr. Robert Siegel of National Public Radio**

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Transcript – As Aired**

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MR. SIEGEL: Now, a conversation with John Negroponte, the Director of National Intelligence. His job, overseeing the entire Intelligence Community was created after 9/11. Negroponte, the veteran diplomat, has refereed to prewar intelligence about Iraq as the WMD fiasco. I sat down with him today at his office at Bolling Air Force Base and asked him about current intelligence on Iran, and Weapons of Mass Destruction. According to U.S. intelligence agencies, how soon will Iran have a nuclear weapon given its present program? Well, Negroponte says the US made its estimate a year ago.

AMB. NEGROPONTE: These are estimates. These are judgments. They're not hard and cold simple facts. But our best estimate at the time, and it continues to be the judgment of the Intelligence Community, is that sometime beginning in the next decade, perhaps out to the middle of the next decade would be a good time frame, a good estimate of when they might have such a capability.

MR. SIEGEL: Sometime between four and 10 years from now you would assume they could achieve a nuclear weapon.

AMB. NEGROPONTE: Five to 10 years from now.

MR. SIEGEL: The International Atomic Energy Agency reported on its inspections this week. They reported on rather little progress by the Iranians. Does that conform to U.S. intelligence or does it in any way alter your estimate?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: This is a judgment that was formed over a period of time based on all sources of intelligence that we have, and I think those basic pieces remain in place today, both the determination to acquire such a capability, and the efforts that are under way to achieve that.

Now mind you – and this was why I was careful to say at the outset that these are estimates and judgments, because you don't know what you don't know. And Iran is by definition, from the point of view of the Intelligence Community, a hard target. They engage in denial and deception. They don't want us to necessarily know everything that they're doing. So we don't, for example, know whether there's a secret military program and to what extent that program has made progress.

MR. SIEGEL: When Americans hear of, or read of, say, an Israeli estimate that the Iranians are two years away from a nuclear weapon, do you think the Israelis are just making different inferences from the same evidence you see –

AMB. NEGROPONTE: No –

MR. SIEGEL: – or they know differently?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: No, I don't – I think that we basically operate from the same knowledge base. We also happen to consult with the Israelis quite closely. We have intelligence-sharing arrangements, procedures.

I think that sometimes what the Israelis will do – and I think that perhaps because it's a more existential issue for them, they will give you the worst-case assessment.

We would agree that perhaps an equally valid assessment would be the same one that we put forward.

MR. SIEGEL: But you're talking about differences in assessment and analysis of information –

AMB. NEGROPONTE: Correct.

MR. SIEGEL: – not differences in information?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: That – I would say that, yes. I think that's fair.

MR. SIEGEL: I'd like to ask you about the threat posed to the United States as you see it now, as the agency sees it now, the U.S. Intelligence Community, by al Qaeda, as we understand it to be led by Osama bin Laden and al-Zawahiri. Do they remain a significant threat to the U.S.? Or has that threat been overshadowed by local groups with similar ideas that might be inspired by but not enabled or assisted by bin Laden at all?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: Our judgment is that al Qaeda remains the principal threat, and it does remain a threat both to our country and to our interests abroad.

You raise an interesting question as to the relationship between al Qaeda on the one hand and certain other groups around the world who may be inspired by al Qaeda but who aren't necessarily directly controlled by it. And what I believe I had discerned from the intelligence that I've seen is that there's a whole spectrum, all the way from those who really are under its influence and to one extent or another receive direction from al Qaeda, all the way to organizations that are simply spontaneous local cells, if you will, who are engaged in some kind of copycat activity.

MR. SIEGEL: Is the pursuit of bin Laden and/or Zawahiri – is that necessary to prevent further acts of terrorism, or is it punitive, or is it fighting the last war?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: I think, first of all, they still are important – even when we say "inspirational," they do inspire.

Secondly, I think they have become kind of icons and symbols of this terrorist movement.

And as I said earlier, yes, we have had indications of them involved, or people closely associated to them, their subordinates, directly plotting against the U.S. and Western interests.

MR. SIEGEL: Why haven't we found them?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: Let me put it this way; many of his closest associates who were involved in 9/11 have been put out of commission one way or another, either captured or killed. I'm not going to try to tell you that it's only a matter of time before he is found, because obviously it's been five years, and one can rightly note that he's been pretty effective at hiding, probably up in that Pakistan\Afghanistan border area. But he certainly has less room for maneuver. He no longer has a nation state as a platform from which to conduct his activities. So I'd say his scope, his freedom of action is substantially less than it used to be.

MR. SIEGEL: But he's still a threat and it's still important to –

AMB. NEGROPONTE: He's still a threat. He's still a threat, yeah.

MR. SIEGEL: When you are addressing a question at the various intelligence agencies about Iran or about al Qaeda or Iraq, and there are differing estimates that are being offered by analysts in the chain of command, how much variety do policymakers get to see? Is it all distilled down to 1 percentage likelihood of what's going to happen or one estimate? Or do our policymakers get to see a variety of possibilities?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: They do. And I think they're getting to see a lot more than they used to, for two reasons. I mean, one, we deliberately want to do that. I mean, if there's two or three real contending points of view, we want the policymakers to know about that. So that's one point.

The second is, we've done a better job of connecting the analysts across the community with each other. We've created real communities of interest so that – just to give you one small example, we've created what is called an Analytic Resources Catalog, so that if you want to know how many analysts across the community work on Iraq, you can get that information; you can find out who the analysts are in every single agency. Strange as it may seem, we didn't have our information organized in that fashion previously, it was really stovepiped. And so there wasn't – if the President's Daily Brief was prepared primarily in the CIA, they perhaps didn't reach out as much as they ought to have to other agencies to compare notes with the other analysts. It's become much easier to create a community of interest.

So I think our policymakers get richer analysis and they get a greater variety of points of view about a particular issue.

MR. SIEGEL: Have you had occasion to tell either the president or the vice president you may suspect that, but we just find no – we find no basis in intelligence for that? Sorry, I can't oblige you with any analysis that supports what you think about that?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: You're going to ask me – if I'm going to say yes, and then you're going to ask me to give you an example. But I'm – I –

MR. SIEGEL: What if I promise I won't ask you to do that?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: No. (Laughs.) But it's not unusual to say that, yeah. Because there is such a thing as conventional wisdom on an issue or whatever people happen to be saying –

MR. SIEGEL: You could offer an example if you wanted to.

AMB. NEGROPONTE: – but which isn't necessarily supported by the intelligence. But we're not – we certainly aren't hesitant to say that if asked.

MR. SIEGEL: Ambassador Negroponte, thank you very much for talking with us.

AMB. NEGROPONTE: Thank you.

MR. SIEGEL: That's National Intelligence Director, John Negroponte, speaking with us in his office earlier today.