

washingtonpost.com

Under Bush, the Briefing Gets Briefer

Key Intelligence Report by CIA and FBI Is Shorter, 'More Targeted,' Limited to Smaller Circle of Top Officials and Advisers

By Walter Pincus
Washington Post Staff Writer
Friday, May 24, 2002; Page A33

Every weekday from 8 to 9 a.m. in the Oval Office when President Bush is at the White House, the hour is taken up with CIA and FBI briefers delivering overnight national security updates on foreign intelligence and domestic terrorism. CIA Director George J. Tenet and FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III are normally there to provide backup.

Also regularly present in the Oval Office in the post-Sept. 11 era are Vice President Cheney, Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice and Chief of Staff Andrew H. Card Jr. Attorney General John D. Ashcroft is also sometimes there.

The basis of the CIA briefing in the first half-hour is its highly sensitive compilation of that day's most significant national security intelligence, called the President's Daily Brief (PDB).

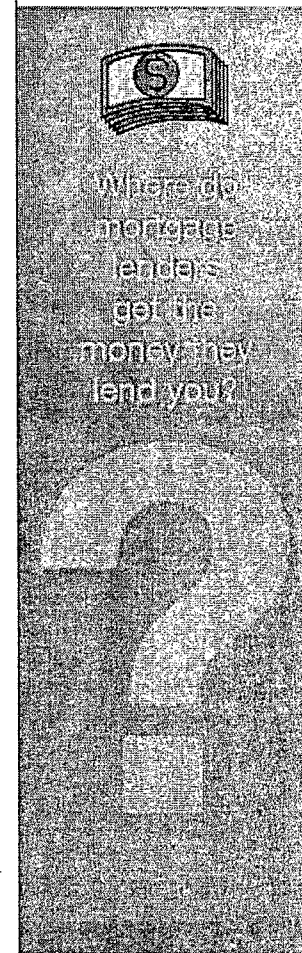
The super-secret PDB has emerged in the public eye with the disclosure that President Bush was informed by the Aug. 6 version that terrorists associated with Osama bin Laden might try to hijack an airplane. What the controversy has obscured are the changes the White House has imposed in how it handles the sensitive intelligence in an effort to play better to Bush's strengths as a manager.

Under President Bill Clinton, the PDB ran around 12 pages and often included detailed analyses as well as new information that Clinton generally read before the briefing. Indeed, in the early days, he often had little use for the follow-up oral briefings offered by the CIA -- a trait that exacerbated tensions between the White House and Langley.

Under Bush, the PDB has become shorter, a seven-to-10-page document containing "more targeted hard intelligence" items, with few longer than a page, according to a former senior intelligence official who was involved in the process. It is written with the understanding that the president is a "multi-modality learner" who processes information better through questions and answers while reading along, the former official said. Most days, Tenet reviews the PDB with the briefer as they drive from the director's Maryland home to the White House. On the way, Tenet often makes notes and looks over the backup material the briefer has brought. Tenet and often the deputy director for intelligence have already looked it over before going to bed the night before, though it is finished by staffers who go to work at midnight and monitor incoming intelligence throughout the night.

Once in the Oval Office, the CIA briefer goes over the seven or eight items -- foreign politics, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, backgrounds of presidential visitors or countries where Bush may be going, always spiced up with intercepts, raw intelligence materials and, on occasion, videos or pictures. There are some analyses, many like the 1 1/2-page Aug. 6 report prepared in response to Bush's late July

Advertisement



request for a study on bin Laden's capabilities to attack in the United States.

Tenet expands where he believes necessary and responds to questions by Bush and others.

When Bush wants more information, his request becomes a "tasking" for the agency. When the CIA portion is completed, the briefer leaves and the FBI briefer enters and provides the bureau's paper. Mueller, who has already been briefed by the CIA on the PDB, does his own review of the FBI paper on the way to the White House, according to a bureau official.

Before Sept. 11, the morning Oval Office national security meeting focused almost entirely on foreign intelligence. The addition of the FBI director and the homeland security director has created what Rice has described as a "fusion of intelligence."

"Every morning now the director of the FBI and the director of central intelligence, as well as the national security adviser, the homeland security director, the president and the vice president sit in the same room to try and do this," she said Sunday on ABC's "This Week."

When the CIA briefer returns to headquarters at Langley, around mid-morning, he or she meets with the CIA analysts who have collected any questions or requests made that morning by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld after their individual agency briefings on the PDB.

The accumulated responses generated by that day's PDB thus serve as a tasking document for the agency and to some degree the entire intelligence community. But for the CIA, the PDB serves as a virtual umbilical cord linking the agency directly to the president and providing the symbol of its position as the nation's premier intelligence agency.

Bush's request last July for more information about bin Laden's interest in attacking the United States illustrates how the CIA works the PDB system. One trigger for his request was information developed around mid-July when there was, Rice said, a "major threat spike" related to a possible attempt to kill the president using an aircraft at the Group of Eight meeting scheduled in Genoa, Italy.

A senior analyst, who works on the PDB staff, pulled together data the last week in July and in the process talked to intelligence community colleagues. "He talked analyst to analyst to someone in the FBI," according to one senior administration official, "and discussed the final product" with that bureau employee.

What emerged was a primarily historical analysis that talked about bin Laden's methods of operation and mentioned events in 1997, 1998 and 2001. One mention of hijacking was in reference to a proposed plot to take over an airliner and demand the release of an al Qaeda operative or Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, who is serving a life sentence for plotting to blow up the Holland and Lincoln tunnels in New York in 1993.

It also discussed bombings such as those in 1998 at the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. As Rice put it Sunday, it said, "Here's what we know historically about al Qaeda's determination to attack the United States."

When the analysis was completed, it was contained in a PDB that was delivered to Bush at his Crawford, Tex., ranch with only the CIA briefer present.

One irony about the public flap over the Aug. 6 PDB item is that it has highlighted a long-standing argument about the CIA's determination to keep all PDBs from being turned over to anyone not on its distribution list, including Congress.

One major agency irritation with Clinton was his often-voiced criticism that most days the PDB contained material he had already read elsewhere. One effect of that view was that Clinton allowed the PDB to be distributed more widely within the White House than any previous president. One of Bush's first moves was to sharply limit PDBs to his top Cabinet members and White House aides.

There is practically no chance that the Bush White House will turn over the Aug. 6 item from the PDB to congressional investigators. As White House press secretary Ari Fleischer told reporters Tuesday, the PDB is considered "the most highly sensitized classified document in the government," and "the people who prepare it will be inclined to give him [the president] less rather than more because they fear it'll get made public and that could compromise sources or methods."

Tenet has considered PDBs so important that in July 2000 he took the position with the National Archives that not even one could be released for publication "no matter how old or historically significant it may be."

© 2002 The Washington Post Company

Advertising Links	What's this?
<p>Compare Mortgage Offers</p>	
<p>Up to four free mortgage, refinance or home equity offers - one easy form. www.nextag.com</p>	
<p>Refinance Rates Hit Record Lows</p>	
<p>Get \$150,000 loan for \$720 per month. Refinance while rates are low. www.lowermybills.com</p>	
<p>Home Loans Made Easy</p>	
<p>Refinance, home equity and purchase loan quotes in one easy step. Apply now - 4 out of 5 approved. www.homeloancenter.com</p>	

