
CHAPTER 8

BARACK OBAMA - A CAREFUL READER

The transition from George W. Bush to Barack Obama reminded the Intelligence Community of the most fundamental truth of briefing presidents: no two are alike and you must tailor the approach to the consumer. Much had been made of the fact that the briefing of Bush with the PDB was an event rather than a book. With Obama, it reverted to a book. He liked to read the daily publication carefully and, ideally, uninterrupted; only then did he want to be briefed on supplementary material that developed the story further.

The election of Obama and his transition to office were distinct in a number of respects that had a direct or indirect relationship to intelligence. The 2008 election was the first since Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson ran in 1952 in which neither candidate was the incumbent president or vice president and, thus, responsible for ongoing intelligence activities and performance. It was the first presidential election since the end of World War II in which the candidates of the two major political parties, Obama and John McCain, were US senators, which gave both of them access to classified intelligence information. Perhaps most important, it was the first wartime transition since Richard Nixon became president in the midst of the Vietnam conflict in 1968.

Within the IC, 2008 was the first year the Office of the Director of National Intelligence was in charge of briefing the candidates and the president-elect. Assisted by CIA, which previously had been responsible for the briefings, ODNI rose to the occasion. By Inauguration Day, ODNI and officers from throughout the IC had provided more

current and background information to the president-elect—and particularly to his national security team—than had ever been presented before. Arguably, the many separate presentations, when taken together, formed a more coherent whole than in the past, as they were all based on more than a dozen briefing packages the National Intelligence Council assembled in advance.

A good deal of the credit for what was to become a successful briefing effort was due to the outgoing administration. President Bush personally discussed essential ground rules with Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell and CIA Director Michael Hayden, and National Security Advisor Steve Hadley on several occasions provided more detailed guidance to senior officers of the IC. McConnell recalls Bush stressing that the IC should “treat each candidate equally,”¹ and Hayden noted the president’s determination “to have the best transition on record.”² A senior officer who supported much of the day-to-day transition work for ODNI said, “I really credit the Bush administration; they considered this a wartime transition.”

In brief, the approach of the outgoing administration was that candidates of both parties could be provided comprehensive intelligence briefings on international developments, but no information on intelligence programs or operations prior to the election. Following the election, the president-elect could receive the same PDB as the president and be briefed on intelligence programs and operations, although the chief of staff or national security advisor had to approve in advance any briefings on covert action or other undertakings that raised sensitive policy issues. President Bush initially asked that the PDB be shown only to the president-elect until he, Bush, had an opportunity to meet with him to underscore the sensitivity of the document. Subsequently, soon after the briefings began, the president determined that as soon as the president-elect formally announced the members of his national security team, those individuals, too, could begin receiving intelligence information, including the PDB.

With these understandings, the White House chief of staff in late July contacted campaign managers of both parties to offer briefings to their candidates. McConnell the first week of August spoke with

1. Michael McConnell, interview with the author in Herndon, Virginia, 26 October 2011.

2. Michael Hayden, interview with the author in McLean, Virginia, 27 October 2011.

Obama's foreign policy adviser, Denis McDonough, and with Senator John McCain's adviser, Richard Fontaine. Immediately thereafter, ODNI sent notes concerning proposed next steps for the briefings to both campaigns, including foreign policy advisers to vice presidential candidates Senator Joe Biden and Governor Sarah Palin.

Preelection Briefings

Senator Obama received one intelligence briefing as a candidate, on 2 September at the FBI office in Chicago. Obama advisers McDonough and Mark Lippert attended. Principal members of the IC briefing team included DNI McConnell; Michael Leiter, director of the National Counterterrorism Center; and John Pistole, deputy director of the FBI. CIA was represented by a senior counterterrorism expert. The session was scheduled for one hour but, as a result of numerous questions from the senator, ran 90 minutes.

The session focused on terrorism and homeland security. McConnell provided an overview to launch the discussion. He and Leiter did the bulk of the briefing, but other experts answered specific questions and elaborated key points. Not surprisingly, only seven years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the primary substantive issue was the continuing threat from al-Qa'ida, a discussion facilitated by the use of a map documenting the terrorist group's presence and influence around the world. The hour allotted for terrorism was augmented by a roughly 30-minute review of other intelligence priorities, including nuclear proliferation and developments in Russia, North Korea, and Iran.

Participants reported that Obama listened carefully. He managed the room with a commanding presence but was serious, humble and, throughout the informal session, asked many thoughtful questions. His staff took notes but did not ask questions. At the conclusion, Obama thanked the briefers effusively, saying he had got exactly what he needed. The senator indicated he wanted to have a follow-on, day-long intelligence briefing in approximately 30 days, when more of his foreign policy advisers could participate and explore a broader range of subjects.

The IC briefers raised with the senator the need to initiate the process of acquiring security clearances for his advisers so they could receive the intelligence briefings and materials he was seeking. Obama readily concurred. The Bush administration, through Office of Management and Budget Director Clay Johnson, had agreed to process a large number of security clearances for each of the campaigns. The Obama team soon provided ODNI many names of prospective appointees, reflecting careful advance planning and a trust in the discretion of the IC that were heartening to see. Security officers and others in ODNI, CIA, FBI and Department of Justice worked cooperatively and expeditiously to process the clearances. The IC began planning the substantive agenda for the second briefing session, but as campaigning intensified it became impossible to schedule and never occurred.

One week after the meeting with Obama, ODNI offered to provide a similar briefing to the Democratic nominee for vice president, Joe Biden. The campaign expressed appreciation for the offer and volunteered that such a session could probably be held in early October. In fact, this, too, proved impossible to schedule. One suspects Biden probably felt less need for such a review, or obligation to receive it, having spent many years on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Over Labor Day weekend, ODNI sent a note to John McCain's foreign affairs adviser, Richard Fontaine, notifying him the Obama campaign had requested a briefing on counterterrorism and offering to provide a similar briefing to Senator McCain. ODNI from the start wanted to make clear it was taking an evenhanded, nonpartisan approach to the briefings.

McCain received one intelligence briefing, held 20 September at his campaign headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. Fontaine accompanied him. Senior IC participants included McConnell; Andrew Liepman, deputy director for analysis at NCTC; and Michael Morell, CIA director for intelligence. Three NIOs provided additional substantive expertise on weapons of mass destruction, South Asia, and the Middle East.

As he had with Obama, the DNI opened McCain's 50-minute briefing with an overview concentrating on the terrorist threat. In this case, however, other subjects constituted a larger part of the agenda—chiefly a review of the nuclear proliferation threat and developments in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. The senator asked a number

of questions regarding additional countries and issues that had come to his attention through his ongoing work and foreign travel on the Senate Armed Services Committee. As a result of his position on that committee, McCain was an ex-officio member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) and, therefore, entitled to so-called oversight briefings, which included insight into the programs and operations of the IC. In this briefing, however, no operational issues arose.

The Republican nominee for vice president, Sarah Palin, on 23 September received a two-hour intelligence briefing in New York City. Palin's foreign policy adviser, Steve Biegun, had informed the IC of several topics the governor wished to have addressed, and the IC team of McConnell, Morell, and a few substantive experts added some of its own. In fact, the discussion covered virtually the same ground as the other candidate briefings—principally al-Qa'ida, the wider threat of terrorism, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. In his opening remarks, the DNI included an overview of the IC's organization.

Governor Palin was in New York for meetings with several heads of government who attending the annual opening meetings of the UN General Assembly. The IC team departed with a quick turnaround task to prepare biographies of a half-dozen foreign leaders whom she had yet to meet, a function the IC performs hundreds of times each year for US policymakers. Like President Bush, Palin was a people person, particularly interested in discussing foreign leaders. Overall, she was an attentive and appreciative interlocutor, carefully studying the graphics and other materials and posing a number of questions to the briefers, who, in turn, were impressed she devoted a full two hours to the discussion.

The topics addressed in the intelligence briefings of candidates in 2008 corresponded to some degree with specific current events of that year and the subjects that would shortly be addressed in the presidential debates. In the United States, the attention of the media and the country was primarily on the unfolding financial crisis. While that crisis had important international dimensions, the IC generally did not incorporate those into its briefings of the candidates. Intelligence information appeared more directly relevant and useful to making sense of several other international developments in the news.

Those key events included, among others: clashes between Israel and Hamas, with a temporary truce; Iran's announcement that it was trebling the number of centrifuges for uranium enrichment; limited steps by North Korea toward denuclearization; Russia's invasion of Georgia over the South Ossetia dispute, and the swearing in of Dmitri Medvedev as Russia's president and Vladimir Putin as prime minister; a difficult security situation in Iraq, prompting a surge of US troops; the Taliban's assassination attempt against Afghan President Hamid Karzai; continuing political and security crises in Pakistan; US actions against al-Qa'ida terrorists inside Pakistan; and the terrorist attack in Mumbai, India, that killed hundreds.

Presidential Debates

In 2008, there were three debates between Obama and McCain, and one between Biden and Palin. In them, there were few references to intelligence, but the points that were made were unusually important, as the candidates disavowed a principal CIA program for interrogating suspected terrorists and called into question the IC's overall performance on Iraq. The presidential debates were held at the University of Mississippi in Oxford on 26 September, at Belmont University in Nashville on 7 October, and at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York, on 15 October. The vice presidential debate was held at Washington University in St. Louis on 2 October.

Early in the first debate, McCain was explicit in distinguishing his record from that of incumbent President Bush, saying, "I have opposed the president on spending, on climate change, on torture of prisoner[s], on Guantanamo Bay." Later in the same debate, he added, "So we have a long way to go in our intelligence services. We have to do a better job in human intelligence. And we've got to make sure that we have people who are trained interrogators so that we don't ever torture a prisoner ever again. We have to make sure that our technological and intelligence capabilities are better."

Obama raised two issues related to intelligence where he disagreed with the Bush administration. The first was the war in Iraq, which he said he had opposed from the outset for a number of reasons, including "whether our intelligence was sound." The second was the interro-

gation of detainees. Obama said, “It is important for us to understand that the way we are perceived in the world is going to make a difference, in terms of our capacity to get cooperation and root out terrorism. But because of some of the mistakes that have been made—and I give Senator McCain great credit on the torture issue, for having identified that as something that undermines our long-term security—because of those things, we, I think, are going to have a lot of work to do.”

The only other explicit reference to intelligence in the four debates came in the second, the vice presidential debate. Discussing the security challenges related to al-Qa’ida sanctuaries in Pakistan, Biden asserted, “That’s where bin Ladin lives and we will go at him if we have actionable intelligence.”

After his inauguration, President Obama quickly limited the interrogation techniques CIA could use to those approved in the Army Field Manual. This was the most immediate and concrete action any new president has taken to limit CIA activities since President Jimmy Carter canceled certain covert action programs early in his term. Regarding the matter Biden had raised, the new administration found during its term in office that there was “actionable intelligence” concerning Usama bin Ladin’s whereabouts, and ordered the military strike that killed the al-Qa’ida leader in May 2011.

Transition Briefings with the PDB

The Obama campaign advised the IC that Senator Obama, should he be elected, would prefer to begin PDB briefings not the morning after the election but on Thursday, 6 November. That eased the process of positioning briefers. As a contingency, the IC in the two days prior to the election had sent briefers to the candidates’ hometowns—Chicago; Sedona, Arizona; Wilmington, Delaware; and Wasilla, Alaska—to be in position immediately to support the president- and vice president-elect, whichever party won. Two briefers were assigned to the new president, with the understanding that they would alternate, generally a week at a time. On Election Day, one of these two briefers was in Chicago and one in Sedona. Following the Obama victory, the latter had time to travel to Chicago to join her colleague so that both could be introduced to Obama the first day.

In addition to the two briefers who would be responsible for assembling and delivering the briefing package during the first year or two of the Obama presidency, McConnell also decided to attend the first session to discuss the process and introduce the briefers. The DNI also asked Morell to be present for the briefings during the transition period from election to inauguration. McConnell thought this to be the best combination to demonstrate senior leadership attention and professional expertise. “I wanted a senior official on the scene,” he later recalled, “and had the greatest regard for Michael Morell. Morell recommended the two briefers. I think Obama saw the briefers as professionals rather than Bushites.”³

Despite the careful planning, the first session, held at the FBI office in Chicago, did not go well. As McConnell recalls the situation, the president-elect was a very positive “hale fellow well met” when he came into the room. However, he was promptly informed there was a problem, in that two of his most senior advisers, John Podesta and Jim Steinberg, were there also, expecting to sit in on the briefing. The guidelines the Bush administration had given the IC were clear: initially, no one but the president-elect was to have access to the PDB. McConnell described Obama as “not a happy camper” after he was informed the two would have to be excluded. The president-elect’s comment to the effect that “we need to resolve who can sit in” left the IC team wondering if even he would be there the next day.

But he was. Indeed, he was there every day. Obama’s staff had informed the briefers that the president-elect “does not do weekends,” but during the transition he wanted, and was provided, briefings seven days a week. His first two briefings were at the FBI office, then they moved to the Obama residence in Chicago, and finally to the president-elect’s transition office in a federal building downtown. Consistent with McConnell’s original idea, Morell considered staying in Chicago to participate in briefings throughout the transition but decided to leave the process in the hands of the full-time briefers. Morell returned to Washington but traveled to Chicago on a few occasions to participate in particular briefings.

The question of who could sit in with the president-elect as he received the PDB briefings was resolved relatively quickly, and within a

3. McConnell interview.

week to 10 days, Rahm Emanuel, Obama's choice for his chief of staff, and McDonough and Lippert, both of whom would become national security advisors, were regulars. Two weeks after the process began, Emanuel and Tony Blinken, national security advisor to Vice President-elect Biden, were informed they were approved to receive the PDB on their own, meaning whether or not they were in the briefing session with their principal.

A separate, potentially awkward issue was also resolved early in the process. The Bush administration believed the president-elect not only should have access to the PDB and all accompanying materials but should have the prerogative to ask follow-up questions of the briefers and to receive additional materials in response to his questions. President Bush's national security advisor requested, however, that the IC share with the White House the president-elect's questions along with the IC's written responses. The rationale was that knowledge of such exchanges would help the national security advisor shape his own substantive policy briefings for the president- and vice president-elect. David Shedd, the deputy DNI for policy, plans and requirements, discussed this matter with Obama's staff, which agreed to the requested procedure.

The president-elect's national security advisors, McDonough and Lippert, were most helpful to the briefers throughout the transition. On any given day, the briefers would stay around for additional discussion with them, getting useful feedback on how the briefings were going and how the team could best support the president-elect. Lippert stayed in the same hotel as the briefers, who would sometimes give him a ride to the briefing location, providing additional time to compare notes. Clearly, establishing an early and familiar relationship with the advisers was a good move.

Although the president-elect had been briefed seven days a week throughout much of November, the briefers understood there was to be no session on Thanksgiving Day. That was not to be. The briefer received a call at home in Virginia on Thanksgiving eve from one of Obama's advisers, who asked where he was and said they would want a briefing the next morning "on the bombings." The briefer was completely in the dark, because news of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai was just breaking. To his relief, he was able to get himself informed on

what was happening and—more miraculously, by citing his need to meet with the president-elect—persuade an airline to book a seat from Washington to Chicago early Thanksgiving morning. “I got there the next morning, briefed him on the crisis, and he never knew I hadn’t been there,” he later recalled. “The president-elect’s expectation was that we would be there for him when he needed us. And we were.”

The new administration’s national security team was largely assembled by the first week of December. At that time, Obama announced the appointment of Gen. James Jones as national security advisor and his intention to nominate Hillary Clinton to be secretary of state, Timothy Geithner for Treasury, Janet Napolitano for Homeland Security, and Eric Holder as attorney general. Obama asked President Bush’s secretary of defense, Robert Gates, to stay on in his administration. The last major national security officials to be announced were DNI Dennis Blair and CIA Director Leon Panetta in early January. With the announcement of their selection, each of these officials and others were cleared to receive PDB briefings. Some availed themselves of the opportunity to begin immediately, but most did not, waiting, instead, until they were in office. Clinton, for example, received an initial briefing, but decided to postpone receiving the PDB on a daily basis until after the inauguration, because she was receiving many other substantive briefings from the Department of State at the time.

The president-elect normally met with his briefer at 9 or 10 a.m., but occasionally in the afternoon. He read the same PDB as the president, but the supplementary material varied. Obama read some “raw traffic,” meaning original intelligence reports obtained from human sources or the technical collection programs of the intelligence agencies. He also read reports of operational activities, but the number of these tailed off over time—he was not as taken with operational and programmatic details as President Bush had been. The regular PDB was published only six days a week, so the briefers improvised Obama’s Sunday book from “best of’s”—previously produced intelligence products the briefers and their home office in Washington considered to be of possible interest to the president-elect.

On Election Day, Obama’s staff, and McCain’s, were presented a compendium of reference material on several dozen foreign leaders most likely to telephone the victor with congratulations. Such infor-

mation had proved useful to President-elect Bush during his transition eight years earlier. The package included biographic material and highlighted sensitive issues that could arise in the calls, as well as topics to avoid. It also provided some perspective on diplomatic protocol, for example, the order in which the president-elect might wish to take calls from foreign leaders from certain regions. Obama's advisers told the briefers that the president-elect used this material right from the start with every call he made or received from a foreign leader. In addition to this material and the PDB, the president-elect reportedly found imagery and timelines to be useful, but tended to pass over text-heavy graphics.

Obama was a voracious and generally private reader. Some days he would engage in discussion with his briefer; other days, he would have few questions or comments. He would occasionally ask why a certain piece had been included that day, express understanding of an issue and his agreement with the IC's analysis, or note skepticism or disagreement with the line taken. The president-elect thrived on exploring the reasons for analytical differences occasionally expressed by the various IC agencies; remarked, tongue-in-cheek, on the high proportion of bad news he was receiving; and on at least one occasion, concurred with the briefer's observation that he had received some rare good news. One of the briefers remarked that Obama "displayed a lot of charm and charisma, but with very few words."

During the transition of 2008, most PDB briefings were held in Chicago, with a handful in Washington. The notable exception was the 10-day period from 20 December until the New Year, when the president-elect and his family traveled to Hawaii. In his home state, Obama acclimated more quickly than his briefer. When she arrived the first morning to provide a briefing on the terrace of the Obamas' beachfront vacation home, the president-elect—dressed in a tee shirt, gym shorts, and flip-flops—thoughtfully assured her there was no need to wear a suit. "This is Hawaii," he reminded her.

The briefers staged their operation from Camp Smith, headquarters of the US military's Pacific Command on the island of Oahu, where they could be assured of physical security, robust communications, and a warm welcome from their military colleagues. Looking back on the decision, however, they thought it would have been wiser to op-

erate from a hotel closer to the Obama residence, since it was at least a 45-minute drive from the military base to the residence. In one respect, however, they were very pleased they had been using facilities at Camp Smith to receive and assemble their intelligence report.

In the early morning hours of 26 December, electric power was interrupted over the entire island of Oahu. The 26th was to be the start of the weekly briefing shift so both incoming and outgoing briefers were around. In part because the attacks in Mumbai continued to figure so prominently in press and intelligence reporting, both briefers were on high alert for terrorist attacks or other threats to the president-elect. They quickly checked with colleagues at Camp Smith and with CIA Headquarters in Washington and found no basis for special concern about the power problem. Their facilities on the base and the Obama residence both had auxiliary generators, so despite the morning's excitement, they were able to complete preparation of that day's PDB and make it to the residence on time.

President-elect Obama was briefed on most days from the date of his election on 4 November 2008 to his inauguration on 20 January 2009. Each of those briefings typically included seven or eight substantial, substantive articles and a variety of supplementary materials and oral updates. During this two-and-a-half month period, the largest proportion of articles, roughly 30 percent, focused on the Middle East. Not surprisingly, most of these dealt with the security and political situation in Iraq; Iran, including its nuclear program; and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The next largest proportion of articles in this timeframe, 17 percent, addressed developments in South Asia, especially the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and the attacks in Mumbai by terrorists with ties to Pakistan.

East Asia, notably China and North Korea, comprised 13 percent of the articles, and pieces analyzing terrorism another 10 percent. The remainder of the material related to events in Africa; Latin America; Russia and its immediate neighbors in Eastern Europe and Central Asia; and Europe. There were articles devoted to transnational issues such as the economic and financial crisis, nuclear proliferation, energy, and narcotics, many of which involved numerous countries and regions. There were also, during this period, a number of articles on the IC's technical intelligence collection capabilities.

Obama digested all this material carefully and typically without much specific comment. After he had dealt with the president-elect for some time, one of the briefers sent a note to Headquarters noting, perhaps humorously, “He read the piece closely and mumbled ‘hm-mm-mm’ in concern. This was significant because he rarely flinches or reacts visibly.”

Briefing the Vice President-Elect

Vice President-elect Biden chose to receive his first PDB briefing in Chicago rather than in his hometown of Wilmington, Delaware. A senior ODNI officer, joined by one of Obama’s two designated briefers, delivered the briefing in the evening of 6 November. The hour-long session began with several minutes on the Intelligence Community and the PDB process. Biden expressed appreciation that two permanent briefers had been assigned to him, with the plan that they would provide him daily briefings on alternate weeks. He explained he probably would not want a briefing every day during the transition, although he did ask the briefers to monitor the material and “red flag” important items for him to read whenever they met next.

Biden immersed himself in the PDB, discussing substantive items thoroughly with the briefers. In addition to the half-dozen analytical pieces, he read a number of supplementary text graphics and volunteered a great many comments and questions. He impressed the briefers as being very knowledgeable about the subjects addressed and as having established views on most of the issues. He had a number of difficult questions on his mind and tasked the briefers to provide additional analytical material.

During the remainder of the transition period, Biden received his briefings primarily in Wilmington from the two briefers who had been assigned to him, one from CIA and one from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). However, Biden would cancel his briefings when he traveled to Chicago, Washington, or elsewhere, with the result that it was rare for the briefers to see him more than two or three days in a row. From the election until shortly after the inauguration, they saw him on an estimated two dozen occasions. Nevertheless, these briefers found him an enthusiastic consumer. “Those of us in Wilmington were

regularly getting an hour or more with the vice president-elect, who asked many questions, constantly levied taskings, and (literally) physically pummeled us with professional affection,” one of them recalled.

Very shortly after the inauguration, the vice president personally informed his briefers he would be receiving the briefing once daily, with the president in the Oval Office, and there would no longer be a need for his two assigned briefers to support him. During the transition, the briefer not briefing the vice president-elect that week would hold a separate session with Biden’s senior national security advisor, Tony Blinken, and those sessions continued after the dedicated sessions with Biden ended with the inauguration. Blinken told the briefers that after he finished his early morning briefing from them, his practice was to give the vice president the “elevator briefing” about what he needed to know as he walked to the Oval Office. This allowed the vice president to streamline his schedule; one PDB briefing a day would suffice.

Other Briefings of the President-Elect and his Team

The IC in 2008 pursued a more systematic substantive approach to preparing for briefings of presidential candidates, the president-elect, and his national security team than had ever been undertaken previously. The National Intelligence Council, which on the DNI’s behalf oversees the drafting and coordination of multiagency intelligence estimates and other analytic papers to support US government policy-making, took on the responsibility to prepare briefings on a number of subjects in which it presumed the candidates would be interested. The aim was to assemble off-the-shelf materials that could be used, or easily built upon, to ensure that all candidates were provided essentially the same, IC-reviewed facts and analysis.

These materials were readied in advance of the two parties’ political conventions. On the occasion of his one briefing of Obama as a candidate, on 2 September, McConnell informed the senator that the IC was prepared also to provide in-depth presentations. Later that day, ODNI informed both campaigns of several proposed briefing topics: al-Qa’ida and counterterrorism, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Middle East security, North Korea, China, Russia, Africa, Latin America, cyber- and future warfare, the global economy and energy, and the security

implications of climate change. The campaigns were informed they were free to add additional subjects, and one did—Pakistan. In keeping with the ground rules and general policy of transparency, the other campaign was then informed that Pakistan had been added.

The payoff from this initiative was that the IC possessed coordinated, finished intelligence available to share with the candidates at short notice. In addition to the briefing materials themselves, the NIC maintained a clear account of what IC-approved, classified source materials had been used. No improvisation or scrambling would be necessary. The candidates themselves were not constrained, as the request to include an additional subject had quickly demonstrated.

Deep Dives

In addition to his daily PDB briefings, Obama from 19 November to 16 December received a number of in-depth briefings, all in Chicago. Advisers McDonough and Lippert, in particular, worked with the IC in selecting briefing topics. As it worked out, roughly half of those chosen were on the list the IC offered; the Obama team proposed the others. During the last two years of his second term, President Bush had been receiving such in-depth briefings regularly, and they had come to be known as “deep dives,” a term that stuck into the early part of the Obama administration as well.

McConnell participated in three of the sessions; Hayden, Leiter, and FBI Director Robert Mueller each participated in one. Senior subject-matter experts, usually the relevant NIO, handled most of the substantive briefing. In most cases, there were multiple briefers to ensure all angles were covered and the team could answer any questions the president-elect might raise. As in his PDB briefings, Obama was reserved, businesslike, even crisp, but he asked a number of probing questions and, according to the briefers, clearly appreciated the subtleties of the answers. The briefers recall that as the end of the transition period approached, his questions increasingly reflected his deliberations on openings and possible actions to address the situations he was hearing described. Not infrequently, according to the briefers, he would note that the IC would need to go over the material again in a larger session with his national security team.

Roughly half of the deep dives focused on specific countries or subjects, examining in more depth the same array of political, security, and nuclear proliferation issues that were necessarily treated succinctly in the PDBs. For example, deep dives were devoted to the Middle East, South Asia, Iran, nuclear proliferation, and homeland security and terrorism. Taking a broader perspective, some examined transnational or more speculative issues. One of these was a briefing on the IC's publication *Global Trends 2015*, the latest in a series in which the IC periodically looked ahead a number of years to provide an assessment of the international situation US policymakers and war fighters would face.

McDonough and Lippert were provided three additional in-depth briefings in Chicago on 21 November dealing with developments in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, and South Asia. IC teams headed by regional NIOs delivered the briefings.

Covert Action

One of the deep dives provided the president-elect during the transition was on the full range of CIA covert action programs. President Bush and National Security Advisor Hadley had made it clear in their guidance to the IC that no information about covert actions or sensitive operations was to be included—even incidentally—in the various substantive briefings the Obama team was receiving. When the president, Hadley, McConnell, and Hayden discussed how and when to brief those programs, one idea was for the president to meet personally with the president-elect to inform him of the most sensitive programs. What proved feasible, however, was a larger session in Chicago on 9 December.

The meeting was to be held at the FBI Building because an adequate, if compact, secure conference room was available. As it happened, however, the day selected for the briefing turned out also to be the day federal authorities arrested Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich on corruption charges. Anticipating that this would create a press frenzy at the FBI Building and that it was unwise to have the DNI and CIA director arrive in the middle of it, the covert action discussion was relocated at the last minute to a smaller, secure facility at the Federal Building, where the transition offices were located.

McConnell and Hayden provided the covert action briefing, accompanied by Shedd and Larry Pfeiffer, Hayden's chief of staff. In addition to Obama, those attending included Vice President-elect Biden, future White House Counsel Greg Craig, and incoming national security officials and advisers Jones, Emanuel, McDonough, Lippert, and Blinken. As they had for President-elect Bush eight years before, the briefers provided a once-over on all covert action programs. A large graphic in the form of a map with box narratives clarifying the location and essential elements of each activity accompanied the presentation.

The last item discussed was the program CIA implemented for the rendition, detention, and interrogation of suspected terrorists. President Bush had publicly acknowledged and explained this program as early as September 2006, but two years later it continued to be highly charged politically and had been an issue in the recently concluded political campaign. Its existence was the chief reason all involved believed the president-elect needed to be briefed on covert action prior to the inauguration rather than afterward, a course that had been followed as recently as during the Clinton transition. Regarding the choice of how to proceed, Hayden later explained, "There was no way we could go with Option B [a later briefing]. We needed to clear the air about what was underway."

The CIA director defended the interrogation program, explained its history, and at one point demonstrated interrogation techniques with Shedd as a prop. Hayden sought to describe exactly how physically taxing the then-approved techniques were by comparing their impact to what one would experience playing youth football. The listeners had a number of questions about this program, as well as the others. In fact, they asked about the interrogation techniques even before Hayden got to them. According to some of the IC participants, by the end of the session, the CIA director clearly thought he had carried the day: "We left feeling good about it because no negative comments were made," Pfeiffer recalled.⁴ For his part, the president-elect expressed no opinion, saying simply that he would want his people to meet again with the IC to continue the discussion.

Roughly two weeks later, on 22 December, a second briefing on covert action was held at CIA Headquarters. The briefers on this oc-

4. Larry Pfeiffer, interview with the author in Washington, DC, 11 October 2011.

casion were the Agency's managers of the individual programs, who went into considerable detail; the briefing lasted several hours. Craig was the senior member of the Obama team that received the briefing.

Another follow-up meeting was held at CIA Headquarters on 13 January to discuss the rendition, detention, and interrogation program in more detail. Hayden, Jones and Craig were the senior participants, although a number of Obama's advisers attended. Hayden recalls he was able to take a full hour to explain the program completely. The Obama representatives listened carefully and, according to Hayden, no one challenged the effectiveness of the program. However, the future of the program was left unclear until the Department of Justice informed CIA's acting general counsel that CIA would be required to use only those interrogation techniques approved by the Army Field Manual.

The briefings of 9 and 22 December and 13 January, when combined, gave the incoming administration a breadth and depth of information on covert action that was without precedent in any previous transition.

Senior National Security Team

Several times when he was receiving PDB briefings or involved in deep dives, President-elect Obama commented that the briefers would be asked to go over the material again when his national security team had been formed. The first of two such opportunities occurred on 15 December. Only days before, Obama had announced his nominees for the senior national security posts, and most of them were in Chicago for the meeting. Including the prospective appointees and other senior advisers, there were approximately 20 attendees from the Obama team.

The IC group assembled to conduct the intelligence briefings included McConnell, Morell, and selected NIOs, who launched the discussion with a briefing on the big issues in the Middle East and South Asia. Obama and several of his principal colleagues had questions of the briefers, and there was much discussion among members of the Obama team about policy options. The briefers recall that the president-elect and others, especially Clinton, were highly knowledgeable and had a broad grasp of the issues, whether the Middle East peace process or the particulars of the situations in individual countries. One of the briefers recalls that Obama was the "most animated I ever saw

him during the discussion of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The briefer had a great analytical construct.” The part of the meeting involving the IC took approximately 45 minutes.

The second meeting of the senior national security team at which the IC provided intelligence briefings occurred in Washington three weeks later, on 9 January 2009. It was held at a building in downtown Washington where the General Services Administration had arranged office space to house transition activities of all departments and agencies. Obama chaired the session, during which the group went over many of the same issues that had been discussed in December, and some additional areas as well. Again, the IC briefers included McConnell and several NIOs.

The meeting in Washington was less satisfactory for the IC, if only because the conference room was hot and crowded. There was space for only one briefer to be in the room at a time, and even that person could not sit down. The briefers stood before the group, said their piece, and departed to make way for the next presentation. These circumstances did not lend themselves to questions or extended discussion involving the briefers. The more important thing was discussion among the Obama team, however, and that did occur. One of the briefers recalled that some of the senior officials-to-be, in particular, were “most engaged and obviously getting ready to jump into action.”

The two briefings of the senior national security team by ODNI during the transition were unprecedented. They were possible in part because Obama selected his senior team quickly and initiated coordinated action by the new designees and his own senior foreign policy advisers to formulate the new administration’s foreign and security policies. Significantly, the briefings were also facilitated by the outgoing administration’s desire for a positive transition. Finally, the briefings reflected the success of ODNI in establishing a productive relationship with the incoming Obama team.

Rest of the Team

The initiative of providing intelligence support to the new senior team was matched—even exceeded—by a parallel effort to provide briefing support to those who, for the most part, would be taking up less senior but important foreign policy positions in the Obama ad-

ministration. This, too, was an unprecedented effort that clearly set a standard for future transitions in that it helped prospective key operating officers of the incoming team get up to speed on developments in their areas of responsibility and facilitated preliminary policy deliberations among them.

The process was launched in a meeting held on 18 November and involving three senior ODNI officers; Peter Clement, CIA's deputy director for intelligence for strategic programs; and Susan Rice of the Obama foreign policy team. In the meeting, the IC offered to provide briefings to those the Obama team designated as soon as those individuals were granted security clearances. The IC representatives again presented the list of topics the NIC had prepared in advance and stressed that Rice and her colleagues could propose topics as well. The briefings would be held at the transition headquarters in Washington.

From 21 November to 6 January, the IC provided two dozen briefings in Washington to at least 54 incoming officials and advisers of the Obama administration. Rice, who later became UN ambassador and national security advisor, and Jim Steinberg were the most senior attendees. They designated Jeremy Bash, who later became chief of staff to CIA Director Panetta, to be the Obama team's regular interlocutor with two counterparts at ODNI to arrange topics and briefers. One or the other of these ODNI officers sat in on all the briefings. Security officers from the Department of Homeland Security ascertained that those receiving the briefings held the proper clearances.

Four intelligence organizations—CIA, DIA, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the Department of State, and NSA—contributed analysts to staff the effort. Each day from 24 November through 23 January, two analysts from different agencies would work as a team at the transition center offices. Their job was to assemble “read books,” compendiums of intelligence material from the daily publications of IC agencies. They also assembled books of materials related to the subjects scheduled to be briefed, so recipients could familiarize themselves with the subject ahead of time. Occasionally, the analysts sat in on the briefings. Following the briefings, listeners sometimes levied requests for additional materials, which the analysts could normally provide from existing intelligence products. Very occasionally, it was necessary to produce original pieces to meet the need. One of the an-

alysts recalled that when this was necessary, there was always quick turnaround.

The several dozen individuals who availed themselves of these briefings were typically private sector or former government experts. Subjects discussed included many of the same high-priority topics that had been briefed to the president-elect and the senior national security team, although the Obama campaign kept the two efforts completely separate. Those being briefed at the transition building in Washington were not informed of what was being briefed to the president-elect and his senior advisers in Chicago. The briefings in Washington covered a wider variety of subjects and contained more granularity regarding developments in Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the UN, as well as global issues such as climate change, pandemics, and international crime and narcotics. The briefers presented the latest classified reporting and analysis, but an equally important function seemed to be providing a forum for the exchange of ideas among the attendees themselves.

Based on the animated exchanges, rigorous and well-informed questions, and the fact that the briefings almost always ran over their scheduled time, there seemed no doubt, as one of the observing analysts put it, that “this was time well spent.” One respect in which the effort was not a complete success was that only a limited number of those briefed took advantage of the read books. The analysts recommended that in the future the IC should make a more concerted effort to inform those scheduled to be briefed about the full range of resources available to them.

Information on intelligence operations and covert action programs was not included in these briefings. When queries related to such programs arose, questioners were referred to the CIA. Because many of the participants had previous experience using the products and capabilities of the IC, they often posed well-informed questions on collection capabilities and areas where the Community was confident about its information or where information was limited or unavailable. These exchanges helped the IC accomplish two of its ancillary goals: to familiarize and update the Obama team about the IC’s capabilities and to demonstrate the coordination that existed among IC agencies.

Support of the Briefing Effort

CIA's Office of Policy Support in the early months of 2008 began planning for the transition. It created a detailed timeline of actions the Agency or ODNI would need to take over the coming months, including consulting with the current administration and eliciting White House approvals for briefings, putting logistics and security arrangements in place, preparing materials for the first briefings of the candidates, and, finally, briefing the president-elect and his senior national security team. In late June, the Agency formally established a presidential transition team, headed by Clement, to coordinate support for the presidential candidates and the president-elect. The DNI in mid-July established an IC transition team, headed by David Shedd, to provide oversight and coordination to the transition activities of all agencies. ODNI took responsibility for arranging the briefings of the candidates. As CIA had experience making the practical arrangements in past transitions, ODNI named the Agency its executive agent for all logistics, communications, and security matters.

In assembling the support structure, CIA was able to draw on its successful experience with the Bush transition eight years before, when for the first time it had been able to replicate Washington-area workstations, with all their capabilities, for its briefers and analysts in Austin. In 2008 in Chicago, an office was set up in a suite of rooms at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, from which the briefers could easily travel to where the president-elect would be briefed, including the FBI office, Obama's residence, and the transition offices in the Federal Building. At the hotel, a number of workstations were installed in two separate rooms, along with secure telephones, secure faxes, and a high-quality printer that could handle large graphics. Robust communications connectivity, all the equipment, and some of those who would staff the operation were in position and tested the week prior to the election. Similar facilities were in place in the hometowns of the other candidates, fully staffed and ready to operate.

Logistics and communications officers were in place first, followed by a presidential support analyst and the briefers. The job of the support analysts while in Washington was to assist the briefers in assembling, updating, and making any necessary changes to the daily

briefing packages for the principal consumers. When they supported the briefers away from Washington, these officers took on additional responsibilities as needed, including monitoring incoming intelligence reports from the field, newly published analytical reports, and late-breaking media items for potential inclusion in the briefings. The support analysts rotated through the Chicago operation every week to 10 days.

Everything worked smoothly, although there were some hectic hours. There were also some unexpected, memorable moments. Because they had been informed Obama would not want to receive his first PDB briefing until Thursday morning, some of the team in Chicago were able to hear his victory speech in Grant Park Tuesday night. Early the following week, the president-elect asked to receive his morning briefing as he was being driven to the airport to travel with his family to Washington for a tour of the White House hosted by President and Mrs. Bush. The presidential support assistant that morning doubled as a chauffeur and was invited to drive in the motorcade to the airport in order to retrieve the briefer for the return to the hotel.

Looking back on how the briefing efforts in Chicago and Washington were organized and implemented, it was clear—despite their overall success—that there was still room for improvement. Because 2008 was the first year ODNI was in charge, there was inevitable awkwardness and some tension between that office and the CIA, which wanted to initiate planning and decisionmaking earlier than ODNI was prepared to do. For example, CIA early in the process drew the attention of ODNI to the need to select briefers for the president- and vice president-elect. As events unfolded, the briefers were chosen at the very last minute or, in one case, a week after the election, with the result that, by their own account, they had too little time to prepare for their jobs.

At the working levels, there was initial confusion about which agency was doing what, and who would fund the various activities. In due course, the “lanes in the road” were clarified, as with the decision that CIA would be responsible for logistics, communications, and security. A midlevel officer from the Directorate of Intelligence traveled to the various locations to secure the hotel or rental home accommodations from which the briefers would operate. He reserved hotel rooms using his own, government-issued credit card, an initiative he would not

recommend, after the fact, as the bill for the accommodations quickly exceeded his credit limit. ODNI paid the bill, but the obvious lesson was that an Agency contracting officer using more conventional government procurement authorities and procedures should be brought into the process at the beginning.

It also took a little time to clarify the roles of the most senior leaders. The CIA director set out to arrange intelligence support to the transition, including providing a covert action briefing, but the DNI quickly asserted his control of the process. Hayden recalls, “CIA was involved—it was all CIA foot soldiers, but Steve [Steve Kappes, CIA’s deputy director] and I were frozen out.” McConnell, reflecting on the effort, made this observation: “Overall, we did a good job, but the ODNI should have started earlier—it was our first time.”

ODNI officials mounted an effort to keep the several IC agencies informed about what the IC was doing to support the transition and to involve them where feasible. Shedd held regular video conferences to coordinate the process, for example, and beginning in mid-July he and other ODNI officers visited leaders of the agencies, including Hayden and Kappes, to brief them and hear their views. The ODNI team also briefed the IC directors of congressional affairs and some staff members representing the leadership of Congress and the congressional intelligence committees. ODNI deployed IC subject-matter experts, usually the NIOs, who came from all agencies and academia, to do most of the high-profile briefings of the national security team. Three of the four individuals selected to brief Obama and Biden were from CIA; one was from DIA.

Informally assessing the success of his effort to involve various agencies, McConnell estimated the ratio of CIA to non-CIA personnel involved in the transition had dropped from nine to one in the past to four to one. From the point of view of the briefers, ODNI and various agencies, while not on the scene in Chicago, were very responsive when contacted to authorize use of their products with the president-elect but sometimes problems arose. One of the briefers recalls, in particular, occasions when she contacted NSA and the intelligence arm of the Joint Staff at the Pentagon to secure needed information. Both were eager to help, although one time the bureaucratic process of ascertaining her security clearances to receive the information delayed

the process. All IC intelligence centers should have the names and security clearances of the briefers readily available ahead of time.

Many of those interviewed suggested the single most important thing the DNI could do to make the process work optimally would be to centralize and streamline responsibility within ODNI itself. Several observed there were too many ODNI components and managers involved in 2008 and, while well-meaning, their numbers delayed timely decisionmaking. Another area identified for improvement related to eliminating redundancy that sometimes came about, ironically, from the IC's success in providing multiple briefings on important subjects. One of the NIOs recommended creating a mechanism to inform those providing deep dive briefings of what intelligence information the president-elect, or other senior consumers, had already received through the PDB briefings, to avoid duplication.

Other suggestions included being careful to ascertain the preferences and requirements of the president-elect and to diplomatically verify guidance received from his aides concerning the types of material to be briefed, who should be briefed, length of briefings, scheduling preferences, and the like. In almost all transitions there have been instances where well-meaning assistants provided guidance that did not, in fact, turn out to reflect the desires of the president-elect. Some of those involved stressed the importance of having very senior analysts and managers, at the level of CIA's director for intelligence, do the briefings. Others, mindful of the desirability of involving and drawing on the strengths of the whole IC, recommended that ODNI, to the extent possible, brief second- and third-echelon officials of the several agencies, as well as the heads of those agencies, about what was being done to support the incoming administration.

Politics of the Transition

The Intelligence Community, CIA, and the 11 presidents who have come into office since the CIA was established in 1947 have worked to keep the process of providing intelligence support to incoming presidents as nonpolitical as possible. In every case, the politically appointed directors of the IC have been involved at least to some degree in transition briefings, but they usually have left the bulk of the effort

in the hands of career intelligence officers. By a very narrow margin, six to five, new presidents over these years retained the head of the IC who was in office at the time they were elected, on several occasions explaining that their decision was intended, in part, to underscore the nonpolitical nature of the job.

In 2009, President-elect Obama inherited two experienced managers of the IC in DNI McConnell and CIA Director Hayden. Both of them wanted to stay in their jobs, and they certainly had the confidence and backing of the outgoing president. Bush personally informed McConnell and Hayden that he had recommended to Obama that they be kept in their posts at least for the first year of the new administration. Bush later wrote in his memoirs that nonpolitical continuity had been a consideration when, eight years earlier, he had retained George Tenet as CIA director.⁵

Not surprisingly, experience has shown that chiefs of the IC work better with the presidents they serve if the two have had a preexisting personal or professional relationship. At the time of his nomination to be DNI, McConnell had not known Bush but was well known to some of the president's advisers and had been asked to take the job by Vice President Cheney. When he was nominated for CIA, Hayden had already worked for President Bush as deputy DNI and director of NSA. However, neither McConnell nor Hayden had a relationship with Obama prior to his election.

Senator Obama in the early summer of 2008 had contacted Hayden through CIA's Office of Congressional Affairs to arrange a briefing. This session was scheduled to be held on Capitol Hill on 18 June but was canceled at the last minute because the senator was attending the funeral of newsman Tim Russert at the Kennedy Center that same day and the service ran beyond its scheduled time. The senator telephoned Hayden to cancel their meeting. Despite their expressed intentions at the time, the session was never rescheduled. Hayden did participate in one briefing of Obama during the transition, the one related to covert action on 9 December. McConnell participated in several.

During the campaign, candidate Obama had raised questions about the IC's performance on Iraq and about one of its collection programs. He had opposed CIA's use of certain interrogation techniques in ques-

5. Bush, *Decision Points*, 84.

tioning detainees suspected of terrorism. These issues were highly charged politically and, along with other considerations, led Obama to decide that he wanted new leadership for the IC. In Chicago on 15 December, on the fringes of the briefing of his newly designated national security team, the president-elect personally informed McConnell that he would not be kept on as DNI. Obama telephoned Hayden with the same news.

On 9 January, Obama announced he would nominate retired Adm. Dennis Blair to be DNI and former congressman and White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta to be director of the CIA. McConnell resigned effective 27 January and the Senate confirmed Blair the following day. Hayden was asked to stay on until Panetta was confirmed, which occurred on 12 February.

President Obama in Office

Following his inauguration, President Obama continued for some months to receive the PDB in the same way President Bush had done. Each morning, a briefer would come to his office with the PDB, which he would then read in the presence of the briefer, the vice president, and often the DNI and several others. To ensure they were prepared for any discussion that might follow, most senior officials other than the president read their copies of the PDB ahead of time. This discomfited the president, who found it awkward that no one else was reading during his session. He also found it unnecessary, much of the time, to be briefed on, or discuss, material he had just read.

James Clapper began his service as DNI in the summer of 2010, when Obama had been in office for roughly 18 months. Clapper, who generally attended PDB briefing sessions twice a week, recalled that he was surprised to find that the briefers seemed simply to sit with the president, who liked to read, or that they “plowed the same ground” with their briefings. Sometimes the president had read the PDB before the briefers arrived, making their presence superfluous. Clapper’s solution to this awkwardness, which he cleared with National Security Advisor Gen. James Jones, was to use most of the time allotted to briefing for presenting “walk-ons.” These were items of information that had become available after the book took its final form, raising new

issues or elaborating further what the president had read in the PDB. As many as seven to 10 walk-ons were presented per day.⁶

ADDNI Robert Cardillo, who was Clapper's first deputy director to be responsible for intelligence integration, handled the meetings in the Oval Office on days Clapper did not, usually three days per week. Cardillo recalled how challenging it was to arrive at his office in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, across the street from the White House, at six o'clock each morning to prioritize and familiarize himself with the contents of the "walk-on" items that had been proposed for his use during his meeting with the president, usually at 9:30 a.m. According to Cardillo, the new approach worked but caused concern among cabinet officials who had seen the prepared PDB in advance but not the "walk-on" items. He recalled Secretary of Defense Robert Gates commenting, "Nobody really cares what's in the PDB...but everyone cares what the president sees."⁷

Clapper also revived the expert briefings. The practice of presenting these in-depth briefings had slowed some months into Obama's tenure. They took a significant amount of time and there were issues of quality control. As one IC participant put it, "Fifty percent were yawners; 50 percent were a smashing success."

As revived by Clapper, the expert briefs began with one or two intelligence analysts or operations officers, often from different agencies, presenting their key points for eight minutes. Following this opening presentation, the president and the experts would discuss the issue for as long as 25 minutes. These sessions took place roughly every two weeks. ODNI and the deputy national security advisor took great care to review in advance the timing, quality, and relevance of the material to be presented. One participant recalled a dry run for senior ODNI officials in which "they were literally sitting there with a stopwatch." Topics were chosen to support approaching policy deliberations, presidential trips abroad, or anticipated visits to Washington by foreign leaders. Participants remember the president being actively engaged in these in-depth—but compact—sessions.

6. James Clapper, interview with the author in Herndon, Virginia, 22 February 2017.

7. Robert Cardillo, oral history interview with Peter Usowski, director of CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence, 15 and 17 March 2017.



President Obama reading the "book" during PDB briefing by Deputy DNI for Intelligence Integration Robert Cardillo in January 2012.

At the end of his two terms in office, Obama continued to read the PDB six days a week. The “book” that he received was actually a tablet computer, the use of which facilitated, on a typical day, the presentation of four articles, one-and-a-half to two pages long; accompanying text boxes, graphics, maps, video, or imagery; brief updates on ongoing crises in the Middle East; and, on Saturdays, usually a longer article on a humanitarian or other big-picture, thematic issue. The use of computers also made it feasible for a large number of senior officials and presidential advisers to receive the PDB. The president and a handful of others received the most restricted version containing sensitive operational material; others saw highly classified but less sensitive versions.

President Obama’s careful attention to the PDB, and his discussion of the issues it raised with senior advisers, was reassuring evidence that he found it useful. This was reinforced near the end of his presidency, when Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes spoke publicly about the PDB briefings. “It’s the only standing meeting he has every day. Even if we don’t have the meeting, he gets the document. Every day there’s the possibility that he’ll see something that will cause him to move the entire U.S. government in a new direction. There’s nothing else like that.”⁸

8. Ben Rhodes, quoted by Gregory Korte, “What the Intelligence Briefing says about Obama’s Presidency . . .” *USAToday.com*, 14 December 2016.

Romney and Ryan Briefed in 2012

President Obama's Republican challengers in the election of 2012, Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts and Congressman Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, received intelligence briefings in the late summer prior to the election, just as President George W. Bush's Democratic challengers John Kerry and John Edwards had eight years earlier. Running for a second term in 1956, President Eisenhower had initiated the practice of offering briefings to his opponents, and over the years the vast majority of challengers accepted. As it worked out in 2012, Romney was briefed twice; Ryan was briefed four times.

In 2012, ODNI effectively drew on its experience from four years earlier, when it had managed the briefing process for the first time. At the end of March, a full seven months before the briefings would occur, DNI Clapper contacted White House Chief of Staff Jack Lew to propose that the traditional intelligence briefings be offered the Republican nominees, outlining the procedures and ground rules that had been used in the recent past. The NIC in June began preparing and coordinating within the IC a list of topics for briefings that was later offered to the Republican nominees' senior advisers, who in turn identified eight issues that were of highest priority to the candidates.

In mid-June, the Romney campaign contacted CIA and ODNI with preliminary inquiries about intelligence briefings and was referred to the White House. In July, Lew contacted the head of Romney's "Readiness Project" (transition team) to offer briefings to the governor and the vice presidential nominee. Following custom, these sessions could begin any time following the formal nomination, which in 2012 occurred in late August at the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida. Immediately following the nomination, the Romney campaign designated policy director Lanhee Chen and foreign policy adviser Dan Senor as points of contact for the briefings. ODNI promptly informed these advisers of the ground rules the White House had approved—notably, that the briefings could address topics requested by the candidates, but would not include operational matters or policy deliberations. The two sides also discussed the various security and logistical issues that would be involved with the process.

Governor Romney, accompanied by Chen, received his first briefing on 17 September in Los Angeles. The leader of the briefing team was Robert Cardillo, the DNI's deputy director for intelligence integration, who at the time was serving as the regular briefer of President Obama. Joining Cardillo were the director of the National Counterterrorism Center and a number of the IC's most senior substantive experts. The two-hour session included briefings on the worldwide terrorist threat, including threats to the US homeland; developments in the Middle East, in particular the violence in Syria and various other manifestations of the "Arab Spring" that were still unfolding; Iran, with emphasis on the status of its nuclear program; and political and security issues related to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Romney's second briefing took place in Northern Virginia on 27 September with Chen and Cardillo again in attendance, but with a different set of substantive experts. Key subjects included political, economic, and military developments in Putin's Russia; the ongoing leadership transition amid corruption scandals in China; and China's economic performance and the modernization of its conventional and strategic military forces. The briefing also focused on the implications of Kim Jong Un's accession to power in North Korea, particularly with regard to any possible impact on that country's nuclear program, and on the potential foreign cybersecurity threat to the United States. Finally, the briefers discussed the presidential election in Venezuela in light of President Chavez's deteriorating health and the impact of the economic, oil export, and regional and foreign policies of the Venezuelan government on US interests.

The press noted that each of Romney's briefings had occurred, but coverage was minimal. Following the second briefing, the campaign confirmed that briefings of Romney and Ryan were taking place, but provided no details. The Intelligence Community had informed the Romney campaign at the outset that, if the media asked, ODNI would confirm that briefings had been provided but otherwise would have no comment.

The several briefers who participated in the two sessions with Romney recalled his gracious, reserved, and statesmanlike demeanor. The governor devoted a full two hours to each of the meetings and, throughout the time, allowed each of the briefers to deliver his pre-

pared points. He asked some questions in the course of the individual presentations, but more often held his questions until the end. These were, without exception, queries designed to clarify specific points and elicit additional information—the briefers were impressed that Romney “left his politics at the door.” His questions and comments demonstrated his knowledge of the Chinese economy, for example, but he made no mention of such politically charged issues as currency manipulation. Romney studied carefully the graphics he was provided if the briefer spoke directly to points on the graphic, but otherwise “he looked you straight in the eye.” Chen asked relatively few questions. The day after the first briefing, Chen informed his contacts in ODNI that the governor thought the briefing had been outstanding and had complimented the knowledge and professionalism of the briefers.

Congressman Ryan, accompanied by foreign policy adviser Senor, was briefed on 20 September in Washington, DC, and on 28 September in Boston. These sessions—in terms of the briefers who spoke and the subjects addressed—mirrored the two presentations Romney had received. The Ryan briefings ran over their allotted two hours but the congressman still wanted to explore certain topics in greater depth and additional briefings were scheduled. A third was held on 6 October near Charlottesville, Virginia, with an IC team led by Cardillo’s deputy and including senior experts on counterterrorism, the Middle East, and Iran. Ryan’s fourth briefing occurred on 5 November, the day before the general election, in Reno, Nevada. Cardillo and the NIO for the Middle East conducted that session. Both supplementary briefings served primarily to update the congressman on developments regarding terrorism, the Middle East, and Iran that had been covered in the earlier sessions.

Briefing Ryan was a decidedly interactive process, as the congressman was most interested and energetic. The briefers were able to get all their key points across but generally did so in a conversational back and forth during which Ryan asked numerous probing questions. A couple of these questions stumped the briefers. The latter observed that Ryan was professional, respectful, and set his politics aside, as Romney had. He studied the graphics and maps carefully, including their legends, pursuing “very granular knowledge.” He “drilled down until he hit rock,” one briefer recalled. On several issues, Senor was also an active questioner.

According to the briefers, Ryan understood the issues “like a well-informed member of the House Intelligence Committee.” Indeed, several commented that it was clear Ryan had traveled with congressional delegations to key areas of national security concern. He was familiar with the knotty issues of political instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The only awkwardness in these rewarding discussions was that, on a couple of occasions, providing appropriate answers to Ryan’s questions would have necessitated going into operational matters. When briefers demurred and explained the situation, Ryan was completely understanding.

The Issue of Benghazi

The most prominent and controversial foreign affairs issue during the 2012 campaign was the US government’s handling of the attack on 11 September on the American consulate in Benghazi, Libya, that killed four Americans, including Ambassador Chris Stevens. It had been initially assumed—and a senior administration official described it as such—that the attack grew out of anti-US demonstrations like those simultaneously occurring in Cairo and elsewhere in the Muslim world, in which protesters were venting outrage at an anti-Islamic film produced by a Coptic Christian in Los Angeles. In fact, it emerged that there had been no popular protest in Benghazi; rather, radical groups and individuals, some with ties to al-Qa’ida saw an opportunity—and took advantage of the generally anarchic security situation in the wake of the anti-Qadhafi revolution months earlier—to strike at the United States.

As it became clear the attack was not the outgrowth of popular protest in Benghazi, Romney criticized the administration for misrepresenting the facts of the situation, the faulty intelligence information on which the public statements had been based, and the failure to provide security sufficient to protect the facilities or rescue the individuals under attack. A major focus of those who provided intelligence briefings to the candidates during this period was to get the unfolding story straight regarding what had happened in Benghazi and to stay out of the public debate.

Reflecting the importance of the terrorism issue, the first briefer at the initial meeting with Romney on 17 September, six days after the

attack in Benghazi, was NCTC Director Matthew Olsen. Discussing the session some months later, Olsen recalled he was determined to make his presentation as timely and accurate as possible.⁹ The morning of the briefing, he prepared the talking points himself in the secure work spaces of the FBI field office in Los Angeles, drawing on the IC's latest intelligence related to Benghazi and ensuring consistency with what he had been telling the president. Olsen's overall focus was on the worldwide strategic terrorist threat, including within the United States, but he began with a careful description of the latest information on Benghazi.

At the second briefing of the Republican challengers—that given Ryan in Washington on 20 September—NCTC Deputy Director Nick Rasmussen drew on the same talking points Olsen had used with Romney three days earlier as he described the overall terrorist threat but updated the material to reflect the latest information on Benghazi.¹⁰ Nine days after the attack, Rasmussen was careful to describe with precision what the IC knew and what it did not, particularly with regard to Ryan's primary interest and, indeed, that of the IC—namely, who was responsible? The sequence of events was beginning to clarify, but even at that point the briefers felt they could not say with certainty whether there had been a demonstration at the consulate independent of the terrorist attack. Cardillo provided updates on Benghazi during the second briefings of Romney and Ryan on 27 and 28 September, but it was not until Ryan's briefing in Charlottesville on 6 October that the NCTC's director of analysis was in a position to state definitively that there had been no popular demonstration.

The three senior NCTC officers who dealt with Romney and Ryan all noted that the two challengers were very interested in the intelligence on terrorism and that, in the setting of the briefings, they completely avoided the associated political issues. The candidates and their aides asked questions to clarify the facts and ensure they understood the security classification of the information they were receiving. The briefers were mindful that some of the IC's early information about the Benghazi situation had been wrong or incomplete, and they were

9. Matthew Olsen, interview with author in McLean, Virginia, 3 January 2013.

10. Nicholas Rasmussen, interview with the author in McLean, Virginia, 3 January 2013.

grateful that the candidates accepted and appreciated their updates and clarifications.

The Presidential Debates

During the presidential debates of 2012, the performance of the Intelligence Community came under explicit scrutiny in a way it did not during the classified briefings of the candidates. The two briefings of Romney, in the latter half of September, were completed prior to his three debates with President Obama in October. Ryan received three of his four intelligence briefings prior to his one debate with Vice President Biden. The briefers followed the televised debates with interest to see whether and how the candidates might make use of the intelligence information they had been provided. The first presidential debate, at the University of Denver on 3 October, was limited to domestic issues. No intelligence issues arose.

The one vice presidential debate, on 11 October, was a different story—the IC was mentioned three times in the first question alone. Moderating the debate at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, Martha Raddatz of ABC News lost little time getting to the issue: “I would like to begin with Libya,” she said. “The State Department has now made clear—there were no protesters there [in Benghazi]. It was a pre-planned assault by heavily armed men. Wasn’t this a massive intelligence failure, Vice President Biden?”

The vice president did not respond directly to the charge of an intelligence failure. However, concerning the question about why the administration had been talking publicly about protesters, he said, “Because that was exactly what we were told by the Intelligence Community. The Intelligence Community told us that. As they learned more facts about exactly what happened, they changed their assessment. That’s why there’s also an investigation...as to whether or not there are any lapses, what the lapses were, so that they will never happen again.” The vice president subsequently repeated this account of the community’s actions. To stress the positive regarding the administration’s handling of the challenge from international terrorism, he also recalled, “When it came to Usama bin Ladin, the president, the first day in office, [while] I was sitting with him in the Oval Office...called in the CIA and signed an order saying, ‘My highest priority is to get bin Ladin.’”

The presidential candidates took up the issue of Libya at their second debate, held on 16 October at Hofstra University in New York. On this occasion, Obama and Romney had a spirited exchange about how the US government had handled the Benghazi matter—including the date the president first referred to it as a terrorist attack—but the Intelligence Community was not specifically cited. Intelligence was mentioned in the third and final presidential debate, held on 22 October at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida. Governor Romney referred in a general way to what “intelligence sources” were reporting about the organization of insurgents challenging the Asad regime in Syria. Separately, in praising the US military, he noted its “extraordinary technology and intelligence.” President Obama referred twice to the Intelligence Community, in each case underscoring the “unprecedented military and intelligence cooperation” with Israel.

Intelligence professionals took seriously the fact that both parties during the 2012 campaign had criticized their performance on Libya. At the same time, the candidates had also said positive things about the Intelligence Community, and there were no substantial organizational or political ramifications for the IC such as those that followed the elections of 2004 and 2008, when difficult issues had arisen related to the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the CIA’s controversial treatment of terrorist detainees. Following the election of 2012, DNI Clapper remained in office and intelligence support to President Obama and his administration continued to be provided in the manner it had been for most of the president’s first term.

