



Jump to CQ.com

[Help](#) [About Us](#) [Log out](#)[◀ Previous](#)[Next ▶](#)
Version for Printing**Recent News**[▶ Browse the most recent news stories](#)**Story in Brief****Harry Potter as a CIA Spy? One Man Says It's Worth a Shot**

Why not train kids for the CIA, wonders security veteran Marc Tobias. Sure, they can be trouble, but they have *got* to be more creative than the old men running U.S. intelligence today.

CQ HOMELAND SECURITY ? INTELLIGENCE
July 22, 2004 ? 8:18 p.m.

Harry Potter as a CIA Spy? One Man Says It's Worth a Shot

By Justin Rood, CQ Staff

Marc Tobias knows what is wrong with the U.S. intelligence community: It does not have any kids.

Teenagers can be difficult, tempestuous and certainly rebellious. But they can also be shockingly creative, open-minded, tireless and eager to disprove the assumptions of the status quo.

Just ask Nathaniel Heatwole, the 20-year-old who repeatedly sneaked weapons onto airplanes to highlight weaknesses in airport security systems. Then there is John Walker Lindh, the teen Taliban who trained at an Afghan terrorist camp, when the \$40 billion-a-year U.S. intelligence community could not get anybody close.

With talents like that ostensibly in demand by the nation's spy organizations, why not train smart, motivated adolescents as intelligence professionals?

"Frankly, that's what we need," said Tobias, a 35-year veteran of criminal investigations and author of the foremost textbook on lock picking.

Tobias is convinced that the answer to the nation's intelligence problems is a specialized academy for students as young as 15 featuring a curriculum of extensive lessons in "modified spycraft."

"I call it Harry Potter meets Homeland Security," Tobias said, envisioning an espionage Hogwarts Academy, where wizards and witches teach the basics of magic and spells to their talented protégés.

Tobias' kids would be taught how to beat virtually every security system available, so they could learn to think like a terrorist, hacker or burglar.

A former South Dakota assistant attorney general, Tobias, 58, knows about intelligence only from reading newspapers and from what he has picked up during his 35-year career in criminal investigations.

But he says he knows what is wrong with the intelligence community, and his academy is at least part of the solution.

"If you put 10 bright kids on a problem, they're going to come up with alternative solutions and ideas that I never would have thought of," Tobias said.

“And that’s the name of the game.”

As Tobias chatted over a cup of tea in downtown Washington, members of the 9/11 Commission were holding a press conference in which they blamed the nation’s failure to detect and disrupt the Sept. 11 attacks on, “above all, a failure of imagination.”

Tobias has a camaraderie with bright young people who share his enthusiasm for beating locks, especially digital locks, created by other smart people. Some people would call those kids hackers. Tobias calls them the key to the nation’s security.

“The vast majority of hackers aren’t [malicious],” Tobias said. “They’re computer nerds. They’re bright people.”

In early July, Tobias unveiled his idea at an international hacker conference in New York City. More than a thousand people attended his seminar, he said. Their response was guarded, but positive.

“These people are patriotic, and they’ll do what they can to help the country,” he said.

Despite the hackers’ concerns — who would fund it? How would it work? How would students be selected? — Tobias is certain that if an academy was built, they would come.

“If today it was announced that we’re opening a national security academy, you’d have a million applications on the first day,” he predicted. “Trust me.”

Tobias would not say what kind of involvement he would like to have in such a school. “[I would do] whatever I can do,” he said. “Look, I’m an idea person. . . . I’ve been trained to think outside the box.”

But what about security of the hackers’ Hogwarts itself? How do you do a background check on a 15-year-old?

“It’s easy,” Tobias said, because kids usually do not have criminal records, and few are likely to have dealings with foreign intelligence agencies. Then again, there were Andrew Daulton Lee and Christopher John Boyce, two high school buddies who were convicted of selling spy satellite information to the Russians in the 1970s.

In any event, the 9/11 Commission partly blamed the failure to stop the hijackers on a lack of imagination among U.S. intelligence officials.

“They had the intelligence, but nobody believed it. But you know what?” asked Tobias. “Kids would believe it.”

Justin Rood can be reached via jrood@cq.com

Source: **CQ Homeland Security**
© 2004 Congressional Quarterly Inc. All Rights Reserved