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Op-Ed Contributor

Loose Lips Sink Spies

By PORTER GOSS
Washington

AT the Central Intelligence Agency, we are more than holding our own in the global war on terrorism, but we are at risk of losing a key battle: the battle to protect our classified information.

Judge Laurence Silberman, a chairman of President Bush's commission on weapons of mass destruction, said he was "stunned" by the damage done to our critical intelligence assets by leaked information. The commission reported last March that in monetary terms, unauthorized disclosures have cost America hundreds of millions of dollars; in security terms, of course, the cost has been much higher. Part of the problem is that the term "whistleblower" has been misappropriated. The sharp distinction between a whistleblower and someone who breaks the law by willfully compromising classified information has been muddied.

As a member of Congress in 1998, I sponsored the Intelligence Community Whistleblower Protection Act to ensure that current or former employees could petition Congress, after raising concerns within their respective agency, consistent with the need to protect classified information.

Exercising one's rights under this act is an appropriate and responsible way to bring questionable practices to the attention of those in Congress charged with oversight of intelligence agencies. And it works. Government employees have used statutory procedures — including internal channels at their agencies — on countless occasions to correct abuses without risk of retribution and while protecting information critical to our national defense.

On the other hand, those who choose to bypass the law and go straight to the press are not noble, honorable or patriotic. Nor are they whistleblowers. Instead they are committing a criminal act that potentially places American lives at risk. It is unconscionable to compromise national security information and then seek protection as a whistleblower to forestall punishment.

Today America is confronting an enemy intent on brutal murder. Without the capacity to gain intelligence on terrorist organizations through clandestine sources and methods, we and our allies are left vulnerable to the horrors of homicidal fanaticism.

The C.I.A. has put many terrorists out of action since 9/11. In our pursuit of the enemy, we accept the unique responsibility we bear as officers of a clandestine service serving an open, constitutional society. But we also know that unauthorized disclosure of classified intelligence inhibits our ability to carry out our mission and protect the nation. Revelations of intelligence successes or failures, whether accurate or not, can aid Al Qaeda and its global affiliates in many ways. A leak is invaluable to them, even if it only,

say, prematurely confirms whether one of their associates is dead or alive. They can gain much more: these disclosures can tip the terrorists to new technologies we use, our operational tactics, and the identities of brave men and women who risk their lives to assist us.

Such leaks also cause our intelligence partners around the globe to question our professionalism and credibility. Too many of my counterparts from other countries have told me, "You Americans can't keep a secret." And because of the number of recent news reports discussing our relationships with other intelligence services, some of these critical partners have even informed the C.I.A. that they are reconsidering their participation in some of our most important antiterrorism ventures. They fear that exposure of their cooperation could subject their citizens to terrorist retaliation. Last month, a news article in this newspaper described a "secret meeting" to discuss "highly classified" techniques to detect efforts by other countries to build nuclear weapons. This information was attributed to unnamed intelligence officials who "spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the effort's secrecy." Whether accurate or not, this is a direct acknowledgment that these unnamed officials apparently know the importance of secrecy.

Recently, I noticed renewed debate in the news media over press reports in 1998 that Osama bin Laden's satellite phone was being tracked by United States intelligence officials. In the recent debate, it was taken for granted that the original reports did not hurt our national security efforts, and any suggestions that they did cause damage were dismissed as urban myth. But the reality is that the revelation of the phone tracking was, without question, one of the most egregious examples of an unauthorized criminal disclosure of classified national defense information in recent years. It served no public interest. Ultimately, the bin Laden phone went silent.

I take seriously my agency's responsibility to protect our national security. Unauthorized disclosures undermine our efforts and abuse the trust of the people we are sworn to protect. Since becoming director, I have filed criminal reports with the Department of Justice because of such compromises. That department is committed to working with us to investigate these cases aggressively. In addition, I have instituted measures within the agency to further safeguard the integrity of classified data.

Our enemies cannot match the creativity, expertise, technical genius and tradecraft that the C.I.A. brings to bear in this war. Criminal disclosures of national security information, however, can erase much of that advantage. The terrorists gain an edge when they keep their secrets and we don't keep ours.

Porter Goss is the director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

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