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## HOMELAND SECURITY

# At the FBI, cronyism trumps competence

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**W**hat will the FBI do the next time it is surprised by a terrorist attack? If past is precedent, the answer is simple. Reorganize.

Last month, the FBI was ordered to reorganize in response to a highly critical report from the Silberman-Robb Commission investigation into pre-Iraq war intelligence failures. This is the bureau's fourth major restructuring in a dozen years. The commission found that despite highly-touted post-9/11 reforms, `` the FBI has not constructed its intelligence program in a way that will promote integrated intelligence efforts, and its ambitions have led it into unnecessary new turf battles with the CIA."

Unfortunately, this latest reorganization is likely to have as little effect as previous attempts to improve the FBI's counterterrorism capabilities.

Traditionally the FBI was divided into two divisions. In 1993, after the first World Trade Center bombing, a third division was created, then a fourth after the September 11th attacks. Now, under the Silberman-Robb Commission recommendations, the four divisions will be reconsolidated into two divisions. Full circle in only 12 years.

The core reason this reorganization will fail, as the others have, is that what's wrong with the FBI has nothing to do with the way the boxes in its organizational chart are arranged. To discover what's truly wrong with the FBI, you don't need another blue-ribbon commission or a master's degree in public administration; you only need to read two recent Associated Press articles by John Solomon.

Published on June 19 and June 20, the articles cover the sworn testimony of the FBI's top counterterrorism officials, past and present, in depositions taken for an employment-discrimination lawsuit. According to the articles, FBI executives, including Director Robert Mueller, not only testified to their own lack of knowledge and experience in counterterrorism, they also admitted that they don't look for counterterrorism experience when hiring and promoting supervisors to fill the ranks of the Counterterrorism Division.

Solomon wrote that 'the FBI's current terror-fighting chief, Executive Assistant Director Gary Bald, said his first terrorism training came `on the job' when he moved to headquarters to oversee anti-terrorism strategy two years ago. Asked about his grasp of Middle Eastern culture and history, Bald responded: 'I wish I had it. It would be nice.' 'You need leadership. You don't need subject matter expertise.' 'It is certainly not what I look for in selecting an official for a position in a counterterrorism position.' "

The illogic and arrogance of such a statement doesn't shock me; it was what I came to expect in dealing with FBI management during my 16-year career. But the candor does. I'm not sure whether I am more surprised that these FBI executives admitted that they don't have counterterrorism experience, or that they admitted that they don't care that they don't have counterterrorism experience.

The FBI may be the only law-enforcement agency in the country that doesn't use standardized promotional exams or any other objective criteria in selecting managers for advancement. With no objective criteria, whom you know is more important than what you know. Cronyism trumps competence.

Solomon quoted the testimony of another FBI executive, Deputy Assistant Director John Lewis, who seemed to suggest the problem was a lack of experienced agents to choose from: "I would dare say that some of the midlevel managers that we have today who have been willingly neck-deep in this problem for the last two years are probably among our most seasoned and experienced people." Lewis ignored the inconvenient fact that he was testifying in an employment-discrimination lawsuit brought by an Arabic-speaking agent who was repeatedly passed over for promotion despite several years of experience working counterterrorism cases in the Middle East.

The Arabic-speaking agent, Bassem Youssef, was being passed over because he had the temerity to point out managerial problems that were impeding FBI counterterrorism investigations. Apparently the inexperienced executives promoted into the FBI counterterrorism program for their "leadership abilities" prefer not to have their policies challenged by more experienced subordinates.

These flawed management practices lie at the heart of the FBI's problems, from counterterrorism to computers, and they cannot be repaired by another realignment of the FBI organizational chart. One definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over but expecting a different result. The Bureau needs to change its management practices, not its desks.

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