

BGS Senior Counselor Michael Morell Discusses The Intelligence Briefing Offered To Presidential Nominees Before The General Election

Intelligence Briefings for the Presidential Nominees
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Once the Democratic and Republican parties officially nominate their Presidential candidates at their political conventions this summer, the nominees will be offered intelligence briefings before the general election. We asked Michael Morell, the former Deputy Director and twice Acting Director of the CIA, to explain how these briefings work.

The Cipher Brief: Can you tell us why the sitting President offers those briefings to the nominee from each party?

Michael Morell: There is a great deal of confusion about these briefings in the media. After a candidate has been formally nominated by her/his national convention, she/he is offered a one-time intelligence briefing (sometimes over multiple days if there are time constraints or if a candidate wants to go deeper on a particular topic). They do not receive a daily briefing. They do not receive regular update briefings during the campaign. They do not receive the President's Daily Briefing. Those only come for the president-elect, after the election in November.

There is also confusion in the media as to why every post-war president has offered these one-time, post-convention briefings to the candidates. The objective is not to start preparing the candidate to deal with the myriad national security issues that they will face six months down the

road, if they win the election. The objective is to protect national security during the campaign by giving the candidates a deep sense of the national security landscape. Let me explain: both our adversaries and our allies and partners will be listening closely, extremely closely, to what the candidates say about the issues during the campaign, and saying the wrong thing could damage our national security. The briefings are meant to help prevent that.

Let me be clear, though: during the initial, one-time briefing, the candidates are not advised on what to say or what not to say about national security issues on the campaign trail. The hope is that by simply giving them an objective, unbiased understanding of the issues, the dialogue on those issues during the campaign will be carried out in a way that does not undermine U.S. interests.

TCB: Who is actually involved in the briefings?

MM: On the government side, the briefing teams are usually composed of senior leaders from the analytic arms of the Intelligence Community agencies, along with senior analysts who, on a day-to-day basis, cover the issues to be discussed. I played the former role in a number of briefings for candidates over the years.

On the candidate's side, they are permitted to bring their closest national security aides. In my experience, that has ranged from just one person to two-to-three people. But there is no just showing up. The IC (Intelligence Community) must approve in advance all of the attendees.

TCB: Are there any limits to what the nominees can be told? For instance, will they be provided with classified information or details of ongoing operations? Are the candidates in essence given security clearances?

MM: Absolutely, there are limits on what candidates are told. The briefings are classified Top Secret, but the candidates are only provided the analytic judgments of the IC and the information used to support those judgments. They are not provided with the details of how that information

was collected—what the IC calls sources and methods. They are not provided with any information on any ongoing covert actions programs related to the issue being discussed. They are not provided with any operational information. Those only come after a candidate wins the election.

TCB: How does the IC prepare for the briefings? Will the briefings be the same for each candidate? What issues would you emphasize in the briefings?

MM: The leadership of the IC, most likely the DNI (Director of National Intelligence), will decide on the topics, perhaps to be approved by the White House. If I were putting the list together, I would include the threat to the U.S. Homeland and to U.S. interests abroad posed by ISIS and al Qaeda; the threat posed by a variety of actors in cyber space; the political and military situation in Iraq and Syria; the situation in Afghanistan; as well as national security issues related to Iran, Russia, North Korea, and China.

The briefing team will go into the room with the goal of providing the same analytic judgments to both candidates, but I would expect the two briefings to be very different. I would expect the briefing for Secretary Hillary Clinton (the presumptive Democratic nominee) to delve into issues more deeply and to be more of a dialogue than the briefing for Donald Trump (the presumptive Republican nominee), which I would expect to be more of a tutorial, more of a first cut at the issues, with the need to provide the history and background on issues. This is simply because the Secretary is starting at much greater level of understanding based on her experience working these issues, her experience working with the IC, and her knowledge of the IC judgments (she was a daily and engaged consumer of both IC collection and analysis). Trump, most likely, will be starting at square one. No value judgments here; just the reality of the situation.

TCB: Any personal observations about a nominee's response to a briefing you provided? Without getting into names, has a nominee seemed surprised by the information? Has it altered a position on an issue or impacted how the nominee publically presented a view?

MM: In general, candidates who have not been involved in national security are surprised by the number of threats facing the U.S., by the seriousness of those threats, by the complexity of the threats, and by just how difficult they are to mitigate. They quickly realize that there are not simple solutions. They quickly realize that their sound bites on the campaign simply don't fit reality. And, they quickly realize just how important intelligence is going to be in keeping the country safe.

Not surprisingly, the briefing team will get a sense of a candidate. Does the candidate know what they don't know, are they trying to understand the issue, do they want to learn, are they open-minded, are they able to grasp complexity, do they ask good questions? Or do they try to convince the analysts of their point of view, are they just trying to find facts to fit their world view or their policy views, do they look at the issues through the lens of national security or through the lens of politics?

The IC knows the Secretary well, and its expectation will be that she will fall into the first category because that is what she demonstrated as Secretary of State. I'm sure the analysts will be very interested to see where Donald Trump falls - largely because they will want to know what he would be like if he were to become their "First Customer," as some analysts at CIA like to call the president. And they will be interested simply because of the nature of the campaign so far, the nature of the candidate so far.

Michael Morell is the former Deputy Director and twice Acting Director of CIA and the author of the New York Times best selling book "The Great War of Our Time."