



Why it could be good for Trump to skip some intelligence briefings

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As he does with considerable regularity, Donald Trump has elevated the eyebrows of the foreign policy establishment with his practice of undergoing intelligence briefings only **once a week** on average, instead of daily. Now his team says that he is getting the President's Daily Brief **three times a week**, along with daily briefings from his appointee for national security adviser.

Although Trump's reduced schedule of briefings is commonly interpreted as an effort to diss the intelligence community, it seems that Trump's chief goal is to keep himself from becoming bored. As **he put it** on Fox News Sunday a few days ago, "I'm, like, a smart person. I don't have to be told the same thing and the same words every single day for the next eight years....I don't need that."

But the problem with intelligence briefings is not so much that they cause boredom in the recipient as that they routinely induce terror.

Central to the briefing is the "threat matrix," a compendium assembled by the CIA and the FBI that includes all the "threats" -- or more accurately "leads" -- needing to be followed up. Garrett Graff **reports** that it is "filled to the brim with whispers, rumors, and vacuous, unconfirmed information" and that it can come off as "a catalogue of horrors" and as the "daily looming prognoses of Armageddon." Philip Mudd **notes** the "voluminous and dominating" threat information, much of which he points out is raw and "below threshold" for top leaders, and notes that it contributes "to a pervasive sense that every day might bring a new attack."

As Henry Kissinger **stresses**, "Historians rarely do justice to the psychological stress on a policy-maker." One can only imagine what happens when this rather natural hazard of office is exacerbated every day by fusillades of seemingly dire threat information generated by people who are paid to identify and inflate threats, not to downplay them. "My job," **recalls** one Pentagon official, "was to look for all the bad stuff. Scanning for threats is what we get paid to do."

Jack Goldsmith, an avid consumer of the process when he was in the Bush administration, **stresses** that, "It is hard to overstate the impact that the incessant waves of threat reports have on the judgment of people inside the executive branch." Former CIA Director

George Tenet **says** that, "Virtually every day you would hear something about a possible impending threat that would scare you to death." This, writes Goldsmith, captures "the attitude of every person I knew who regularly read the threat matrix." Every person.

In his 2010 memoir, George W. Bush **notes** that, thanks to intelligence reports, "for months after 9/11, I would wake up in the middle of the night worried." But even a decade later he cannot bring himself to reflect on the fact that those worries went substantially unfulfilled in subsequent experience. Similarly, although Tenet may have been scared to death every day by the intelligence information fed to him, scarcely any, perhaps none, of the thousands of "threats" that terrified him on a daily basis actually came to pass.

Goldsmith suggests that the sheer number of "threats," combined with the fact that these scarcely ever lead to anything, never managed to inspire analysts and policymakers to consider the rather plausible, if arguable, conclusion that there was little or nothing out there to fear. Rather, it caused them -- exclusively it seems -- to embrace the dead opposite. "The want of actionable intelligence combined with a knowledge of what might happen," he says, "produced an aggressive, panicked attitude that assumed the worst about threats."

Barack Obama does not seem to have been immune to the process, **noting** that as "a President who looks at intelligence every morning, I also can't help but be reminded that America must be vigilant in the face of threats."

Part of the problem emerges from what Marc Sageman, after years of experience in the intelligence community, **calls** "a bias for alarming interpretations." Often, he says, "the worst interpretation" is given full attention while potentially disconfirming evidence "is neglected." Robert Jervis **agrees**: probing for "alternative explanations of what was happening" is, he finds, "very rare."

It remains to be seen whether the nation is better served if its commander in chief is terrified a few times a week rather than once a day by his intelligence briefings.