

Managing Mayhem

The Future of Interagency Reform



5th Army Command Post supports relief efforts of Federal agencies responding to California wildfires, 2007

4th Combat Camera Squadron (Daniel St. Pierre)



Chairman visits Naval Air Station Key West and Joint Interagency Task Force–South

U.S. Navy (Chad McNealey)

By JAMES JAY CARAFANO

The U.S. Government can draw on the talents of more than two million civilian employees. Five out of six work out of sight of the Capitol. These employees are joined by almost three million in uniform around the world and a Congress backed by a staff of over 20,000 on Capitol Hill. That gives Washington a bigger workforce than any corporation in the world. Yet it is amazing how often this workforce lets us down in the moment of crisis—simply because its components do not work well together.

The Departments of Defense, State, Homeland Security, and Treasury, as well as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Central Intelligence Agency, and other Government agencies, have separate and unique capabilities, budgets, cultures, operational styles, and congressional oversight committees. They even operate under different laws. Getting them all organized on battlefields, after disasters, and during crises can be like herding cats. To meet the dangers of the 21st century, interagency operations will be more important than

ever. Yet few Americans understand the pressing need for reform, even though restructuring “interagency” operations may be one of the hot-button issues tackled by the next administration, whether it is Democratic or Republican.

When folks finally turn their attention to the issue, there are some basics about fixing interagency operations they need to understand.

Don't Fix What Ain't Broke

There is nothing wrong with the underlying principles of American governance. Particularly essential for good governance are the constitutional checks and balances that divide Federal power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. This division entails not only sharing responsibility within and among the branches of government, but also ensuring accountability and transparency in the act of governing. Shortcutting, circumventing, centralizing, undermining, or obfuscating constitutional responsibilities are not effective means for making democratic government work better.

Respecting the principle of federalism is also essential. Embodied in the U.S. Constitution, the imperatives of limited government and federalism give citizens and local communities the greatest role in shaping their own lives. The 10th amendment states that “powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” In matters relating to their communities, local jurisdictions and individuals have the preponderance of authority and autonomy. This just makes sense. The people closest to the problem are the ones best equipped to find the best solution.

Repeating History

For its part, Washington can certainly do better—in large measure simply by improving interagency operations, for in the long history of these operations, the same problems spring up again and again.

Why? Government undervalues individuals. Human capital refers to the stock of skills, knowledge, and attributes resident in the workforce. Throughout its history, Washington has paid scant attention to recruiting, training, exercising, and educating people to conduct interagency operations. Thus, at crucial moments, success or failure

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U.S. Navy (Johnny Bivara)



Participants from 17 Federal Government and local agencies conduct emergency exercise in Minnesota

1338 Ariitt/Wing (Eric Gudmundsson)

often turns on happenstance: whether the right people with the right talents happen to be at the right job. Rather than investing in human capital before a crisis, Washington plays Russian roulette.

The government lacks the lifeline of a guiding idea. *Doctrine* is a body of knowledge for guiding collective action. Good doctrine does not tell people what to think, but it guides them in how to think, particularly in how to address complex, ambiguous, and unanticipated challenges when time and resources are both in short supply. Unfortunately, throughout our nation's history, government has seldom bothered to exercise anything worthy of being called interagency doctrine. The response to Hurricane Katrina offers a case in point. The U.S. Government had the equivalent of a doctrine in the form of the National Response Plan. Unfortunately, it had been signed only months before the disaster and was barely practiced and little understood when disaster struck.

Process cannot replace people. At the highest levels of government, no organizational design, institutional procedures, or legislative remedy has proven adequate to overcome poor leadership and combative personalities. Presidential leadership is particularly crucial to the conduct of interagency operations. Over the course of American history, Presidents have

had significant flexibility in organizing the White House to suit personal styles. That is for the best. After all, the purpose of the Presidential staff is to help Presidents lead, not to tell them how to lead.

The Iran-Contra affair offers an apt example. When President Ronald Reagan spoke about the affair on March 4, 1987, he told the Nation that he accepted "full responsibility" for his own actions and those of his administration. He described his efforts to regain public trust in the Presidency and outlined a plan to restore the national security process, mainly by adopting the recommendations of the Tower Commission report.

Leadership from the Congress, especially from the committee chairs, is equally vital. There is no way to gerrymander the authorities

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of the committees to eliminate the necessity of competent bipartisan leadership that puts the needs of the Nation ahead of politics and personal interest.

And in the end, no government reform can replace the responsibility of the people to elect qualified officials who can build trust

and confidence in government, run the government, and demonstrate courage, character, and competence in time of crisis.

Fixing these problems requires a scalpel, not a sledgehammer. It would be a mistake to think of interagency operations as a uniform, one-size-fits-all activity that requires uniform, one-size-fits-all reforms.

Solutions for Strategic Incompetence

At the highest level stands the process of making interagency policy and strategy. These tasks are largely accomplished inside the Beltway by officials from the White House and heads of Federal agencies in cooperation and consultation with the Congress. Over the course of modern history, policy-making has actually become the strongest component of the interagency process. When it does fail, its breakdown can often be traced more to people and personalities (inattentive Presidents or squabbling Cabinet officials) than to process.

Improving performance at the highest level of interagency activities should properly focus on the qualities and competencies of executive leadership, as well as getting leaders the highest quality information so that they can make the best informed decisions.

Overcoming Operational Inaction

Operational activities stand on the second rung of the interagency process. These activities comprise the overarching guidance, management, and allocation of resources needed to implement the decisions made in Washington. Arguably, it is at this level where government's record is most mixed. Outside the Pentagon's combatant command structure (which has staffs to oversee military operations in different parts of the world), the U.S. Government has few established mechanisms capable of monitoring complex contingencies over a wide geographical area. Processes and organizations are usually ad hoc. Some are successful; others are dismal failures.

Relying on skill instead of luck requires more permanent but flexible organizations that do not make national policy but that can coordinate large, complex missions. One potential solution is to build on the concept of the military's regional combatant commands, but with a new organizational structure that

better supports the Nation's security needs. That organization should probably facilitate interagency operations around the world, while still attending to effective joint combat action.

Of course, we would continue to need permanent military commands under the direction of the Pentagon, but the number of combatant commands should be reduced to three. In Europe and Northeast Asia, the United States has important and enduring military alliances.

There is a continuing need to integrate our military commands with them. To this end, U.S. European

Command and U.S. Pacific Command should be replaced by a U.S.–North Atlantic Treaty Organization command and a U.S. Northeast Asia headquarters. U.S. Northern Command should remain as the military command responsible for the defense of the United States.

In addition, three joint interagency groups (InterGroups) should be established. Joint interagency task forces already have been used effectively on a small scale to conduct counternarcotics operations in Latin America and the Caribbean and off the U.S. Pacific coast. They incorporate resources from multiple agencies under a single command structure for specific missions. There is no reason this model could not be expanded, in the form of InterGroups, to cover larger geographical areas and more diverse mission sets. InterGroups should be established to link areas of concern related to national security missions for Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and South and Central Asia.

Each InterGroup would have a mission set specific to its area. The Latin America InterGroup, for example, should focus on counterterrorism, civil-military relations, trade liberalization, and drug, human, and arms trafficking.

Each InterGroup should include a military staff tasked with planning military engagements, warfighting, and postconflict operations. In the event that military operations are required, that staff could be detached from the InterGroup (along with any supporting staff from other agencies required) to become the nucleus of a standing joint task force (JTF). Using this model, operations in Iraq and Afghanistan would have been commanded by a JTF.

Preparing Responders to Respond

The third component of interagency activities is field activities. That is where the actual work gets done—rescuing people stranded on rooftops, handing out emergency supplies, administering vaccines, and supervising contractors. Here, success and failure usually turn on whether government has correctly scaled the solution to fit the problem. Most overseas interagency activities are conducted by Country Teams supervised

outside the Pentagon's combatant command structure, the Government has few established mechanisms to monitor complex contingencies over a wide geographical area

by Ambassadors and their professional staffs. Likewise, inside the United States, state and local governments largely take care of their own affairs. When the problems are manageable, as in coordinating tsunami relief within individual countries, these approaches work well. When the challenges swell beyond the capacity of local leaders, as the case studies of pacification programs in Vietnam and the response to Hurricane Katrina illustrate, more robust support mechanisms are required. Arguably, what is most needed at the field level are better doctrine, more substantial investments in human capital (preparing people to do the job before the crisis), and appropriate decisionmaking—instituting the right doctrinal response when a crisis arises.

A generation ago, the U.S. military faced similar professional development challenges in building a cadre of joint leaders—officers competent in leading and executing multi-Service operations. The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 mandated a solution that required officers to have a mix of joint education, assignments, and board accreditation to become eligible for promotion to general officer rank. Goldwater-Nichols is widely credited with joint military successes from Operation *Desert Storm* to the war on terror. The recipe of education, assignment, and accreditation (EA&A) can be used to develop professionals for other critical interagency national security activities.

An EA&A program that cuts across all levels of government and the private sector must start with professional schools specifically designed to teach interagency skills. No suitable institutions exist in Washington,

academia, or elsewhere. The government will have to establish them. While the resident and nonresident programs of many university and government schools and training centers can and should play a part in interagency education, Washington's institutions should form the taproot of a national effort with national standards.

Qualification will also require interagency assignments where individuals can practice and hone their skills. These assign-

ments should be at the operational level, so leaders can learn how to make things happen, not just set

policies. Identifying the right organizations and assignments and ensuring that they are filled by promising leaders should be a priority.

Accreditation and congressional involvement are crucial to ensuring that these programs succeed and continue. Before leaders are selected for critical (nonpolitically appointed) positions in national and homeland security, they should be accredited by a board of professionals in accordance with broad guidelines that Congress establishes. Congress should require creation of boards that set educational requirements and accredit institutions 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. Congress should also establish committees in the House and Senate with narrow jurisdictions over key education, assignment, and accreditation interagency programs.

The Clock Is Ticking

Critical components of good governance, such as establishing long-term professional programs, are often shunted aside as important but not urgent—something to be done later. But later never comes. This is unacceptable. Crucial national security activities require building interagency competencies that are not broadly extant in government. The administration and Congress have time to address this issue and help to make Americans safer for generations to come. **JFQ**