

Hollywood in government's anti-terror mix

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A failure of imagination.

That was one of the criticisms leveled at the U.S. government following the Sept. 11 terror attacks: Officials hadn't thought creatively about how terrorists might strike this country.

In the years since the tragedy, the Department of Homeland Security has been trying to make sure such a failure never happens again.

But instead of scavenging for answers on Capitol Hill, Homeland Security has been calling upon people with a different kind of training.

Enter the Alternative Analysis Program, the department's call to creative arms. In an entertainment era that turned fictional federal ninja Jack Bauer into a household name, the program gathers various thinkers ranging from academia to the world of entertainment together to add an outside-the-box dimension to the war on terror.

The program is just one example of the fusion of mass entertainment and national security. Hollywood director Michael Bay has said he's bounced ideas around with the government, and the since-canceled TV show "E-Ring" a Pentagon drama was put together with the help of Ken Robinson, a homeland security expert.

Kirk Whitworth, a spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security, said the Alternative Analysis Program and others like it came from a mandate to the intelligence community made in 2004.

"The ultimate goal is to prevent us from being blindsided again," he said. "We want to get people thinking in nontraditional ways and reach outside of government."

Teams are assembled, and the topic determines who gets called in, as well as the team's size (both of which Whitworth can't divulge). Every team features a mishmash of specialties professors, novelists, filmmakers and military wargamers, just to name a few.

"We tap into the entire creative community," Whitworth said.

One of the chosen was Brad Thor, a best-selling military thriller novelist who got a call from the government while running in the mountains a few years ago. At the time, the program was known as Analytic Red Cell.

"They brought me out to D.C. and took me to this vanilla building with pretty serious security," he said. "I was one of two thriller novelists there there were also futurists, sci-fi writers and psychologists in the room."

Thor's recounting of his experience with the program sounds like a playground of thought, with government agents supplying the ball.

"They start out with the full group and put out a scenario if you had access to this weapon, what would you do? If you had to hit this target, what would you do?" he said. "It's one of the few times in my life where I really felt I belonged."

One of the unique challenges concerning this group, Thor said, was the quirk of having that much creative energy in the room.

"As you know, you get creative people in the room, and they have a tendency to get off track," he said with a laugh. "But they were very good at keeping people on track. It was scary how well trained these people were."

While he couldn't get too specific, Homeland Security's Whitworth said some of the topics covered in Alternative Analysis range from viral outbreaks to terrorist misuse of information found on the Internet.

Thor isn't allowed to go into details either, but pointed out that Homeland Security rotates people in and out of the teams to keep ideas fresh, although it does keep some people on call.

"I call it the Las Vegas of government programs," he said. "First, President Bush said we have to be lucky all the time, while the terrorists have to get lucky once. So the question is, how do we increase our odds?"

"And second ... what happens in Analytic Red Cell stays in Analytic Red Cell."

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