

28 December 1981

Breakfast Item for Acting DCI/SECDEF - 29 December 1981

SUBJECT: Terrorist Threat Reporting

1. There is no magic answer to the question of how to improve the U.S. Intelligence Community's capacity to acquire, report and disseminate information about terrorist threats against U.S. interests, i.e. lives and installations. All of us agree that we need more well-placed penetrations of major terrorist organizations, a sustained high standard of professional handling of sources and of our relations with foreign intelligence services and an improvement in our analytical capability, both in the field and at the national level.

2. At the same time, it should be pointed out that terrorist threat reporting is a business filled with bear traps. Intelligence professionals are uncomfortable with the "cry wolf" nature of most terrorist threat information. Much is reported, little ever takes place. If the target of the terrorist threat is an important person, frequently there is overreaction--which leads to a spate of reporting beyond any one agency's ability to control, which in turns leads to false confirmation, to still greater dissemination and so on through the vicious circle. The Libyan threat to assassinate President Reagan is the most recent example of terrorist threat information taking on a life of its own.

3. Even with the prompt dissemination of well-sourced warning information, there remains the difficult question of how long we can reasonably maintain an alert status against a threat to U.S. interests. Significant threat information circulated for several months prior to both the Red Army Faction's attacks against Ramstein AFB and General Kroesen in West Germany and the Red Brigades kidnapping of General Dozier in Italy.

4. Experience shows that the most effective method of guarding against a terrorist attack is exposure of terrorist intentions. That exposure represents a dilemma between protection of sources and methods and the dissemination of enough of the basic threat information to those responsible to ensure an adequate security response. That dissemination often means sharing with foreign intelligence services whose reactions are not always predictable.

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5. There is little doubt that foreign intelligence services are attuned to terrorist threats which may impact against U.S. interests and that they share this information with us freely. Some of this information acquired is excellent. Most is marginal, but we cannot ignore any threat to U.S. citizens and, therefore, must treat each threat seriously. Also, even the better intelligence services, such as those of Western Europe, seem to lack the solid penetration sources which each should have to deal with his own threat.

6. Field evaluation of threat reporting can and should be improved. Generally, we do a competent job of evaluating/ assessing our unilateral reporting, but much of the information from foreign intelligence and security services does not receive the same scrutiny.

7. Thus, it is not a question of more reporting, but of better reporting (and, more importantly, reporting over which we have a measure of control), better exploitation of sources and better analysis. The basic expertise is already available in the U.S. Intelligence Community--what is required is much more of the same.