

2013

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Recommended Citation

Crockett, Jarrod (2013) "Forces for Global Good: American Strategic Planning in the 21st Century," *Political Analysis*: Vol. 15 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/pa/vol15/iss1/2>

Forces for Global Good: American Strategic Planning in the 21st Century

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Introduction

U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall created the State Department's Office of Policy Planning in 1947 because he realized the United States faced challenges in the post-war era that would require a sustained effort to discern future issues and policy options. Despite Secretary Marshall's attempt to anticipate future events, the importance of strategic planning has steadily declined since the 1950's even though contemporary America faces issues just as dire as those confronted by policymakers during the heart of the Cold War. Paradoxically, the explosion of data generated by the Information Age creates more uncertainty, not less.

Globalization, cyber-security, the shifting polarity of the international system and the spread of agency among a more diverse pool of actors are but a few of the problems that can vitiate American supremacy in the 21st century. Washington is handicapping its ability to meet these challenges by failing to invest in the ability to evaluate current strategies and think critically about new ones. John Bryson's *Strategic Planning for Public and Non-Profit Organizations* and Leslie Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant's *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High Impact Non-Profits* provide insight to how America's policy planning can be restructured for American dominance in the 21st century

Benefits of Strategic Planning

This paper will define strategic planning as a multi-part consultative process between key decision makers and stakeholders that includes: 1) determining foreign policy goals in the short, medium and long term, 2) identifying future trends, events and opportunities that will affect the implementation of these goals and 3) evaluating current policies and developing alternatives. The first and most obvious benefit from developing a strategic planning infrastructure is an increased ability by policymakers to evaluate current strategies and make adjustments if necessary. The international system is fluid and anarchic, as powers constantly scheme and jostle to advance and defend their own self-interests. Decision makers cannot identify every possible scenario, but should be aware of the most probable courses of action and plan accordingly. Even if the plans are not implemented, the planning

process forces decision makers to think strategically and prioritize issues. In the words of former U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, “The plans are nothing, but the planning is everything.”¹

This process is especially important because alternative strategies cannot be implemented at anytime, but depend on the opening of a policy window. Bryson writes that strategic adoption in non-profits is only likely to occur in response to a pressing issue, important political shifts or when an authoritative body is authorized to act.² The same restrictions apply to foreign policy. Policymakers will likely only be receptive to new ideas when there is

¹ Bruce W. Jentleson, “An Integrative Executive Branch Strategy for Policy Planning” in *Avoiding Trivia: The Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy*, ed. Daniel Drezner (Brookings Institution: Washington D.C., 2009), 72.

² John Bryson, *Strategic Planning For Public and Nonprofit Organizations*. 4th ed. (Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2011), 244.

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a fundamental geopolitical shift (like the transition from World War II to the Cold War or the 2011 uprisings in Middle East & North Africa), at the beginning of a new presidential administration or when some type of crisis or scandal creates a demand for change.³ The planning process will keep alternative ideas coherent and up-to-date so decision makers can implement them before the window closes.

The power neoconservatives held during the first term of the George W. Bush Administration was due in large part to their ability to keep their ideas developed throughout the 1990's via a network of think-tanks. Thus, when 9/11 upset the prevailing paradigm and caused the United States to search for new ideas, neo-conservatism won out because its ideas were packaged and ready to

go.⁴ Another example is the transition of Sino-U.S. policy from containment-engagement to encouraging Beijing to be a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system. The State Department's Office of Policy Planning developed and maintained the responsible stakeholder framework for three year before its implementation. The concept did not become official U.S. strategy until the appointment of Robert B. Zoellick as Deputy Secretary of State created a policy window.⁵ Zoellick was responsive to the responsible stakeholder paradigm and was able to immediately implement it into his speech because State's Policy Planning Staff had already developed and maintained the framework.

A final benefit of strategic planning is that it increases the

³ Richard N. Haass, "Planning for Policy Planning" in *Avoiding Trivia*, 25-26.

⁴ Daniel Drezner, "The Challenges of Future Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy" in *Avoiding Trivia*, 10

⁵ Bruce W. Jentleson, "An Integrative Executive Branch Strategy for Policy Planning" in *Avoiding Trivia*, 71-72.

effectiveness of current actions by placing them in a larger strategic and historical context. Strategic planning can use history's lessons to warn us about past failures, what might succeed in future, broaden perspectives to include previously unforeseen actions or consequences and can provide cover for policymakers in case a decision goes awry.⁶ While policymakers should still remain alert and constantly scan their environments, the planning process enables them to focus the bulk of their attention on current decisions and policy. Bryson refers to this process as making strategy changes a part of people's assumptive worlds.⁷ Policymakers can most effectively deal with small details if they know the large ones are already taken care of.

Historical Factors Impeding Strategic Planning

Given all of its positive benefits, one would expect that the national security apparatus would have taken steps to fix America's strategic planning deficit long ago. However, there are several outstanding issues that prevent the construction of a proper and fully integrated agency-wide strategic planning system. Almost every country has had difficulty incorporating strategic planning into its everyday foreign policy functions because line officers are consumed with current crises and favor adaption and improvisation to long-term strategic thinking.⁸ Policy implementers are not convinced that the effort required to integrate a grand strategy into their assumptive worlds would assist in their day-to-day job duties. Planners must

⁶ Peter Feaver and William Inboden, "A Strategic Planning Cell on National Security at the White House" in *Avoiding Trivia*, 102.

⁷ Bryson, *Strategic Planning*, 287.

⁸ Lincoln Bloomfield, "Planning Foreign Policy: Can it Be Done?", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (Autumn 1978), 379-384.

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demonstrate that they can help with current issues in order to gain influence with and access to key decision-makers. However, too much focus on the present endangers the policy planning staff's main asset: its ability to step back and look at how current actions fit into the larger strategic and historical context. Furthermore, if policy planners present alternatives that are too unorthodox or criticize current policy too harshly, they will find themselves ostracized and unable to affect policy implementation at all.⁹

Another huge obstacle to incorporating a strategic planning process is the influence of well-developed bureaucratic interests. Bryson notes that political leaders in government that champion change can often find themselves stymied by bureaucracies that utilize byzantine procedures and entrenched personnel to block any

unconventional wisdom.¹⁰ Federal agencies are habitually opposed to any change that does not originate with them for a variety of reasons: they see new initiatives as an admonition they aren't doing an adequate job, worry new programs and policies will divert scarce resources, fear losing their control over a specific issue area or because they intrinsically reject any idea not created by themselves.¹¹ Even more insidious is the phenomenon of bureaucratic lock-in, where the agencies that command the most resources can consistently push through their preferences and create permanent and inescapable policy dependencies.¹² The vast amount of

¹⁰ Bryson, *Strategic Planning*, 379.

¹¹ Peter Feaver and William Inboden, "A Strategic Planning Cell on National Security at the White House" in *Avoiding Trivia: The Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy*, ed. Daniel Drezner (Brookings Institution: Washington D.C., 2009), 104.

¹² Daniel Drezner "The Challenging Future of Strategic Planning" in *Avoiding Trivia*, 10.

⁹ Ibid, 378.

resources funneled to the Pentagon following 9/11 created a textbook example of bureaucratic lock-in, where the Defense Department's large budget made it virtually impossible for it not to dominate the policy process. The disparity was so severe that former (then current) Defense Secretary Robert Gates publicly pleaded for more funding for the civilian arms of the foreign policy apparatus.¹³

The final element that makes policy planning difficult is the fear that the losers in the planning process will leak confidential policy deliberations. Bryson notes that for strategic planning to function at an optimal level, stakeholders must be able to openly discuss the strengths and weakness of current strategies and feasible alternatives. Policy planning is a wasted effort if organizations are not willing to consider radical ideas and simply want to maintain the

status quo.¹⁴ However, policymakers are not able to have these frank discussions because those who do not want to change existing strategies or oppose proposed alternatives could leak their disapproval (along with government documents favorable to their position or harmful to their opposition) to the press. The Carter Administration was embarrassed in the late 1970's by revelations that they contemplated force drawdowns in Europe, while the Bush Administration in 2004 had to pull back the Defense Department after it became public knowledge the Pentagon was researching the strategic implications of climate change.¹⁵ Even if planners can persuade current officials to respect the integrity of the process by not leaking information, there is nothing preventing them from publishing

¹⁴ Bryson, *Strategic Planning*, 245, 255.

¹⁵ Aaron L. Friedberg, "Strengthening Strategic Planning" in *Avoiding Trivia*, 90-91.

¹³ Ibid, 9.

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potentially damaging memoirs once they leave public service.

These historical experiences demonstrate that crafting a workable strategic planning infrastructure will be a difficult process with a high probability of failure. However, foreign policy outcomes developed in the absence of such a process are likely to be substandard. In the past fifteen years the U.S. has fought three wars (Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya), an undeclared fourth war (Pakistan), underwent the most severe financial crisis since the Great Depression and has been caught by strategic surprise several times (9/11 and the uprisings in the Arab World). Current or future issues include the Syrian civil war, rise of powers like China and Brazil, the instability wracking the EU, Iran's nuclear development, fears of cyber-warfare, climate change and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. The future is constantly in motion and America cannot face

these challenges without a clear process for identifying, developing, implementing and reassessing solutions.

A Strategic Planning Model for the 21st Century

Any strategic planning reform must place the White House at the center, since the president is the only one with authority over all the relevant policymaking agencies (State, CIA, Defense, Treasury etc) and the power to iron out any disputes that may arise. Furthermore, only the president can truly foster an atmosphere where officials at all levels are unafraid to voice their unbiased opinions since he is the one who will incur the political fallout.¹⁶ However, it is important not to let presidential

¹⁶ Michele Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, "Strategic Planning for U.S. National Security: A Project Solarium for the 21st Century". *The Princeton Project on National Security*, 2006 <<http://www.princeton.edu/~ppns/papers/interagencyQNSR.pdf>>, 10-11.

control impede the ability of other arms of the bureaucracy to shape the strategic planning process. Almost all government agencies are required by the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act to create five-year strategic plans. These plans vary widely in their scope, development and level of seriousness but it would be a mistake to dismiss them because of their uneven quality. All agencies benefit from constantly scanning their environment and these five-year plans should be consolidated into the new planning system.

The best historical example of an interagency planning process is President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Project Solarium, which he initiated following his inauguration in 1953. Eisenhower augmented the National Security Council (NSC) by adding a Planning Board and an Operations Coordinating Board, which prepared policy issues for full council discussion and assisted in the

implementation of policy decisions, respectively.¹⁷ These boards also had the salubrious effect of dividing the responsibility for planning policy and its implementation. The national security adviser and respective agency heads jointly nominated candidates for board membership, and appointees were granted the rank of assistant or undersecretary, along with a presidential letter of appointment. These accoutrements, along with frequent contact with high-level officials, conferred legitimacy upon board representatives and signaled the president's dedication to the planning process. The Planning and Operations Boards also utilized the knowledge of outside experts to tackle particularly difficult problems. Board members were encouraged to air their differences and find common positions that could be

¹⁷ Raymond Millen, "Cultivating Strategic Thinking: The Eisenhower Model", *Parameters* (Summer 2012), 58.

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distilled into draft papers for consideration by the full NSC. Draft papers could also include opposing views if board members could not reach a consensus.¹⁸

President Eisenhower's Planning and Operations Coordinating Boards provide solid foundation for a 21st century strategic planning process because they encouraged frank discussions and debate, convinced relevant actors to accept the legitimacy of the planning process and disseminated dissenting viewpoints throughout the federal government. Furthermore, Eisenhower's process conforms perfectly to the contract strategic management approach outlined by Bryson. Under this approach, a principal (or center) establishes strategic objectives, determines the roles and responsibilities of individual units, evaluates performance and ensures the smooth functioning of the

system.¹⁹ The individual units (or agents) would then be free to determine the best way to achieve their objectives. The Operations Coordinating Board provided guidance and implementation assistance for the President's national security decisions, but left the detailed policy planning up to each individual department. The board had no authority to strip departments of their responsibility for policy implementation, and departments were free to ignore its advice.²⁰

Contract management should be coupled with a financial technique known as entrepreneurial budgeting. Budgeting under this scheme entails providing agents with expenditure limits along with broad allocations for specific functions. Departments are allowed to keep any left over funds so long as they can

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 58-59.

¹⁹ Bryson, *Strategic Planning*, 332-333.

²⁰ Millen, "Cultivating Strategic Thinking", 63.

demonstrate a high level of results. Entrepreneurial budgeting promotes innovation by both centralizing power in the executive branch and spreading it out among various government departments.²¹ The Operations Coordinating Board should be given responsibility for determining these allocations and ensuring departments are meeting their proscribed objectives. Allocating funds in this way would give agencies an incentive to improve their own performance and show results instead of engaging in bureaucratic warfare.

Cross-training and collaboration are other techniques that can reduce intradepartmental conflict. The failure of America's nation-building experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate that federal departments have an extremely difficult time coordinating with each other and performing tasks outside their traditional roles

and issue areas.²² To be eligible for chairmanship on the NSC's Planning Board, departments must regularly exchange personnel with other federal agencies. Fostering cross-collaboration will encourage looking at a problem from all angles and understanding how issues fit into the larger strategic context.²³ Agencies should also go even further by utilizing the expertise of think-tanks, university departments, NGO's and businesses to ensure they have a 360 degree perspective. This obviously cannot be done with every single issue, but such a policy will foster an atmosphere of collaboration and opening, instead of secrecy and strife.

²² "Forging a New Shield: Report of the Project on National Security Reform", *Project on National Security Reform*, January 2009 (accessed November 23, 2012) <http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2009/0103/comm/pnsr_report.html>.

²³ Leslie Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant, *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits*, revised ed. (Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2012), 166

²¹ Bryson, *Strategic Planning*, 296-297.

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President Eisenhower's Project Solarium contains many useful tips for a future strategic planning process, though his efforts were not free of imperfection. During Project Solarium, the national security adviser chaired planning board meetings, an arrangement that does not conform to the principles of shared leadership outlined in Crutchfield and Grant's *Forces for Good*.²⁴ Crutchfield and Grant found that the most effective leaders are the ones who know how to share power with others. By distributing their power instead of hoarding it, these leaders are able to multiply their influence and broaden their impact.²⁵ To conform with this framework, the national security adviser should not hoard power by tightly holding the reins of Planning Board sessions. Instead, board chairmanship should rotate regularly

between various agency heads. This would increase their support for the process by assuring them their views will be heard and they will have a legitimate chance to have their views heard by the president via the board.

Conclusion

Without a durable and effective strategic planning process, American policymakers will be doomed to the defensive, constantly reacting to surprising developments with inefficient ad-hoc solutions. The techniques laid out in *Strategic Planning* and *Forces for Good* will empower the U.S. foreign policy apparatus to decrease bureaucratic disputes, harness the productive creativity of dissenting viewpoints, open policymakers' minds to the larger strategic context and develop and maintain plausible alternative strategies. A much improved strategic planning process is the most effective way to maintain American hegemony in an

²⁴ Millen, "Cultivating Strategic Planning", 59.

²⁵ Crutchfield and Grant, *Forces for Good*, 177-180.

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increasingly uncertain and complex
strategic environment.