

The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency at 15: Coming of Age, 1996-2011

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We began with a passing of the flag.

On Oct. 1, 1996, Deputy Secretary of Defense John White handed the new National Imagery and Mapping Agency (NIMA) flag to Acting Director Rear Adm. Joseph J. Dantone Jr. As an idea first suggested by Robert Gates when he served as Director of the CIA/Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), but refined and developed in a more receptive political atmosphere by DCI John Deutch, full collaboration between imagery analysts and geospatial specialists within a dedicated agency seemed ideal as the 20th century ended and new, more asymmetrical threats emerged around the world. For Dantone, directing the new agency meant breaking down cultural barriers between analysts and scientists who did not have a history of easy, regular communication.

The previous year, Dantone assumed the chairmanship of the transition team that established the mission, function, organizational structure and program plan for NIMA. During his tenure, he focused attention on transferring resources from eight different agencies into the new agency after winning the approval of Department of Defense (DOD), the Intelligence Community and various oversight congressional committees. In the meanwhile, the agencies that would become NIMA, especially the Defense Mapping Agency (DMA), provided phenomenal geospatial and imagery support to the success of the Dayton Peace Accords, sealed at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, in 1995, clearly exhibiting the potential of the proposed NIMA collaboration.

From its beginning on Oct. 1, 1996, NIMA faced extraordinary internal and external responsibilities. Outwardly, DOD looked to the new agency for direct analytical combat support in aerial and space-based reconnaissance and cartography.

In addition, its founding statutes required NIMA to support national-level policymakers and government agencies. NIMA also became a member of the Intelligence Community and the central authority for access to the best imagery and geospatial information as well as the ultimate arbiter of standards for these critical sources. The primary creators of the agency, White and Deutch, sought to form NIMA around the concept of a single, national geospatial information system, linking the existing imagery and cartographic exploitation functions as they emerged into the digital world.

NIMA absorbed four agencies at its birth in 1996 and took imagery and cartographic functions from four others. The new agency consumed DMA, the National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC), the Defense Dissemination Program Office and the Central Imagery Office. It also took control of various aspects of the intelligence mission once performed by CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), National Reconnaissance Office and the Defense Aerial Reconnaissance Office.

We took our first significant steps learning to communicate and collaborate.

Army Lt. Gen. James C. King assumed command of NIMA in March 1998 and began the process of practical growth and development. One of the most revealing advances of his tenure emerged from the production cells established by NIMA and dedicated to understanding the potential power of combining geospatial techniques with the seasoned imagery analysis developed at NPIC, now part of NIMA. The Eurasia Branch production cell at the Washington Navy Yard's Building 213 began issuing collaborative products that drew applause from the entire community, prompting then DCI George Tenet to examine their "Wall of Fame" while on a visit to NIMA. This kind of collaboration and

experimentation provided the magic ingredient that brought the effort and the output to another level. Intellectual insight into a crisis situation expressed in a tight, complementary symphony of image, geospatial reference and idea quickly set a new standard for professional achievement.

On the eve of Sept. 11, 2001, NIMA had clearly begun to define and satisfy its customers with timely and specific solutions, but the obstacle of internal integration persisted, holding the agency back from fully realizing its possibilities. The major internal tradecraft cultures, whether imagery analysts or cartographers, feared that one mission or the other would disappear in the process of integration, with one group eclipsing the other. Both cultures greeted any effort to integrate with profound suspicion. As the Report of the NIMA Commission established by Congress in 2000 noted, these cultural distinctions even emerged in the agency's mission statement: The NIMA mission—to provide timely, relevant and accurate imagery, imagery intelligence and geospatial information in support of national security objectives—shows the same multiplicity.

While responsive and expert, in September 2001 the agency still had a long way to go. However, it would soon travel much of that long road in a very short period of time. For NIMA, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United States acted as a very potent catalyst. The agency response in the days after the attacks propelled reforms in organization and practice forward at a truly breathtaking rate. The terrorists had unwittingly provided the reason and opportunity for significant changes inwardly which almost immediately manifested themselves outwardly in tradecraft developments and warfighter support.

Sept. 11 defined us.

The terrible events of that day enabled our predecessor command, NIMA, both to master its mandate more effectively and to integrate its components more thoroughly. Opportunistic leadership and internal expertise used the terrorist threat to unite the agency as never before, allowing its community to respond with creativity and energy to the national need.

Retired Air Force Lt. Gen. James R. Clapper Jr. became the director of NIMA just as the attacks took place in 2001. Lamenting the lack of a blueprint to DIA when he became its director, just before his retirement from the U.S. Air Force in 1995, Clapper arrived at his new assignment with the NIMA Commission Report under his arm, finding in its conclusions the compelling vision of those who created NIMA in 1996 from multiple agencies and missions. He saw a clarity and completeness in their effort that gave him a sense of the best way ahead. When appointed to lead NIMA, he embraced their plans and then saw in the 9/11 attacks the opportunity both to fulfill quickly the commission's ambitions for NIMA and to bring the agency to the front line against the terrorist assault.

For Clapper the image of a world held in the grip of terrorism recalled the weeks he spent on the commission investigating the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia. In the absence of the Cold War superpower rivalry, Clapper envisioned "a much more lawless world" of multiple decentralized threats. He walked through the wreckage at Khobar and hoped he did not see what the future would bring.

Said Clapper, "And I'll never forget walking up the stairwell, which was completely covered in blood; blood all over the walls of the place ...

You know, I'd never been exposed to that. So it made a tremendous impression on me, and it was a graphic example to me of what terrorism is all about. And as a consequence, I got deeply involved in that even when I was retired and the whole subject of terrorism and homeland security and homeland defense ...”

Every aspect of NIMA that an incoming director would want critically revealed in a constructive way appeared in the commission's report. It discussed outsourcing especially repetitive cartographic tasks to free civil servants for more essential work. This independent view also suggested that NIMA should look hard and long at commercial imagery collection and some partnerships with private industry in that realm. The commission also emphasized the need to collaborate across boundaries of office, geography, culture and agency. If, for example, the best signals intelligence informed imagery intelligence and visa versa, collaboration with the National Security Agency seemed natural. However, in the Intelligence Community at large, such collaborations did not occur with frequency or very naturally. Above all, as Clapper read the report, he saw that the commission had no illusions about limited funds and resources. The armed forces needed to define as precisely as possible the nature of the products it needed and they had to define the meaning of information superiority.

Clapper could not have hoped for a more thorough blueprint or more informed set of constructive criticisms when he took over at NIMA in a country reacting to attack and preparing for war.

In many cases the attitudes toward the changes and reforms Clapper envisioned would have taken years to address, and implementation would have required even more time. The events of Sept. 11 permitted him to suspend a comfortable reality within the Intelligence Community and to implement changes as part of the national emergency. Not long after the attacks he commented, “Some would argue that the worst time you want to make changes is during a crisis. My experience here tells me that's the best time

to make changes. Because basically it minimizes the resistance. It's a lot easier to make changes in the name of doing things more efficiently in the case of a war. It makes it a lot simpler, a lot more sellable. So we didn't, you know, we didn't take all the delivery time you would normally take to have offsites and focus groups and handholding employees—and we didn't do that. We said we're gonna do it—you know; as a consequence, we got a jump start on making a lot of changes.”

As NIMA director, Clapper reshaped the agency into what would become NGA in 2003.

Clapper used America's determination to counter the terrorist threat to advance the reach and role of NGA at home and abroad. Mobilization for the war in Afghanistan provided ample motivation and reason for the tradecraft communities within NIMA to come together, bringing greater unity to the agency. He then projected NIMA/NGA into the theater of operations by setting the stage for the NGA support teams (NSTs) to become the face of our agency with the warfighter. The NIMA/NGA leadership also adopted a scheme of “now, next and after next” to make sure that agency thinking always looked beyond the present and tried to anticipate the future needs and achievements that would arrest the terrorist threat. This new unity of thought and tradecraft matured into GEOINT, a term for NGA's primary intelligence product that Clapper took from the dialogue within the agency and made official in both work and in the agency's name.

This work laid the foundations for our activity in Afghanistan and Iraq, our domestic homeland security and disaster relief functions, as well as the potent messages sent to the terrorists both by our success in the field and the recent welcome elimination of Osama bin Laden. When Vice Adm. Robert B. Murrett succeeded Clapper in 2006 the emphasis he chose for his tenure through 2010 rested upon the early initiatives taken by Clapper to project NGA forward. Placing GEOINT into the hands of the warfighter, encouraging NGA staff and leadership to deploy and work alongside those doing the fighting, and expanding the size

and role of the NSTs became daily reality. Murrett himself spent significant time in theater, working on collaborative arrangements with allies, visiting NSTs and making NGA a reality to those who needed to use GEOINT.

He also led the NGA domestic staff into the NGA Campus East (NCE) project, which would provide NGA's physically scattered staff with a very capable home that would help the entire NGA community work together more closely and productively. As NCE opens for business, the corporate vision currently emerging from discussions among the NGA leadership, with an emphasis on placing GEOINT into the hands of the warfighter, clearly builds on the policies and initiatives of both Clapper and Murrett. As it should, our past has informed the present. At 15, NGA has clearly come of age as a leader in the American Intelligence Community. ✨

Editor's note: Quotes from retired Air Force Lt. Gen. James R. Clapper Jr. stem from his oral history interview with former NGA historian Dr. Martin Gordon.



NIMA Director Army Lt. Gen. James C. King presented the NIMA Medallion for Excellence to John J. Hamre, Deputy Secretary of Defense. King praised Hamre for his support of NIMA and called him a "significant part of the legacy of NIMA."

Alumni Organizations Keep the NGA Spirit

Did you know there are private organizations whose membership is made up of current and former employees of NGA and its legacy organizations? These associations support social interaction, recreation, education and other benefits for their members.

In late July 2011, the Association of Aerospace Charting Seniors (ACS), located in the West, and the National Geospatial Intelligence Alumni Association (NGIAA), located in the East, combined to form the National Geospatial-Intelligence Alumni Association (NGAA). NGAA has chapters in the East and West, with a membership of over 500. Their websites are at www.ngaaeast.org and www.ngaawest.org, respectively.

Current and former NGA employees may also join the Association of Mapping Seniors (AMS); their website is at www.mappers.org.