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## Open Source Intelligence

Robert David Steele 04.18.06, 6:00 PM ET

NEW YORK -On Sept. 11, 2001, four airplanes were hijacked by terrorists who intended to crash them into a series of high-profile U.S. targets. Two crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. The third collided with the Pentagon. But passengers on the fourth plane were alerted to the crisis while still in the air. They fought back, and the plane went down in rural Pennsylvania, sparing its intended target, the U.S. Capitol.

In other words, the only hijacked airplane that failed to hit its target on Sept. 11 was the one where informed citizens were able to take direct action. It gave proof that our national security establishment is broken. A \$500 billion per year defense department and a \$50 billion per year secret intelligence community failed where a few brave citizens armed only with cell phones succeeded.

This tragic event illustrates the way we must reinvent our national intelligence system. The threats we face don't lend themselves to pre-planned, centrally controlled government direction. Only a nation in which each citizen is both a collector and consumer of intelligence, able to share information adequately and in real time, will survive the tribulations to come.

Today, U.S. "intelligence" is upside down and inside out. It is upside down because it relies on satellites in outer space rather than human eyes on the ground. It is inside out because it tries to divine intelligence unilaterally, without first asking anyone else what information they might provide.

Despite high-profile intelligence failures such as Sept. 11, a series of directors of Central Intelligence have failed to significantly change the way we collect and process information. They simply have not gotten it through their heads that intelligence is about knowing enough to make smart decisions at all levels, on all subjects, not just about stealing very expensive secrets on a handful of what they call "hard targets"--China, Iran, Russia and a few others.

Fortunately, the idea of "collective intelligence" is gaining acceptance--at least outside of government circles.

In short, collective intelligence relies on the combined brain power of large groups of people. We see it at work when political parties choose a candidate or create policy platforms. We see it on the Internet, when groups of strangers solve problems and edit collaborative encyclopedia entries. We even see it in the behavior of ants, which are capable of maintaining complicated nests and executing huge military raids, tasks far beyond the intellectual abilities of any one ant.

We also saw collective intelligence at work in the wake of the 2004 tsunami that ravaged South Asia. After the waters receded, international citizens with cell phones and cameras started sending photos and text messages back to their friends at home. All over the world, volunteers jumped in to set up bulletin boards on the status of survivors, helping families reunite or check on loved ones. A hundred citizens on the ground, with eyes on target and cell phones in hand, proved themselves far more useful than one spy could ever be.

How can we use this to reform intelligence? I suggest we create a national Open Source Agency. Half of the money earmarked for the agency would go toward traditional intelligence work. The other half would

provide for 50 state-wide Citizen Intelligence Networks, including a 24/7 watch center, where citizens can both obtain and input information.

We could establish new emergency intelligence phone numbers--think 119 instead of 911--allowing any housewife, cab driver or delivery boy to contribute to our national security. All they have to do is be alert, and if they see something, take a cell phone photograph and send it in with a text message. If three different people notice the same suspicious person taking photographs of a nuclear plant, for instance, it could be hugely important. The system could even evolve to automatically mobilize emergency workers or warn citizens. Imagine if after people alerted the network about a roadside car bomb, it automatically sent text messages to every phone in the immediate area, warning people to stay away.

When you think about how the system will change, it may be helpful to picture national intelligence as a baseball game. In the old days, government bureaucrats accustomed to unlimited budgets and secret methods would try to win a game simply by bribing a player (Clandestine Intelligence), putting a "bug" in the dug-out (Signals Intelligence), trying to "sniff" the direction and speed of the ball (Measurements & Signatures Intelligence), or taking a satellite picture of the field every three days (Imagery Intelligence).

This approach is no longer appropriate. In our new era, everyone, including any terrorist, has the option of using open sources of information that are equal or superior to secret sources. The new craft of intelligence requires all the players to function as part of a team, and asks them to win however they can. It uses the collective wisdom of all the participants. It encourages the crowd to participate. Open source intelligence harnesses what *everyone* sees and knows. It changes the rules of the game.

We must study, digitize, translate and learn from the history of all nations and peoples and lands. We must share the cost of collecting and understanding all information in all languages with knowledgeable individuals from all nations, not just our own. We must harness the distributed intelligence of the entire nation, such that everyone might participate. We will still need spies and secrecy, but improved use of public intelligence will allow them to focus more narrowly.

"A nation's best defense is an educated citizenry." Thomas Jefferson said that. Not only was he right when he said it, but today, his words must lead us to realize the importance of public intelligence.

*Robert David Steele is a retired Marine Corps Reserve infantry and intelligence officer who served four years active duty and the remainder in the Individual Ready Reserve. After joining the CIA in 1979, he served three back-to-back tours in Latin America as a clandestine case officer, including one tour as one of the first officers focused full time on terrorism. He is the author of three books about intelligence and the the chief executive of [OSS.net](http://OSS.net).*

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