

Five Missteps in Interagency Reform—

And What to Do About Them

BY JAMES JAY CARAFANO

Carved into the base of a statue at the National Archives are some of the most important words in Washington, DC: “What is past is prologue.” This phrase succinctly states the intent behind the laws requiring that the U.S. Government record and interpret its history. Such laws are in place not only to illuminate the past but also to provide insights and observations to inform future decisionmaking. No government activity demands more reflection than overcoming the obstacles to conducting effective interagency operations. In the past decade, the United States has done more than enough wrong to learn some lessons on how to do things right.

It is generally recognized today that whole-of-government or interagency operations (where more than one agency or authority combines efforts to address difficult and complex challenges) are essential to successful governance. The attacks of 9/11, the troubles in Iraq and Afghanistan, the global effort to combat transnational terrorism, the response to Hurricane Katrina, the Gulf oil spill, the task of responding to climate change—after each new challenge emerges, the chorus gets a little louder. It would be unfair to say that Washington has done nothing to answer the cries for reform. But it is fair to say that the government has gotten more wrong than right when it comes to instituting feasible, suitable, and acceptable change. Five of the most prominent missteps and some ideas about how to fix them make this point pretty well.

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Soldier provides security on Forward Operating Base Lane in Zabul Province, Afghanistan

U.S. Army (Tia P. Sokimson)



Misstep 1: Know Yourself—We Don't

There is no magic formula for whole-of-government operations. How governments work is a reflection of their tradition, laws, culture, economy, history, geography, environment, and demographics. The U.S. Government, in fact, has a long history of dealing with interagency challenges—a legacy filled with epic successes, monumental failures, and everything in between.

In the years after World War II, for example, the United States faced many of the same challenges that it experienced in dealing with Iraq and Afghanistan. American forces administered long-term occupations in Trieste, Germany, Austria, Japan, and South Korea, operations that required the Defense Department, State Department, and other agencies to work together. At home, the national response to the massive Alaska earthquake of 1964 was a model for national disaster response

and recovery efforts in the wake of catastrophic natural disasters. In Vietnam, U.S. intelligence, defense, and aid agencies also had to work hand in hand. Washington treated each of these challenges, and most every other major interagency challenge, as a unique experience. Responses were created ad hoc and then forgotten.

One of Washington's biggest missteps is that it has no official history of whole-of-government activities. Establishing a corps of interagency professionals, as well as the doctrine and policies necessary to implement whole-of-government solutions, requires a professional historical foundation.

The lack of historical-mindedness is stunning, especially since it is embedded in almost every other Federal activity. Many agencies, from State to Defense to the Central Intelligence Agency and National Park Service, maintain history offices, many of which are established

by statute. These offices are funded out of the agency's annual appropriation. Federal historians are government employees, though in some cases private historians write official histories under contract to the agency historians. History offices and each agency's official historian are often charged with a range of duties. In addition to writing the official history of the organization and annual historical summaries, many undertake case studies to inform ongoing policy questions or answer queries from Congress and government officials on historical matters.

Federal historians also provide a foundation for academic historians and public policy analysts who use the historical materials as a starting point and guide for their research. For example, the State Department's Office of the Historian collects, edits, and produces the *Foreign Relations of the United States*. This series, begun in 1861 and continued to this day, publishes the official documents that explain major foreign policy initiatives by the United States. The volumes have been used as a primary source by countless historians and other scholars.

No Federal activity requires a more solid grounding than operations involving multiple agencies, requiring great coordination. The capacity of agencies to act collectively has become a core competence of government. Today, however, few individuals in government have the skills needed to create national enterprise solutions to national problems.

Congress should establish a National Historian of the U.S. Government and a Federal interagency office. This office should work independently of any single agency and be charged with writing the official history of interagency operations as well as producing cutting-edge analysis and case studies that inform the thinking and development of a corps of interagency professionals. Among his key

duties, the Federal interagency historian should report annually on the state of Federal history and records management programs and their impact on preserving and writing interagency history. This would ensure that there are documents so that a large community of practice, from academe to think tanks and all government agencies, can access the data needed for studying interagency operations.

Misstep 2: We Need a Playbook—We Don't Have One

Typically, discussions of whole-of-government reform start with wiring diagrams, organizational charts, and debates over roles, missions, responsibilities, and authorities. These ruminations could not be more ill-suited to establishing systemic reforms. Washington continues to focus on reorganizing, creating czars, writing new rules, or establishing new programs because that is what Washington does best—not because that is the kind of reform that is really needed.

Washington is addicted to linear thinking and linear solutions. Linear systems are symmetrical and proportional. Inputs and outputs can be defined and quantified. Small inputs have a small impact; they hardly move the system or only gradually have an impact over time. Big inputs make big changes. Linear systems can be broken down into component parts. The parts can be analyzed and then reassembled to understand the performance of the macrosystem. The whole is literally equal to the sum of the parts. The problem is that most complex government challenges do not look like this at all. Wars, natural disasters, transnational terrorism and crime, climate change—none of these are linear affairs.

Most interagency challenges are challenging because they are symptomatic of what analysts call “wicked problems,” or complex systems. Complex systems are nonlinear. It is difficult to

map cause-and-effect relationships. Complex environments do not yield easily to control by hierarchical systems and linear authorities.

Washington's first priority should be to adopt doctrine and planning processes that will serve as the lifeline of a guiding idea—informing how to adapt organizations and practices to the realities of governing rather than organizing government and hoping its structures and methods of operation will serve to meet the tasks that have to be addressed.

What Washington needs is a doctrine of *practice*, rather than a doctrine of *phenomenon*—in other words, a body of common knowledge

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and understanding that informs how government should think about solving complex problems rather than a rule book telling people what to do. One element of this doctrine might be suggested by the work the Army has done on the concept of operational design, schooling planners in how to interpret and understand the environment in which operations will be conducted so that they can formulate planning processes, operations, and organizations suited to the particular mission and the conditions under which it must be accomplished.

Sound doctrine and planning processes are particularly advantageous for dealing with complex environments. A common body of knowledge, a standard operational language, and a uniform manner of understanding problems facilitate trust and confidence between leaders and followers. That allows for decentralized execution. In turn, the capacity to decentralize operations permits organizations to be

highly adaptive and flexible, a vital attribute in responding to complex conditions often associated with wicked problems.

Washington's misstep is that it has started and stopped attempting to organize an interagency planning process and to establish doctrinal knowledge a number of times over the last several decades. Under President Bill Clinton, the White House initiated a new planning process. A system was developed under Presidential Decision Directive 56 (PDD-56), which established an interagency process to respond to complex contingencies overseas, such as providing assistance to foreign countries after earthquakes and hurricanes. Agencies chafed under a formal process that required them to define an endstate, allocate resources, articulate a plan, and then jointly monitor execution. President George W. Bush scrapped PDD-56. Then, under President Bush, the Department of Homeland Security undertook an ambitious program to push interagency doctrine and planning for domestic operations, only to largely abandon the initiative under President Barack Obama. Until the requirement for interagency doctrine and planning takes root in the Federal Government, Washington will always be playing catch-up with the next big thing that confronts it.

Addressing misstep 2 harkens back to the importance of correcting misstep 1. History is a key component of building common knowledge, developing critical thinking skills, and understanding the complexities of public policymaking.

Misstep 3: Value Human Capital—Washington Doesn't

The skills, knowledge, and attributes of the leaders tackling complex problems are far more important than the formal organization and processes of government. Preparing competent leaders starts with adequate doctrine, but

doctrine alone is not enough. Having a shared body of common knowledge and practices is one thing. Doctrine does little good unless it is taught—and taught to people who are capable of and practiced in executing it.

The White House’s after action report on the national response to Hurricane Katrina highlighted the shortfalls in government ability to manage large-scale interagency operations. Numerous studies have documented similar problems in managing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. To avoid the pitfalls that have hobbled many past interagency operations, the professionals leading interagency efforts must have three essential skills:

- ❖ familiarity with a number of diverse disciplines (such as healthcare, law enforcement, immigration, and trade) and practice in interagency operations, working with different government agencies, the private sector, and international partners
- ❖ competence in crisis action planning and long-term strategic planning
- ❖ a sound understanding of federalism, free-market economy, constitutional rights, domestic government, and international relations.

Indeed, without this foundation of professional skill, running interagency operations always becomes a futile exercise. This is the most important lesson learned from Pentagon efforts to address jointness. The military achieved improved cooperation among the Armed Forces by creating a joint professional development program that included activities involving more than one Service and requirements for joint education, assignments, and accreditation. In other words, it built a professional development

program to ensure that it had leaders who could master the challenges of joint operations.

The Bush administration took an admirable stab at starting a national security professional development structure that would have addressed many of the requirements for interagency operations. The initiative was started late in the Presidency. It now sits virtually moribund. To address this misstep, the Obama administration must sell Congress on a plan to address education, assignment, and accreditation.

Overcoming misstep 3 also goes back to fixing misstep 1. History is part of the foundation of any sound professional education and development program. Developing a body of interagency history would create a foundation of knowledge on which to establish the interagency ethos—just as military history is central to building joint military professionalism. Official histories of U.S. interagency operations would provide a rich depth of insight into understanding the opportunities and obstacles in whole-of-government operations.

Misstep 4: Operators Can’t Operate

Addressing missteps 1 through 3 will give Washington what it really needs—leaders who can lead in interagency operations. History, doctrine, and professional development all contribute to developing an indispensable skill: leaders with wisdom. And leaders who deal with complex problems must above all have wisdom.

University of Bristol’s Professor of the Learning Sciences Guy Claxton defines *wisdom* as “good judgment in hard cases.” Hard cases appear:

Where important decisions have to be made on the basis of insufficient data; where what is relevant and what is irrelevant are not clearly demarcated; where meanings and interpretations of actions and motives

*are unclear and conjectural; where small details may contain vital clues; where the costs and benefits, the long term consequences may be difficult to discern; where many variables interact in intricate ways.*¹

Such wisdom is the essence of decision-making for complex activities like whole-of-government operations.

We have been fixating on how Washington organizes for complex operations since World War II, and there is not much more to be wrung out of the system. Too often, those interested in interagency reform focus on the highest levels of government: those who make high policy and the organization of the White House staff. That is nonsense. The White House and a handful of Cabinet secretaries cannot manage the world—no matter how much information, wisdom, and power they have.

At the policy level, agencies in Washington reach broad agreement on what each will do to support an overall U.S. policy. Here, the United States is actually not too bad. Trying to systematically deal with interagency policy is really an invention of the Cold War. It is difficult to look at the U.S. Government at any period before in its history and point to an enduring, formal process for interagency policy cooperation that produced anything significant. In the years between World Wars I and II, for example, the State Department refused to participate in war planning or issue political guidance to Army and Navy planners because it believed that such coordination would be inappropriate and an intrusion of the military into the civilian sphere of government. That changed at the outset of the Cold War with the passage of the National Security Act of 1947, creating the National Military Establishment, which later became the Department of Defense (eventually

organizing all of the Services under this single Federal department), National Security Council (NSC), and Intelligence Community. These entities, particularly the NSC, instituted a process of policy coordination that endures today.

Arguably, the United States has the policymaking process down pretty well. Critics can rail against decisions made regarding everything from the Iraq War to the Gulf oil spill, but the main problem was not the process, but instead qualitative judgments made by decisionmakers. No process reform can guarantee better high-level decisionmakers—these individuals are determined largely by the results of elections.

While Washington can always dabble at the fringes on how it organizes itself—such as establishing the Department of Homeland Security—there are clear left and right limits. These are established by the U.S. Constitution, particularly regarding the principle of federalism; the division of checks and balances of exercising sovereign power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches; and freedom of the President in organizing and running the office of the White House and exercising executive power in general. These limits in how the Federal Government functions are fundamental to the exercise of American democracy. They should not be tinkered with unless good reason is given. The fact that Washington cannot herd its cats well is not a good enough reason.

Furthermore, even if Washington was supremely well organized and all knowing, it does not follow that whole of government would work flawlessly. Washington is only one player in the complex process; much of the success or failure of an operation will turn on how well those executing White House policies can adapt, innovate, and adjust to conditions on the ground.

It is at the intermediate level—the operational level—where the U.S. Government

undertakes major operations and campaigns, and where agencies in Washington have to develop operational plans such as coordinating recovery operations after a major hurricane, that the United States often struggles most. This is where interagency cooperation is the weakest. This is a legacy of the Cold War. There was rarely a requirement for Federal agencies outside of Washington to do that kind of integrated planning to contain the Soviet Union. Agencies generally agreed on the broad role each would play. There were few requirements under which they had to plan to work together in the field to accomplish a goal under unified direction. Washington has never had an enduring formal system to make things happen at the interagency level outside of the Capital above the level of an individual Embassy.

Today, coordination of major interagency operations in the field is often troubled. Reconstruction activities in the wake of the invasion of Iraq are a case in point. The military, the Coalition Provisional Authority, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) all undertook major projects. There was no shared vision, no common operational planning, and no integrated contracting or human capital management process. As a result, these organizations learned lessons on the job and adapted, but they did not keep up with the changing security environment in the country, and after spending billions of dollars, there was little to show for the investment.

If there is a problem that needs to be fixed, it is this: the ability to coordinate major interagency challenges outside of Washington, away from the offices of Cabinet secretaries and staffs, whether it is coordinating disaster relief over a three-state area after a hurricane or conducting the occupation of a foreign country.

It should come as no surprise that operational interagency activities have been found

wanting. They are flawed by design. There are many factors that contribute to that.

Tradition. The divide between civil and military spheres is part of a U.S. tradition that has always placed a premium on civilian control of the military. In the 19th century, it was thought appropriate to “firewall” military activities from civilian functions. Even today, military and civilian officials are cautious about “straying out of their lane.”

Operational Organization. Every Federal agency has its own distinct operational organization. The U.S. military, for example, has a system of regional commands established under the Unified Command Plan (UCP). It does not match the State Department’s regional system, which, in any case, functions nothing like the military combatant commands. Federal agencies are always reluctant to support interagency headquarters outside of Washington for fear that they will usurp policymaking authorities from the department secretariats.

Capacity. Outside the Department of Defense, Federal departments have limited capabilities to conduct operational activities. Most Federal agencies, for example, do not have effective means to mobilize and deploy personnel.

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Inspectors General. Interagency operations require effective oversight. This is problematic for a Federal inspector general corps that aligns with individual agencies. In Iraq, for example, a Special Inspector General for Iraq had to be established to oversee activities involving multiple agencies.



U.S. Air Force (Jacob N. Bailey)

Soldier with Joint Task Force supporting Federal Emergency Management Agency relief efforts scans streets of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina

Politics. Many politicians are rightly uncomfortable with the notion of big government. They are concerned that creating a more effective interagency process would empower government to the point that it might lead to abuse, encouraging Washington to take on missions that are not appropriate.

Operational Models. There are no good operational models on how to undertake major interagency activities outside of Washington. The most common is the lead agency model, in which one Federal agency is responsible for leading a response or planning effort. Where the lead agency has the preponderance of responsibility and resources, usually other departments act like bystanders—primarily interested in doing as little as possible. Where the departments all have major equities in the process, usually everyone simply agrees to do what they are already doing.

The key to improving interagency operations is to focus on the most pressing problem—and that is *not* in a Cabinet secretary's office. The answer is not reorganizing the Federal Government or redistributing Federal responsibilities. We need to focus on how to make the interagency process more responsive in the operational environment.

This leads to the next misstep. The United States lacks good operational structures of managing interagency activities. That is particularly a problem regarding overseas operations where the Pentagon's UCP simply is not effective as a cornerstone for whole-of-government operations.

The UCP is still primarily organized to provide global command for the last war. In addition, while each of the geographic commands contains a joint interagency coordination group to organize regional

activities, in practice, there is little cooperation or planning with outside organizations or departments. Furthermore, combatant commanders tend to compete with the Ambassador (and the Ambassador's Country Team, which incorporates all civilian, military, and intelligence personnel assigned to the Embassy) in each country in the commander's area of responsibility. Nor can combatant commanders partner with the State Department at the regional level because the State Department's regional desks cover different geographical areas than UCP areas of responsibility.

To the Pentagon's credit, the combatant commands have tried their hands at herding cats. U.S. Southern Command undertook a number of initiatives, and U.S. Africa Command was stood up with the idea of becoming a model for interagency cooperation. Sadly, none of these initiatives has proven wholly satisfactory.

There are alternative models. A possible structure for the UCP might go as follows: There is still a need for permanent military commands under the direction of the Pentagon; however, the number of combatant commands should be reduced to three. In Europe and Northeast Asia, the United States has important and enduring military alliances, and there is a continuing need to integrate the U.S. military commands with them. To this end, U.S. European Command and U.S. Pacific Command could be replaced by a U.S.-NATO command and a U.S. Northeast Asia headquarters. U.S. Northern Command might remain as the military command responsible for the defense of the United States. In addition, three Joint Interagency Groups (InterGroups) could be established. Joint interagency task forces have already been used effectively on a small scale to conduct counternarcotics operations in Latin America, the Caribbean, and off the Pacific coast of the United States. They might incorporate resources from multiple

agencies under a single command structure for specific missions. There is no reason that this model could not be expanded in the form of InterGroups to cover larger geographical areas and more diverse mission sets.

Misstep 5: Congress Is AWOL— It Can't Be

Capitol Hill is ill-suited to promote cooperation among Federal agencies. It appropriates funds for operations of individual departments. The jurisdiction of committees that oversee the government dovetails with the departments they oversee. In some cases, that is not even true. In the case of the Department of Homeland Security, through its insistence on creating the department committees, Congress refused to give up jurisdiction over the agencies folded into the new department.

Misstep 5 is that Congress has done almost nothing to move the ball of interagency reform forward. There are at least three areas where the Hill needs to act.

First, Congress needs to consolidate oversight on the key enablers who will make interagency integration happen—overseeing the education, assignment, and accreditation standards for whole-of-government professional development to a single committee in each chamber. In particular, accreditation and congressional involvement are crucial to ensuring that these programs are successful and sustainable. Before leaders are selected for critical (nonpolitically appointed) interagency positions, they should be accredited by a board of professionals in accordance with broad guidelines established by Congress. Congress should require creation of boards that encourage the establishment of educational requirements and accredit institutions that are needed to teach national security and homeland security, screen and approve

individuals to attend schools and fill interagency assignments, and certify individuals as interagency-qualified leaders.

Second, Congress needs to set broad rules on how interagency operations will be conducted, particularly with regard to exercising unity of command. The nature of the task should define who should be in charge. When dealing overseas, there are three critical tasks. They have been described in various ways as justice, security, and well-being; or governance, security, and essential services. Planning occupations after World War II, the military planners called it the “disease and unrest” formula—preventing humanitarian crises, establishing a legitimate, functioning government, and ensuring the existence of competent domestic security forces to support that government.

Who should be in charge depends on which of the three missions has priority at the time. In a postconflict environment, for example, the military should be in charge of interagency operations until a stable security environment is in place. Where crisis response is the priority (and security is not a major issue), a civilian agency should take the lead. Where governance is the issue, building up the capacity of government to be honest and efficient and to promote economic growth and strong civil society (again, when security is adequate), a civilian agency should be in charge. This organization might be something more like USAID, but independent from the State Department, using instruments more like the Millennium Challenge Account and focusing on measures such as those listed in *The Heritage Foundation* and *The Wall Street Journal Index of Economic Freedom*.

Third, Congress needs to set better rules on how to fund interagency operations. Developing the capacity for all Federal agencies and nongovernmental agencies—and private sector contractors, for that matter—to provide the people and services needed has to be a priority. There is a simple solution for cutting the Gordian Knot of the thoroughly knotty problem of who pays. Congress could appropriate money to the agency that will provide leadership for the operation, and that agency would negotiate with other agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and private sector contractors to determine what it needs to support what needs to be done. For planning, training, education, and exercises, the lead agency would pay other agencies to participate out of an annual appropriation provided by Congress. For operations, it would pay for the supporting agencies to provide personnel and services (and the salaries of personnel to backfill those deployed for operations) out of supplemental appropriations provided by Congress.

The Way Forward

In Washington, the urgent typically crowds out the important. When it comes to mastering interagency operations, however, Congress must make an exception. Fostering the practice of whole-of-government operations will never rise to the level of a vital national issue. It will only be in the aftermath of some great future disaster that our politicians will stand up and cry out, “This all could have been avoided if we had acted.” That is an avoidable tragedy. Instead, Washington could act now and correct the missteps that have kept the U.S. Government from setting the standard for interagency operations. **PRISM**

Note

¹ Quoted in Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008), 119.