

Michael Morell
Private Citizen
Former Acting and Deputy Director, Central Intelligence Agency
Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives
Russian Bounties on U.S. Troops: Why Hasn't the Administration Responded?
July 9, 2020

Testimony

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, Members of the Committee,

It is an honor to be invited to appear before this distinguished committee.

A number of senior national security officials over multiple administrations, both Republican and Democrat, including at least four presidents, taught me the importance of making clear what is known and what is unknown.

In that spirit, I want to say that I have not seen the intelligence in question, I have not talked to anyone inside government about the intelligence, and I do not know what, if anything, the Administration has done in response or why they made any decisions they might have made about the issue. In the Q&A, you will find me reluctant to speculate on any of any that.

What I do know and therefore what I am able to answer questions about are: (1) How the collection, dissemination, and analytic processes of the Intelligence Community work; (2) How the PDB process worked over the 33 years I served at CIA; (3) Assuming that the IC thought the information credible at some of level of confidence, how the policy process on something like this would have worked at senior levels in the Bush and Obama Administrations; and (4) What I would have done as the Acting or Deputy Director of CIA under different scenarios about what the raw intelligence showed and what the analysts thought of it.

With all that in mind, let me make eight brief points:

One, there is a misperception by many in the media about who receives raw intelligence. Many incorrectly assume it only goes to IC analysts, who decide what to pass on and in what context to intelligence consumers. That perception is not accurate. The truth is that raw intelligence gets disseminated widely – to intelligence analysts, yes, but also to war fighters in the field and at the Pentagon, to policymakers at State and DoD, as well as to senior White House officials via the White House Situation Room. The important point here is that many people would have already seen the raw intelligence as the analysts were just beginning their work.

Two, a key question with regard to the raw intelligence is whether it was clear to a reader what might be happening – that is, what the Russians might be doing – or if it was possible to put that together, to see that, only by connecting a number of dots. I don't know the answer to that question in this case. Importantly, though, in my experience, even if it was even only vaguely

clear that the Russians might be paying bounties to Taliban-associated militants for killing American soldiers, that information would have made its way to the highest levels of the US government, including the President -- before the analysts concluded their work.

Three, the lead IC agencies in assessing the information would have been the Central Intelligence Agency because of its role as the key all-source analytic agency on strategic issues and its key role in assessing overseas terrorism threats, the Defense Intelligence Agency because of the important role it plays in the analysis of force protection issues, and the National Counterterrorism Center because of its role on terrorism threat intelligence. The analysts would assess the information and come to two judgments – (a) whether or not they believe Moscow was offering the bounties and, (b) if they believed that, what is their level of confidence in that judgment, low, medium, or high.

Four, if the analysts believed, at any level of confidence, that the Russians were providing the bounties, that judgment would be presented in the PDB. If the President does not read the PDB – not all presidents have – it would have been briefed to him, if not by the PDB briefer, then by the Director of National Intelligence or the Director of CIA or even those senior administration officials who were aware of analysis because they read the PDB or were briefed on it, such as the national security advisor, the White House chief of staff, and even the vice president.

Five, it is important to note that a dissent within the Intelligence Community on either the judgment itself or on the confidence level would not keep a piece out of the PDB. Rather, the dissent would be noted in the piece itself.

Six, once the piece was in the PDB, the IC leadership would, on something of this significance, brief Congress. I would have briefed the Gang of Eight as well as the full membership of the two intelligence committees either the same day the piece ran in the PDB or the day after.

Seven, if the IC assessed that the Russians were providing the bounties, again at any level of confidence, that would kick off a policy process inside the NSC staff on how the US should respond. The analysts' level of confidence would make a difference to that process and its outcome. A medium to high level of confidence would lead to a policy decision on how to proceed, while a low level of confidence would result in a decision that more intelligence was necessary before a decision could be taken on how to deal with the Russians on the matter. Tactical decision in Afghanistan would have moved forward at any level of confidence.

Eight, and finally, a medium-to-high level confidence judgment that the Russians were indeed offering the bounties would, in every administration I worked, have resulted in some sort of policy action designed to deter the Russians going forward. The safety of our troops would have required it.

Mr. Chairman, let me stop there, and I look forward to answering the Committee's questions.