



PORTRAIT: MAUREEN BAGINSKI

The FBI's 'Vision Lady'

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN

Maureen Baginski is leery of heights. Yet, every morning just before dawn, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's powerful intelligence czar wills herself to drive over a narrow, shoulderless, two-lane bridge across a river, part of a nearly two-hour commute from her home in Virginia to FBI headquarters in Washington. "When I cross it in the dark, my legs start to get rubbery," says Baginski. "But I tell myself I can't be that paralyzed, for Christ's sake. I've got

to drive over the bridge!"

The resolve she gathers to cross the bridge is no less necessary when she arrives at the office. Because Baginski, an FBI outsider, has been tasked with pulling off what many believe to be mission impossible: ensuring that the hidebound FBI not repeat the sort of catastrophic intelligence failures that plagued the bureau prior to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. FBI Director Robert Mueller has proposed creating a new directorate for domestic intelligence within the FBI, with Baginski at its helm. And the stakes couldn't be much higher. Baginski's as-

signment is to change the FBI in a fundamental way, to turn it into an agency that systematically collects, analyzes, and disseminates intelligence. Not just to prosecute crimes after the fact, as it has done in the past, but to prevent future terrorist attacks on American soil.

The process has been nothing short of excruciating. Ultimately, the new directorate needs the blessing of Congress or the president. But Baginski has meticulously been creating the blueprint for it since May 2003, when Mueller named her to head a new office of intelligence in an effort to deflect



Baginski is trying to change the bureau's culture.

lysts are unqualified for their jobs, and the good ones are raided by other agencies.

Baginski also wants to train new agent recruits to gather and use intelligence right from the beginning of their careers. And she wants intelligence gathered from all sorts of FBI cases to be funneled into the effort to prevent terrorist attacks. "She's embedding intelligence into the DNA of the FBI," says recently retired bureau executive Steven McCraw, who was Baginski's first deputy. Meanwhile, she's struggling to resolve the legal quandaries that stem from the FBI's dual obligations: to share information but to guard evidence for use in court cases. "She's invaluable," Mueller told *U.S. News*. "She has helped bridge the two disciplines of law enforcement and intelligence."

Baginski is now regarded as the FBI's third-most-powerful official, behind only Mueller and his deputy. "It's a sign of what an important player she is," says Deputy Attorney General James Comey, "that when the director, the attorney general, and I get our daily CIA threat briefings and then review the FBI threat information, she sits next to the director."

That Baginski, 49, has become so crucial to the bureau's survival is a classic inside-the-beltway tale of talent, luck, and sheer chutzpah. Petite and friendly, her warm voice a tad husky from smoking, Baginski is tough inside, say her colleagues. Her critics call her authoritarian. Baginski's career as an NSA signals intelligence analyst was happenstance. An authority on the obscure 19th-century novelist Nikolai Leskov (1831-1895), Baginski says her first love is Russian literature, something she realized wouldn't pay her bills. "The secret no one knows," says Baginski, "is that I applied at the FBI." But Baginski quickly changed her mind after realizing she wasn't willing to endure the long hours and endless relocations of a G-man career.

When Baginski joined the NSA in 1979, her first assignment was teaching Russian at the National Cryptologic School. Over the next two decades, she

moved into top management posts, including head of the NSA's 24-hour watch center. From various perches, she responded to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, but nothing quite prepared her for Sept. 11, 2001. That night, as Baginski trudged to the NSA parking lot and watched trucks placing concrete Jersey barriers around the perimeter, "I will confess to you to having a few tears," says Baginski. "I wasn't doing things about some far-off lands anymore. This was my own country."

Baginski says her career has been successful in part because she is an analyst by instinct, a "diagnostician of problems." And she's "no shrinking violet," she admits, when it comes to suggesting solutions. In 1999, Baginski co-authored a scathing report dissecting the NSA's decade-long computer, personnel, and code-breaking woes. Lt. Gen. Michael Hayden, the NSA director, then decided to fix the problem by creating a new directorate for signals intelligence and naming Baginski as its chief. Baginski later earned the moniker of "the Vision Lady."

Last year, Mueller was also searching for a "vision," one that would prevent the 9/11 commission from recommending that the FBI's domestic intelligence mission be given to a new agency. His answer? Baginski. Impressed by Mueller's credibility and Baginski's intelligence savvy, the commission decided in July to leave domestic intelligence in the FBI's hands. "She knows that world very, very well, and she's leading the FBI to the promised land," Comey told *U.S. News*. "She's one of Bob's tugboats."

When Mueller recruited Baginski, she was actually contemplating entering the private sector. "She could have earned a million bucks," said senior FBI official Michael Rolince. "Instead, she inherited a million headaches." Even before she picked up the FBI lingo or understood the bureau's culture and mission, Baginski had to leap into action to establish enough credibility to convince the 9/11 commission that the FBI could effec-

"I wouldn't even begin to pretend that it's not hard."

Born: Feb. 3, 1955

Family: The fifth of six children, raised in Boston Lakes, N.Y. Married, no children

Education: Bachelor's degrees in Russian and Spanish, master's degrees in Russian literature and linguistics; all from SUNY-Albany

Public service: National Security Agency 1979-2003; Federal Bureau of Investigation May 2003-present



HOT SEATS. Baginski and FBI Director Robert Mueller in a moment of reflection during an appearance before the 9/11 commission

tively handle domestic intelligence. “The pressure that has been put on her to make this succeed, it’s almost unfair,” says Rolince. “If I were Maureen Baginski, I would have thought, ‘If this is so important, why don’t I have a hundred percent backing from a hundred percent of the people?’ And even today, she doesn’t.”

One night, then Deputy Director Bruce Gebhardt telephoned Rolince at home and asked him to help ease the dependent Baginski’s transition. “She did not feel embraced,” says Rolince, whose “temporary” assignment turned from 60 days to six months. Baginski says she knows there was no malice intended. “I have personally felt very welcome,” says Baginski, “but what I’m asking people to do is very hard.”

Many of the bureau’s 56 field office chiefs were especially resistant. “She said [they had] to create these field intelligence groups,” Rolince recalls, “but she had not a dime, not a body to offer.” Baginski’s role also was discomfiting to old-school agents who resent Mueller for buying into the premise that FBI agents can’t “connect the dots” and for what

they perceive as his weakness for outsiders. “She’s the new messiah,” scoffs one senior official.

Sources say Mueller has told senior executives that resisting Baginski’s reforms is not an option. “Mo not only has the vision and the plan, but she also has the juice,” says McCraw. Mueller denies he is strong-arming his executives. “I do

“She’s embedding intelligence into the DNA of the FBI.”

STEVEN MCCRAW, former FBI executive

want people—I *expect* people—to understand the mission and work to support the mission,” Mueller said. “But I want to hear opposing views.”

Still, Mueller’s reliance on Baginski has raised eyebrows. “You are posited as a solution to many problems,” 9/11 commissioner Jamie Gorelick told Baginski at an April hearing. “Many times, we have asked the question: How is X going to get fixed? Who’s going to do Y? And often, very often, maybe too often for your comfort level, Mo Baginski is the answer.”

Some FBI executives are bemused by

the new power dynamic. “It’s like a dance,” says one official, who supports Baginski. “But she’s trying to lead, and we’re trying to follow.”

The intelligence immersion lessons are proving difficult, though it helps that Baginski can sum up her complex trade-craft in some catchphrases. “Collect what you *must*, not what you *can*,” she urges

agents during her frequent crash courses. “Know what you know, then collect against the ‘gaps.’” She warns agents to “share by rule and withhold by exception” and reminds them that “from the president down

to the patrolman,” the only useful intelligence is that which adds “value” to decision making.

Baginski admits it’s going to take at least five years to turn the FBI around. What happens to her reputation if there’s another terrorist attack? “I feel enormous pressure and responsibility, but none of it comes from the fear that I would be held up as a poster child for failure,” says Baginski. “I am confident I am not doing this by myself. We are doing it as the FBI.” That’s the idea, anyway. ●

➤ *E-mail:* ragavanc@usnews.com