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NTAS reinforced by alum's thesis work, professor's research

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NTAS reinforced by alum's thesis work, professor's research

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A publicly posted December 2015 bulletin from the [National Terrorism Advisory System](#) (NTAS) was the first of its kind: A 69-word description of the San Bernardino shootings, actions that were being taken and, importantly, how individuals could secure themselves and whom to call if they see something nefarious.

That more detailed and tangential warning has the fingerprints of NPS-CHDS academics from underling research by professors to student thesis exploration to the actual implementation of the new format.

“This is a success story of NPS-CHDS – it’s about how this program can do unique and significant things when students are made available to participate in the program,” said Department of Homeland Security Deputy Branch Chief Roy Brush, a master’s degree alumnus.

Brush’s 2014 NPS-CHDS thesis, “[Silent Warning: Understanding the National Terrorism Advisory System](#),” examined the NTAS and how or if it could improve. Introduced in 2011, the NTAS replaced the oft-maligned color coded predecessor, the Homeland Security Advisory System (HSAS).



Brush’s research found that, while more accepted than its HSAS predecessor, the NTAS needed improvement. He cited the Intelligence for Homeland Security Course at CHDS as a catalyst for this work. Faculty member Dr. [Erik Dahl](#)’s 2013 book, “[Intelligence and Surprise Attack: Failure and Success from Pearl Harbor to 9/11 and Beyond](#),” was a principal text that guided Brush’s thinking in how to shape improvements. Dahl puts forward a series of preventative actions in the book, Brush noted.

Purveyors of security sensitive warning systems face what professionals call “the decision maker’s dilemma.” On one hand, duty calls for alerting the public. At the same time, decisions makers must be careful not to endanger operational security and not endanger ongoing investigations. This revised NTAS seeks to strike that balance.

“Dr. Dahl was talking about intelligence in military context, but it was very similar to the ‘decision makers’ dilemma’ that I face every day,” Brush said. “That’s where it really started for me.”

Events around the world intensified the urgency of Brush’s thesis just as it was being finalized and released. Just a couple of months prior to his graduation, a gunman killed a soldier at the Canadian National War Memorial and was killed himself after a shootout in the nation’s Parliament building. Then, in November 2015, a three-pronged attack killed 130 in Paris that shook the western world. ISIS claimed credit for both.

“There was an uptick in terrorism, so the Secretary and senior leaders were disposed to having a conversation about how we engage the public and give them what information they need while maintaining operational security,” he said.

Once the decision was made to proceed with changes, Brush and his team were charged with assembling a group of about 40 subject matter experts from various components within DHS. The group spent hundreds of hours hammering out the concept of what the system would look like.

The team also consulted with its federal partners, users of the system and even non-government organizations. The new approach is rooted in a January 2015 meeting with Secretary Johnson, members of the Aspen Institute and Wilson Center, said Roger Parrino, Senior Counselor to the DHS Secretary.

“The terrorist threat had become more fluid and traditional,” Parrino said. “It was great that Roy knew all the prior history. We had a good foundation with which to drive this change.”

Credibility was a concern. This would be the third version of a public terrorist warning system since the 9/11 attacks. The revised format addressed part of the credibility concern with bullet-point actionable steps an average person can take. The system also retained its operational security. Bulletins communicate general trends, while a warning communicates specific threats.

DHS Secretary Johnson announced the change in mid-December 2015

“It’s time we changed the system,” Secretary Johnson said at the time. “People are anxious now; they should know and need to know what its government is doing to protect our homeland.”

Thus far the warning format has been used twice, first for the San Bernardino attack and again in June in response to the Orlando nightclub shootings.

“We really had done something significant in my mind, the federal government supporting and creating a tool and working to answer a problem and do things that are substantively beneficial to the American people,” Brush said. “What is in place now is better positioned do the job, which is to answer that decision maker’s dilemma.”

Dahl noted that Brush has continued to be a supporter of CHDS since graduating, as he returned to Monterey last March and led the Intelligence class in an exercise in which they used the new NTAS system in a fictional scenario.

“Roy Brush’s thesis, and his later work in revising the NTAS system, is a terrific example of how NPS and CHDS academic work can have important consequences in the real world,” said Dahl. “Roy’s time in our program gave him the chance to think hard about how to improve one of the most critical parts of our homeland security warning system, and then he was able to take those ideas back to DHS and make it happen. I can’t think of a better testimony for the value of what we do here.”

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