

Central Intelligence Agency

[Home](#) | [Notices](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Security](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Index](#) | [Search](#)



PRESS RELEASES AND STATEMENTS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

14 July 2004

**Acting Director of Central Intelligence John E. McLaughlin
Interviewed by Steve Roberts
on National Public Radio's Diane Rehm Show, 14 July 2004**

(transcript)

For WAMU and NPR in Washington, I'm Steve Roberts, sitting in for Diane Rehm. On Friday, the bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee released its report on the US Intelligence Community's pre-war assessments on Iraq. In the 511 page report, the committee concluded that intelligence provided by the CIA about Iraq's weapons programs was either overstated or was not supported by evidence. The report cited a broken corporate culture, poor management, and an aversion to risk-taking. On Sunday, Deputy Director John McLaughlin took over as Acting Director of the Agency. He joins me in the studio to talk about the report and the implications for America's intelligence gathering operations. But first, the news...

(break)

Roberts: Thanks for joining us. I'm Steve Roberts, sitting in today for Diane Rehm. Last Friday, the Senate Intelligence Committee released a lengthy and very critical report on the intelligence provided by the CIA before the US decision to invade Iraq. The report details specific failures that led to false conclusions about Iraq's weapons capability. On Sunday, former Deputy Director John McLaughlin became the CIA's acting Director. He joins me in the studio to share his perspective on the report, the Agency's record, and on the future. Mr. McLaughlin, welcome to the Diane Rehm Show.

McLaughlin: Thank you, Steve. It's good to be here.

Roberts: You can join our conversation. Please give us a call. And Mr. McLaughlin can

probably join us for only the first half hour. We'll try to take a couple of calls. You can call at 1-800-433-8850 as always. Let me start with the news. Yesterday you gave an interview to Reuters in which you said that the threat levels to the United States are higher than at any time since 9/11. What are you basing that on?

McLaughlin: Well, since 9/11, we've developed much more intelligence than we had then on al Qaeda and its intentions. Of course, at that time, as you know, in the summer of 2001, we had ample warning of attack, but we didn't know anything about specificity: timing, targets, and so forth. But we did have conviction that something big was coming at us. We have that same conviction now. And the reason I say that it is serious is that I think the information I've seen is very, very solid. We have very little doubt about the information we have in terms of its sourcing and its authenticity.

Roberts: Anything specific?

McLaughlin: Well, there's always a tension, Steve, between the public's desire for specificity on this and our first mission, which is to stop it. One of the tools that terrorists use to gain an advantage over us is their ability to keep a secret. We don't have a very good ability to keep a secret these days. But they keep this highly compartmented so that when we do acquire some understanding of their plans, there isn't a lot we can say about it, because the information we have is important to us in seeking to thwart the attack.

Roberts: And there is—a lot of our listeners would say, "Wait. Should I worry? Should I avoid traveling this summer? Should I avoid going to the Democratic or Republican conventions or being in the same city where they are being held—in Boston and New York? What would you say to that?"

McLaughlin: I would say no. I would not advise people to think that way. What I would advise people to do is three things. I would advise them to have confidence that the government is working this as hard as they can. I believe our homeland security apparatus is working well. We had a great exercise back in December at the time we went to orange, and everyone performed very well during that period. Now, I don't mean to be overly reassuring here, because, remember, when you're dealing with terrorists, we can be successful a thousand times; they've just got to be lucky once. So, I don't mean to be falsely reassuring. What I would say is that people ought to go on about their business. And the other thing that I would say to the American people is that it's very important: they have an important role to play here. And that is: Be vigilant. To notice things that are suspicious. This, of course, is preeminently the duty of local law enforcement. But citizens themselves need to keep their eyes open and be alert.

Roberts: Now you've said to our listeners, to the country, that we should have confidence in what they're being told. Now our people say wait: The Agency did not accurately predict 9/11. They made a lot of mistakes in terms of putting intelligence together before 9/11. The Senate committee has just reported/disclosed deep flaws in the intelligence which before/leading up to Iraq. Why should we have confidence in you, given your track record?

McLaughlin: Well, this is one of the objections I would have to the Senate's report. The way it's been presented has allowed take root a perception out there that because there were perceived shortcomings in the work on that one specific problem in that one specific time frame that somehow you can't trust intelligence anymore. There are a multitude of reasons why the American people should have confidence in their Intelligence Community and confidence when we say that there is a serious threat. Let's take those in reverse order. Let's talk about the threat. Before 9/11, we did have warning, and we warned. We didn't have the specificity. Since 9/11, we have taken down—you've heard this figure before—nearly 2/3 of the leadership that was in place with al Qaeda at that time. Capturing a terrorist is not an easy thing. We have taken out of place and rendered to justice the architect of 9/11: Khalid Sheikh Muhammad. That's one reason why the American public should have confidence when its Intelligence Community says there's a serious threat. It's not something we do casually. We do it based on tough, rigorous experience, particularly since 9/11, when our officers have been risking their lives around the world, face-to-face with terrorists. Now second, I want to cover that second point. More broadly, why should people have confidence with their Intelligence Community. One of the problems that I have with the Senate report—and let's put that in context. After all, I did stand up the other day at a press conference to say in three words "We get it." We understand there were shortcomings. But one of the problems I have is that report is presented with no context whatsoever. It is completely without context. After all, what it is, is a discussion on our work on weapons proliferation. And we'd acknowledge that there are some shortcomings; I'll be happy to talk about those as you wish. But if you look at our record across the board on weapons proliferation, it is extraordinarily strong. The President just the other day visited Oak Ridge, Tennessee, to look at the haul of weapons that came out of Libya, including weapons materials associated with a nuclear weapons program. Libya's WMD was eliminated principally because British and American intelligence detected accurately what they were doing in their nuclear program, in their biological and chemical program, and confronted the Libyans with that knowledge. An understated story here on the weapons side is the success that the Intelligence Community has had working across years, across continents, and across disciplines to take down—literally, take down—the world's most dangerous proliferation network: the A. Q. Khan network, operating initially out of Pakistan, but spanning three or four continents. And I could go on. Look, we are in the classic position now that American intelligence gets into about every ten years. There's a cycle here, where perceived shortcomings overshadow dramatically the successes. So I would say to the American people that they need to have confidence in their Intelligence Community.

Roberts: You also said those three famous words now: We get it. What did you get? What were the shortcomings? What changes do you think are necessary as a result, not only of the Senate's report, but your own internal assessments of what went wrong?

McLaughlin: You know, I could have said that a little differently. I could have put it in the past tense. I could have said, "We got it." Because, in the intelligence business, we have to constantly be in a learning mode. I'll tell you what we got, but let me frame it a little bit for you. I said in a speech to the Business Executives for National Security a couple of weeks ago that however good we are, there's no perfection in this business. By profession, we must take risks.

Risks. Now people urge us not to be risk-averse. So our officers risk their lives overseas. And our analysts here risk their reputations every day by having to take a stand on controversial issues. So, when you take risks, by definition—look it up in a dictionary—there's a possibility of a mistake. So in a risk-taking business, there's a possibility of a mistake. And, when mistakes are made, the only thing we can do is stand back and learn from them. Now, in this case, as soon as conflict ended, the hostilities ended formally and we went into Iraq, and we did not discover the, particularly the, biological and chemical weapons that the whole world anticipated would be there, I might add, we immediately began our own internal investigation of why that would be so. We looked at our sources, we looked at our assumptions, we looked at our analytic tradecraft. And, in fact, many of the things that you find in the Senate report we'd passed to the Senate as we discovered problems with sources; as we discovered assumptions that we had made that ought to have been tested more rigorously.

Roberts: This is a very important point, because you said that you just recently, you've instituted a new system where these National Intelligence Estimates—the famous NIEs—are now subject to much more scrutiny in almost a devil's advocate way that people take. I'm sure that critics say, "wait. Why wasn't this being done earlier? Why wasn't there much more of an internal, rigorous process of subjecting these judgments to more thought?"

McLaughlin: Well, it's a very interesting question. Here what I would assure the American public here, is that devil's advocacy, if we all understand what that means: it means challenging the assumption that's before you. It means taking a set of facts and trying to arrive at a different conclusion quite deliberately to see if they stand up. This is woven into the fabric of our business. It's something people don't understand.

Roberts: It doesn't seem to happen...

McLaughlin: I think it happens in many cases. Let me give you a couple of examples. The Iraq problem was unique in many respects, absolutely. Normally, our job... Take a case like North Korea's weapons programs. Highly secretive, closed state. Not a lot is known. Quite a bit is known, but our job in a case like that is to penetrate and discover what the world does not know. In the case of Iraq, our job was a little different, if you think about it. For us to have performed differently in Iraq, we would have had to overturn beliefs that were held by the entire world. And that's one of the very few instances that I can think of in my 30 year career of that's where the bar was for the Intelligence Community. Let's turn to our devil's advocacy for a moment, because one of the things that devil's advocacy often involves is reaching outside the Intelligence Community for external experts. For people to come in and tell you what they think, without any of the preconceptions that might exist from intelligence data. You know, ironically, had we done that on Iraq, our projections about their weapons programs might have been even stronger than they were. Because most of the external experts believed more strongly than we did in many cases that those weapons existed. I'd like to read you a statement...

Roberts: What about this notion of group think? It's a phrase that's received a lot of currency. And it charges this basic assumption that you've described—in fairness, that was shared by other

intelligence services. Just this morning, there's a report issued in Britain which made very similar criticisms of the British system as with the American system. And there was, and clearly the Clinton Administration also shared some of these assumptions. President Clinton has said this. Hilary Clinton has said this. But, do you agree that there was a failure to challenge that assumption that turned out to be so flawed?

McLaughlin: Actually, I disagree. I think, again, you know, Director Tenet made a speech at Georgetown back in February which had a lot of this in it. The theme of it was "We're not all right, and we're not all wrong." In this case, we were wrong about some things, some important things. But I don't think we were a victim of what I would call group think. One of the things that's not well understood about this National Intelligence Estimate—and that's essentially what the Senate spent a year studying—is that it is filled with argument. When you get past the first five pages there is a lot of argument laid out in that estimate. Now, I don't know how many people in Congress read it. I literally don't know. But, had they read the entire document, and not just the first few pages, where we mistakenly—this is a lessons learned—we mistakenly did not express as fully as we should have some of the uncertainties because technically, in our first couple of pages—this is an art form issue—we try to sum up what we really think. If you go into the document itself, you'll find that there were strong dissents established.

Roberts: But those didn't come through.

McLaughlin: Well, they certainly were made available to people in Congress.

Roberts: And to the White House?

McLaughlin: Absolutely. And if you look at, for example, the issue of nuclear weapons, one of the things that people forget, is that we did not say "he had nuclear weapons." And the issue of reconstitution was strongly objected to by the State Department. This was laid out in the document. And the whole issue of these famous aluminum tubes was also objected to in three pages.

Roberts: John McLaughlin. He's the acting Director of the CIA. We're going to be right back with a couple of your calls and questions, so stay with us.

Roberts: Welcome back. I'm Steve Roberts. I'm sitting in today for Diane Rehm. My guest this hour is John McLaughlin, the acting Director of the CIA. He was formerly the Deputy Director. And as he was pointing out to me, acting Director, Mr. McLaughlin, does not mean part time Director.

McLaughlin: Not at all.

Roberts: It's an 18-hour job.

McLaughlin: Not at all. I was amused by a piece in one of the newspapers yesterday that

suggested our halls were empty and that we were all staring our shoes. But in fact the place is bustling, and I'm not part time. I'm acting with full energy and commitment every single day.

Roberts: Now, of course, you have been a CIA professional and you're not a political appointee. But, inevitably, the CIA has become a major factor in the political campaign. And let me quote to you a headline from the front page of the New York Times over the weekend after Senators Kerry and Edwards made partially critical remarks about both the Agency and the Bush Administration. "Bad Iraq Intelligence Cost Lives, Democrats Say." What was your reaction when you saw that headline?

McLaughlin: Well, my reaction when I saw that headline was to say to myself that I think it is wrong. The implication that has come out of all of this discussion is that somehow decisions to go to war were based on this document that was studied for a year overstates the role of this document. Couple of thoughts on that. I mean, had that been the basis for going to war, more would have been made in the debates about the fact that we said that Saddam didn't have nuclear weapons. More would have been made in the debates about the fact that we said that he was not enriching uranium. More would have been made in the debates about the fact that we had serious differences on a number of issues that we were talking about just before the break. More would have been made about the fact that we expressed low confidence in our understanding of when and whether he reviews these weapons. So I think that there was more involved in this debate. Look, I can't say why anyone chose their view or their (inaudible) or how they chose to go, to come down on this question. Everyone has to say that for themselves. But there were, as I said earlier—one of the things missing from this whole discussion was context. And, you go into the context here. (inaudible) This was, after all, not Switzerland we were writing about. If you read the report, it would sound as though we were wrong to even suspect that weapons existed. This is a country that we'd been in conflict with one way or another for 12 years. A country where the system of containment arguably was breaking down, whether it was limiting finances or sanctions or influence of military materiel. This was a country where given every chance to account for his weapons, Saddam continued to deceive. This was a country where we were, after all, flying in no-fly zones, north and south, every day. This was a country which since the war, since the end of hostilities, has been shown through the work of the Iraq Survey Group to be in material breach of Resolution 1441. So, you know, when I saw that headline, I... Obviously, as an American, I've been in the military, I've served in uniform, I've been under attack in a war zone. I know what it's like and anyone who, you know, contemplates the situation regrets the loss of life. But I think it is oversimplifying the situation here to say that this is all because of this estimate that's been studied for a year.

Roberts: You've pointed out several times that your professional analysts made many qualifications and many caveats in their reports and analysis. And yet, your predecessor, Director George Tenet, if Bob Woodward's book is to be believed, said to the President of the United States, "It is a slam dunk," quote, that these weapons would be found and these weapons were present. Now that doesn't sound like there are a lot of caveats in that statement.

McLaughlin: Well, one thing I don't comment on is anything that happens in the Oval Office. And I certainly am not going to comment on what the Director is alleged to have said. What I

would tell you, though, is that however that alleged statement is interpreted, I know George Tenet well. And I know what his thinking was, was that there was a lot of evidence that he had weapons. You know, he uses colorful language. And I think it's been overinterpreted, overemphasized. But I just am not going to discuss what goes on in the Oval Office.

Roberts: Well let me ask you this. Since you made the point that these caveats were contained in the information that was sent to the Senate oversight committees as well as to the White House. And that there are well-documented statements over and over again by Vice President Cheney, by the President himself and others, talking about their surety, their confidence, their absolute conviction that these weapons existed, are you saying that the information was taken from, that the qualifications, the caveats that the Agency presented then got lost in translation and that the White House overinterpreted what you said?

McLaughlin: I'm not going to try to make judgments about statements by people in the Administration, because I think that my job is just to interpret the intelligence, get it down in black and white, make sure of that. And that's what we have to stand on. But I would say, policy makers, unlike intelligence analysts, make their statements and their judgments on a broad range of issues. Sherman Kent, one of the forerunners of intelligence analysis, who is quoted, actually, in the Senate report, said once, that the average policy maker makes a decision on the basis of about a dozen different indicators, not just intelligence. So we have to calculate, among other things, what is the level of risk you're willing to take in the post-9/11 environment? That's not an intelligence judgment. Intelligence doesn't make policy. And they also read the raw reporting. And they're entitled to their own views. They don't have to just parrot.

Roberts: Are you comfortable that the intelligence estimates were interpreted accurately by the White House? When you heard these statements that were full of conviction when you, in the material coming out of CIA was full of caveats, was there a disconnect there?

McLaughlin: I did not at any point feel that there was a major disconnect. And, again, that's just not an area where we get into. If there is a major error in a statement by a public figure, as George Tenet has said a number of times, we would quietly say to them, "I wouldn't go quite that far. I would do it a little differently." But again, policy makers are free in interpret intelligence as they wish. And I would remind you again, and remind people that before the war, most of the experts had fewer qualifiers than the Intelligence Community. And our Administration figures were free to call upon those experts as well as us. Just to quote some things from testimony that was given prior to the war, back in September 2002. You know, David Kay, for example, said this. He was our chief weapons inspector. He was a friend of mine, who did wonderful work for us after the war as one of our advisors. You know, David said, what's clear is that unless we take immediate steps to address the issue of removing Saddam's regime from power in Iraq, we will soon face a nuclear-armed and emboldened Saddam. It discusses the obstructions that Saddam was putting up, and says this removes all doubt about his aim to acquire and enlarge his nuclear and biological and chemical weapons stockpiles. And, if you looked at other articles that were written by various people, you will see that experts, including UN experts, were cited as having a far more robust opinion than we did about his uranium. For example, Ken Pollak's article in the

Atlantic Monthly in January and February of 2003 looked back at what he heard from UN inspectors in 2001 when he asked 20 of them if Saddam was enriching uranium. They all put up their hands and said, "Yes. Yes." That's more than what the Intelligence Community said. So our policy makers are reading all of this stuff, too, and they've got to decide, "well, the external experts are saying that, there's the Intelligence Community that's saying this", they've got to take a position. And that's among the dozen things that they refer to.

Roberts: One of our callers wanted to talk to you. And if you'll put on your headphones, we'll go, we'll try to get through a couple of these quickly. Connie in Rome, New York, welcome to the Diane Rehm Show, Connie.

Caller: Thank you. Longtime listener, first time caller. I just wanted to assure Director McLaughlin that not every citizen in the United States is really down on the CIA or the FBI. We realize that they go through major upheavals frequently. And we remember the '70s. (sentence inaudible) And clearly Congress didn't let them do what they needed to do. So, I just wanted him to know that there are people out there that know that they're doing a good job. That's it.

McLaughlin: Thank you, Connie.

Roberts: Thank you, Connie. Let's talk to Miles in Cleveland, Ohio. Welcome to the Diane Rehm Show, Miles.

Caller: Good morning. Thank you for taking my call. First of all, I'd like to thank Mr. McLaughlin for his many years of service to the people of this country. So often, I would imagine, you don't get individual things like that. My question is, and the last caller just somewhat briefly touched on it, since 9/11 and the war in Iraq, we've heard a lot of blame being put on systemic problems in the Agency that date back to the Church hearings in the mid-'70s, in particular, that those impacted the Agency's ability to have assets on the ground in other countries. And, I would like you to address that in the context that if in fact there were restrictions created by those hearings, which I do not believe to be the case, because I do recall them, what's different now? What are you going to be allowed to do now in order to have such assets, which are obviously so important, in place.

Roberts: Thank you. Thanks, Miles. A very important question.

McLaughlin: Yes, it is. And I'm happy to have it, because we have been in the process, Miles, of rebuilding our, what we call our Clandestine Service for a number of years now. I will tell you that when George Tenet became Director of CIA back in 1997, shockingly, at that point, as a result of resource cuts in the '90s, we had only about two dozen officers in training for that service, which is basically the nation's spy service. I will tell you that since then, and I give the Congress and the Administration credit for understanding that we need more resources, we have hired large numbers of people. We are now graduating the largest Clandestine Service classes in our history. The CIA gets about 6,000 resumes a week from people who want to work for us. And we're in much better shape. Are we perfect yet? Are we where we need to be? No. We have a

ways to go, because the world has changed dramatically in the last ten years. The need for intelligence is greater. But we'll get there. We have some years to go before where we need to be to serve the nation properly.

Roberts: I'm Steve Roberts, and you're listening to the Diane Rehm Show. I've talked to a number of people who like to follow up that question in terms of the recruitment of Muslims and of Arabic speakers. There's been a lot of talk about the lack of assets on the ground in this community. That this recruitment has been badly hampered by the way Muslims have been treated at airports, (inaudible) and that this has been a... I've talked to some in the FBI, not in the CIA. They've said this is an enormous obstacle to recruiting just these types of people you need.

McLaughlin: Steve, I don't have at my fingertips the data that I would need to give you a factual answer on how many people of Muslim background we have recruited recently. I know that we've had a major recruitment drive in that community, because we do need Arabic speakers. It's a myth that we don't have Arabic speakers. We have a lot of Arabic speakers. But it is not a myth that we don't have enough. I mean, if you consider the demands on us in the war on terrorism and in Iraq right now, if you speak Arabic, every chance there is that you're going to be working on one of those two problems. What I would say is, since I have a chance to talk to the American public here, if you are of Muslim background, and if you, particularly if you speak Arabic, and you want to work for the CIA, we want to talk to you.

Roberts: OK. Is there a website? Or a place people can consult if they want to?

McLaughlin: cia.gov Download the application, and fill it out in Arabic.

Roberts: OK. Thank you. Let's talk to Scott in Dallas, Texas. Thanks for joining us on the Diane Rehm Show, Scott.

Caller: I want to focus on terrorism. Did you all (inaudible) that resolving the Israeli-Palestine conflict would be the (inaudible) would resolve it. David Robarge, in a State Department hearing said that Israel was responsible for initiating the '67 war, contrary to all the rhetoric and propaganda otherwise.

We have allowed that fact to continue, (inaudible) and encouraged it. And are now (inaudible) buying it and making it permanent with the wall. If this isn't an unwanted incitement. Why aren't we talking about that?

McLaughlin: Well, I know that our government is committed to making progress in that area. I'm not a policy maker. So I can't comment on the policy itself. People can argue one way or another about the degree to which the Arab-Israeli conflict fuels terrorism. What I would tell you is this. At the time of 9/11—2001—the Arab-Israeli conflict was less than it is now. In fact, in the period between roughly 1996-1997 and 2001, my Agency was involved in helping to ease that conflict, in many cases, through the direct, effective work of George Tenet working to increase the effectiveness of the Palestinian security services. My point here is simply this: The Arab-Israeli

conflict was at a low ebb then, and they still attacked the United States. So, to me, this is an excuse that terrorists use to justify their murderous acts.

Roberts: Let me ask you another question. The Senate Committee very specifically dealt with only one issue, which was the quality of the intelligence produced by the professional agencies. It very specifically, in part, for political reasons, did not deal with the second question, which was: how was this intelligence used by the Administration. There was an arrangement, between the Democrats and Republicans, to put that report off. It will come. Maybe not till after the election. But from everything you know, what will that report say? What's your view of how the intelligence that you provide... You say that you know the policymaker. But how was the intelligence your Agency provided used by the White House, fairly or unfairly, accurately or inaccurately?

McLaughlin: Well, that's one of those questions that I think I'm going to leave to the Senate committee. You know, if they did not feel qualified to wrestle with that now, as an intelligence professional, who really tries to stay out of politics, it's very important—it's very, very important—to keep this nation's intelligence services out of politics. I'm going to let them sort that out. What I know here is that the President made a strategic decision to change the geographic scope of terrorism in the Middle East and given that the Iraq was a state sponsor of terrorism. And people can debate that. But I think I'm going to let the Senate sort out those issues.

Roberts: Very quick final question: What's the mood in Langley today? Some people have raised the possibility of demoralization, given all the criticism.

McLaughlin: Well, you know, people in the Intelligence Community have to be very resilient. I mean, they're out there on the front lines, fighting terrorists. I had a colleague say to me the other day, "the correct response to the Senate committee is to go out and penetrate another proliferation network, recruit another terrorist, take another one off the streets, because that's what we have to do for the American people."

Roberts: John McLaughlin, acting Director of the CIA. Thanks very much for being with us on the Diane Rehm Show.

[\[Press Releases and Statements Page\]](#) [\[Public Affairs Page\]](#) [\[CIA Homepage\]](#)

Page last updated: 04/25/2005 12:26:32.

If you have questions or comments about this Web site, [Contact Us](#).