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Blair Is Steeped in the Ways Intelligence Works

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After Dennis Blair's assignment as military liaison to the CIA 13 years ago, he groused about all the cloak-and-dagger politics at Langley headquarters. "You'd go to a meeting and think everyone had agreed" to a particular course of action, and then the meeting would end and "someone would come up to me in the hallway and say, 'Forget what you heard in there' " -- what we really want to do is something different, Blair once explained.

Secret agendas have never been "Denny" Blair's style. The reserved former four-star admiral, who is widely understood to be President-elect [Barack Obama](#)'s choice as director of national intelligence, is well known in Washington as an intellectual who values straightforwardness and has mastered the byzantine interagency process during his various government stints.

In choosing a man so steeped in Washington's ways, the Obama administration is signaling its intention to streamline the [Office of the Director of National Intelligence](#), which is widely seen as too large, too cumbersome and still too disjointed, according to transition officials.

Created by Congress in 2004 over the objections of most leaders of the U.S. intelligence community, the McLean-based ODNI today includes 1,500 employees and a hefty, although undisclosed, number of private contractors. It supervises the nation's 16 other intelligence agencies, including the CIA.

"This will be a new day for the ODNI, believe me," said one officer who has worked with Blair and who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he did not get permission to be quoted.

Blair is likely to face Senate questions about his role in maintaining [U.S. military](#) ties with Indonesia's military during a period in which it engaged in human rights violations, and about his corporate ties to a company involved in the F-22 Raptor program. There are also members of Congress who remain uncomfortable with giving the top intelligence job, with its range of priorities, to a former military officer.

Blair would be the third recently retired four-star officer nominated by Obama for a top post, an unusual trend for a Democratic administration and one that has surprised both political camps. Former Marine Gen. [James L. Jones](#) is the nominee for national security adviser, and former Army chief of staff Gen. Eric K. Shinseki has been tapped as secretary of veterans affairs.

Obama is also considering asking retired Air Force [Gen. Michael V. Hayden](#) to stay on as [CIA](#) director, according to officials familiar with the transition's selection discussions. Such a choice would put three military men in top national security positions at a time when many experts believe intelligence is already too skewed toward military priorities.

Blair, a sixth-generation naval officer from Maine, is unusually familiar with the business of intelligence, with stops at the [White House](#), CIA and Pentagon and through his daily contact with the [State Department](#) when he commanded U.S. forces in the Pacific. In the latter job, he helped turn the Joint Intelligence Center in Hawaii into the largest such center in the world. After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, he led an interagency effort to identify, capture or kill members of the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group in the Philippines. He knit together a team of special operations forces and CIA agents that worked closely with the Philippine army on tactical operations.

He also has adeptly navigated the shoals of Washington, first as a White House fellow, then as a [National Security Council](#) staffer, CIA liaison and director of the Joint Staff. In the Pacific, he butted heads with the State Department and Congress over his desire to maintain ties with the Indonesian military despite its human rights record and its involvement in East Timor atrocities. "Militaries that are doing something bad at times go into their shell," he said at the time. "It's them against the world." A more fruitful strategy, he insisted, is to make them feel a kinship with professional militaries.

Robert Gelbard, a former U.S. ambassador to Indonesia, opposed Blair's push to work with that country's military in 2000, but he endorses Blair as director of national intelligence. "We had a legitimate policy disagreement. But he has a tremendous analytic mind and commands a lot of respect in Washington. His appointment comes at a time when there needs to be a critical reassessment of what the ODNI does," Gelbard said.

Blair earns kudos from former staffers and peers for his management of large organizations with multiple, fast-paced operations. At Pacific Command, he managed more people than work in the Executive Office of the President, as well as military relations with 43 countries, including four with the world's largest armies: China, India, North Korea and South Korea.

As director of the Joint Staff, he led dozens of ambitious general officers with daily responsibility over every military program conceivable. Blair shepherded through the first mammoth Quadrennial Defense Review, a look at how the entire U.S. armed services would be used and what type of equipment and force structure would be needed in the post-Cold War era. He was never shy about showing his grasp of issues, and "you could always tell when Denny Blair knew more about the issue than the briefer," said retired admiral Stephen Pietropaoli, who sat in on many meetings. "He didn't hide it; he was very economical."

The same bluntness characterized his dealings with foreign counterparts. He once told surprised Chinese officials, "I'm not worried about you taking Taiwan because, even if you get across the straits, you can't maintain it, you can't protect it," according to a witness in the room. But he ultimately saw China as less of a threat than did the Bush administration. Blair also privately criticized the Taiwanese government for pushing too hard for independence when it already enjoyed de facto independence.

Blair's views on China and Taiwan and his efforts to create lasting multinational forums in Asia brought him crosswise with then-Defense Secretary [Donald H. Rumsfeld](#) and ultimately cost him a chance at becoming chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#). He also is deeply committed to engagement, even with traditional adversaries, and to reorganizing government to empower diplomacy and other nonmilitary instruments of power, he has said in numerous interviews.

After retiring from the military, Blair became president of the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), a

U.S. government-funded think tank. He also joined the board of directors and owned stock in EDO Corp., then a subcontractor for the F-22 Raptor fighter program. His corporate ties became the subject of a [Defense Department](#) probe after IDA issued a study endorsing an EDO contract for the program. The department's inspector general found that Blair had violated IDA's conflict-of-interest rules but had not influenced the results of the study.

In his typically blunt fashion, Blair told [The Washington Post](#) at the time: "With due respect to the inspector general, I find it difficult to understand how I can be criticized for a conflict of interest involving a study in which I had no involvement," he said.

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