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Intelligence Test

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It began with a telephone call from an old friend — and with a plea for help. The caller was vice president Dick Cheney, and he had an important request. He wanted to know if John M. "Mike" McConnell would be willing to serve his country one more time — by accepting a presidential appointment as the U.S. Director of National Intelligence.

"Mike, we need you to come back," said Cheney during his phone call of December 23, 2006. "We've got some serious issues, and we think you can help."
McConnell listened carefully to his friend and former boss. Then he asked for some time to discuss this extraordinary request with his family: “Let me think about it over Christmas?”

Cheney agreed. The two men chatted amiably for a minute or two and then said goodbye.

For McConnell, a 1966 Furman graduate whose father had once worked in the shipping department of a Greenville wholesaler while his mother labored in a garment factory on Poinsett Highway, his brief conversation with the vice president would launch the latest chapter in a remarkable life story built around the theme of public service.

It would also present the veteran intelligence officer — a decorated Vietnam War combat veteran who'd risen to the rank of Vice Admiral in the U.S. Navy and had then served for four years (1992-96) as director of the National Security Agency — with what must surely be the greatest single challenge of his professional career.

With the war in Iraq going badly in late 2006, and with the U.S. intelligence community still reeling from its failure to accurately assess Saddam Hussein's weapons-of-mass-destruction program in the run-up to the war, stepping into the role of America's "spy czar" would require strong nerves.

But McConnell didn't blink.

After a critically important conversation with another old friend, newly installed Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, in which he made certain that he would have the full support of the Pentagon and also the authority required to do the job properly, McConnell said "yes" to Cheney's request.

Within two months of the urgent summons from the White House, McConnell was sworn in as America's newest spymaster.

The needs of the nation

PRAISED BY PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH FOR his "long experience" and "unique understanding of the threats we face in this new century," McConnell willingly gave up a lucrative post as a Washington-based national security consultant to once again serve the nation.

He knew his assignment wouldn't be easy. And the immensity of the task can be seen in a single fact: having replaced John Negroponte (now Deputy Secretary of State) as Director of National Intelligence, McConnell is responsible for managing an estimated 100,000 employees who work for no fewer than 16 different agencies.

He's also the administration's point man in the continuing and often contentious effort to persuade Congress to give America's intelligence agencies the tools they need to protect the country against the growing menace of international terrorism. Describing himself as "apolitical" and "determined to defend the Constitution and the rule of law," McConnell is nonetheless convinced that the intelligence community must be given enough surveillance latitude to do an effective job of eavesdropping on potential terrorists by intercepting their electronic communications. Although he's intent on protecting the privacy rights of U.S. citizens, he believes strongly that electronic eavesdropping is sometimes required to defend against the very real danger of attacks.

As he struggles with these challenges and with mastering the rapidly accelerating computer- and satellite-based technologies that are now an essential part of intelligence gathering, McConnell finds himself working 16 hours a day, six days a week in an effort to reshape and reform the nation's intelligence apparatus.

At first glance, his willingness to carry this heavy load seems difficult to fathom. Why take on such a burden at the age of 63, when he could just as easily have spent his days "putzing around" (his words) with his six grandchildren and two
Springer spaniels at his country home in Middleburg, Va.?

McConnell’s response: “The needs of the nation.” Then he adds, “I was thinking about public service, that’s all. I’ve always considered my 29 years in the U.S. Navy to have been public service. Looking back, I do think those years left me with a sense of responsibility to the country.

“I also think our country faces a major challenge right now if we’re going to successfully restructure and improve our intelligence capability so that all of the agencies involved can do a better job of helping each other by sharing information more. Accomplishing that won’t be easy, because there’s always resistance to change. But we have to do it. In the wake of 9/11, we simply don’t have a choice.

“It’s clear that intelligence needs and intelligence-gathering methods are changing rapidly today, and we have to change with them. And it’s my job to try and help that process along, while also doing my best to help protect the privacy and the constitutional rights of every citizen in this country.”

Humble beginnings

When McConnell arrived on the Furman campus in the fall of 1964, he was so poor that he sometimes had difficulty getting enough to eat.

The son of a family who lacked the resources to pay for room and board, the youthful McConnell managed to solve his housing problem by landing a job as a custodian and equipment manager for the university’s athletic department.

He liked the job a lot. In addition to earning some precious dollars for tuition, he was permitted to live in a room in the old gym, free of charge. Money was still tight, however, and he was sometimes forced to skip meals to make sure all the bills were paid.

But then he got a wonderful break.

As he recalls with a nostalgic smile, “One day Dean [Francis W.] Bonner sent for me. So I went over to his office and he said, ‘What are you eating?’

“And I said, ‘Well, I’ve got a hot plate. Life is good down at the gym.’

“He looked at me and said, ‘Not good enough.’ And he handed me a meal card and said, ‘If you’re going to be [living] here on campus, use this. I want you eating in the dining hall.’”

Amazed, McConnell stared at the card —
and realized that it would provide him with three free meals a day for the rest of the year.

"I have no idea what turned him on to my situation, or how he knew I was living in the gym," says McConnell. "And he never mentioned it again. I was stunned by what he did — and I can tell you that I went on to use that card enthusiastically. I am forever grateful."

For McConnell, who had earned a two-year degree from what was then North Greenville Junior College before enrolling at Furman, Bonner's kindness became "a great inspiration." But he also benefited, he says, from several professors who piqued his curiosity about economics and political science.

"I still remember Economics 101," he recalls, "and the way our professor made the theories of banking and the theories of money so fascinating. I didn't know a thing about economics, but that course was so interesting and so exciting that I decided to make economics my major on the spot."

A consummate pro

After earning his Furman degree, McConnell chose to complete his military obligation and volunteered for a three-year hitch in the U.S. Navy. In 1967-68, he found himself attached to a unit of the Navy's legendary Mobile Riverine Force — the famed "River Rats" — which patrolled the inland waters of South Vietnam in support of American combat forces.

McConnell still remembers the sound of "enemy rounds zinging" into the USS Colleton barracks ship, where he spent 12 months on duty. He was later decorated for his service.

Sometime near the end of his Vietnam tour, the youthful ensign discovered that he loved Navy life and wanted to specialize in intelligence-gathering and analysis. What followed was a glittering 26-year career in Naval intelligence. He would serve as the top intelligence officer for the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Colin Powell during the Persian Gulf War in 1991, and in that position he developed professional relationships with Secretary Gates and with Steve Hadley, the President's current National Security Advisor.

As the Joint Chiefs' spokesperson during Operation Desert Storm, his clear grasp of the facts, smooth delivery and ability to explain complex issues earned him widespread respect, especially from the press. Later in 1991, he received Furman's Distinguished Alumni Award.

Having also served effectively as an intelligence officer under Dick Cheney when Cheney ran the Department of Defense for the first President Bush, McConnell was an obvious choice in 1992 to head the National Security Agency. During his four years in that job, he was known as a consummate professional with a knack for streamlining and modernizing massive government bureaucracies.

When McConnell stepped down from his NSA post in early 1996, Sen. Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania entered a tribute into the Congressional Record praising McConnell for his commitment to making sure that the agency "had the requisite skills and resources to meet the quickly evolving technological challenges that faced the Nation."

Specter added, "His candor and openness
What's it like to sit down with the President of the United States each morning to review national security issues and the latest international crises?

In his job as Director of National Intelligence (DNI), Mike McConnell ’66 is responsible for briefing George W. Bush six mornings a week about potential threats to the nation.

Surprisingly enough, given the critical importance of the topics that are discussed, McConnell says these early morning meetings are actually “very relaxed and very congenial. It’s a very brisk pace, but it’s friendly, it’s give and take.

“The president is very open, very interested in everything you tell him,” says McConnell. “But he’s also very much in charge. There’s never any question who the President is.

“He’s also an incredibly fast reader. I’ll hand him a four-page article, and a minute later he’s asking a question on page three or four, while the rest of us are still on page one or two. But he also has great range. Quite often we’ll go through eight layers of information on an intelligence matter — all the way from the strategic level, way up in the stratosphere, down into a lot of very fine detail.

“And three weeks later — or three months later — he still remembers the context of the details.”

In addition to McConnell, the briefings usually include Vice President Dick Cheney, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley and White House Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten, along with one of two briefers who rotate duty in preparing the President’s daily intelligence book and provide insights on the articles. Depending on international circumstances, the group will at times be joined by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and Admiral Michael Mullen, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

“What typically happens is that we’ll design each day’s intelligence briefing around a particular theme,” explains McConnell. “On Monday we might do Iraq, on Tuesday we might do homeland security and terrorism, and so on. We also like to set up what we call ‘deep dives’ — longer sessions where we’ll bring in a couple of analysts with special knowledge.”

Quite frequently these longer reviews will last for 60 minutes or more and will include intelligence operatives who’ve lived in a foreign country for 15 or 20 years and are intimately familiar with its language and culture. Because they give the commander-in-chief an opportunity to scrutinize international problems and security threats in great detail, McConnell says, “The President has told us that he really likes the deep dives.”

— TOM NUGENT
Launched in April of 2005 after several years of contentious national debate about the best way to organize the intelligence community in light of the threat posed by international terrorism, the Office of the DNI operates out of a facility located at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C.

Like the authors of the 9/11 Commission’s final report — who strongly recommended that the DNI should work to improve information sharing and cooperation among the various spy agencies and the Pentagon — McConnell is “absolutely convinced” that protecting America from future attacks hinges on accomplishing a long overdue restructuring of the entire intelligence community.

“There’s no doubt that we have to do a better job of sharing [intelligence] information across boundaries,” he says, and adds that he hopes his hard-earned reputation for being “apolitical” and “a professional intelligence man” will help him convince the leaders of the country’s intelligence community to trust his vision of improved information-sharing and cooperation among the various agencies involved.

“My approach is to change the culture in the community,” he says. “For the past 50 years, that culture was based on ‘need to know,’ where you had to prove that you were entitled to intelligence information in order to be allowed to look at it.”

McConnell says that, while such an approach served the country reasonably well during World War II and the Cold War, it did not prove effective in response to 9/11. “Right now,” he says, “I think one of the biggest challenges we face is to change the ‘need to know’ culture to a ‘responsibility to provide’ culture within all of these different federal intelligence organizations.

“If we can get the information-sharing part done — along with making sure we have the Congressional authority to collect the information we need, while protecting the privacy rights of every citizen — I think we’ll be well on our way to a much more effective intelligence capability in this country.

“That’s a goal we must accomplish,” he adds with emphasis, “and you can be sure we’re going to do everything we possibly can to get it done.”