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Staying Safe
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Rumor Control

There is a piece of advice that all corporate communications professionals give to politicians and executives: Never comment on rumors. Rumors are often spread in order to damage the reputation of institutions or the individuals that govern them; but, beyond damaging reputations, rumors are frequently used for another purpose: to force the hand of the intended target. This is precisely what Al Qaeda is doing to the Department of Homeland Security.

This past week we were told that senior Bush Administration officials have told reporters that Osama bin Laden and his chief lieutenants are directing an Al Qaeda effort to launch an attack in the United States sometime this year. We were then told, once again, that the intelligence was "cryptic" about both timing and location. So we should then ask is this new information intelligence or is it rumor?

In a news conference on July 8th, 2004, Secretary Ridge stated that the intelligence about Al Qaeda's intentions was credible, even if it lacked specifics. He added that while there are no specific facts, since the chances of heading off an attack were better than ever, there was no reason to raise the terrorist threat level. It was also reported that prior to his public briefing for reporters, Secretary Ridge briefed senators, including Senator Bill Frist, the Senate Majority Leader. It was further reported that Mr. Frist said he had heard no startling information in the closed session and that "the nature of that risk is very nonspecific." Nevertheless, what is the harm in warning about a threat even if the evidence of the threat is based on corroborated rumors?

Among the many lessons we have learned from the Iraq invasion, one of the most prominent is that our intelligence community is susceptible to converting rumor into fact or something close to fact. True enough, rumor is often a primary source of accurate intelligence, but just as often it is simply wrong. The leaders of the global intelligence community know this and that is why in the past they have never conducted press conferences to release speculative information. Why then does the Department of Homeland Security?

During the Cold War we were never told how many Russian ICBMs had been programmed with the coordinates of a particular U.S. city. While we could all guess which cities were probably on the list, why was the public never told officially? I would suggest it was because we never wanted to disclose to Soviet Intelligence how little we actually knew. We would never allow our hand to be tipped. By conducting official press conferences acknowledging that we know there is a threat, but that we have no idea what it is, we risk tipping our hand to Al Qaeda.

As a counterterrorism official with the Israeli government throughout the 1960s and 1970s, I can state that we were successful in preempting terrorist attacks because we always kept the terrorists looking over their shoulder. One of the most powerful tools that can be used to permeate fear and uncertainty throughout an organization is never to reveal what you know or do not know about the organization, while at the same time launching successful attacks against the organization, whether it is by attacking the organization's leaders or by foiling their plots. The Israeli counterterrorism community has never employed the communications tactic that the Homeland Security Department is currently using because, as the saying goes, those who are in the know don't talk, and those who talk don't know. It is very dangerous to expose to the enemy what we do not know.

Right now, because the Department of Homeland Security has seemingly legitimized rumors by conducting press conferences that pass on threats, Al Qaeda has the American public guessing, and that is precisely what Al Qaeda wants. We all know, or should know by now, that the Al Qaeda threat is real and an attack could happen at any moment. That is all that we need to be told about the threat. Press conferences should not be used to pass on threats, they should disseminate facts, such as how we can prepare to protect ourselves if the threat materializes.