Fiscal Crises Experimentation: A Darwinian Approach

by Allan D. Childers and Mark H. Sweberg

"It is not the strongest of the species that survive, not the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."

Charles Darwin

History demonstrates that periodically the nation goes through fiscal evolutions that change the environment in which U.S. government departments and agencies shape their organizations, programs, and activities. Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution posits that the struggle for resources favors actors who adapt best to their changing environment. Those who do not adapt tend not to survive. As a result, U.S. government officials responsible for international relations must recognize that serious policymaking, planning, and international programs that provide support in peacetime and during crises will not survive in the current fiscal environment by continuing to conduct business as usual.

America’s greatest resource is its peoples’ ability to adapt to necessary change. Today’s fiscal challenges offer renewed opportunities to refine U.S. government policies, practices, and procedures on a local, national, and international scale. Currently, policymakers and pundits view the collective capacities and capabilities of both federal and non-federal departments and agencies as individual stovepipes that respond to international security, stability, and market opportunities through their individual processes and resources. The threats proffered by budget reduction initiatives are an opportunity for policymakers to take a fresh new approach to national and international causes—a whole-of-nation approach.

Experimentation can forge a way to evolve the structures and processes of departments focused on national security and foreign affairs, specifically the Department of Defense (DoD),

Allan D. Childers is an expert in peacekeeping and interagency planning with General Dynamics. He previously managed the State Department’s Enhanced International Peacekeeping Capabilities Program as a member of the Political-Military Affairs Bureau.

Mark H. Sweberg, COO of Sweberg Consulting, serves as a senior policy consultant for reinvigorating the U.S. Air Force nuclear enterprise, drafting DoD training transformation policy, and developing comprehensive approaches to interagency coordination.
the Department of State (State), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). These departments have primary lead for defense, diplomacy, and development. In fact, although not the focus of this article, all components of the U.S. government can benefit from effective experimentation.

The real source of untapped energy to respond to national and international capacity building lies in the overlapping branches and root structures of governments and private organizations that reinforce each of the elements of national power. The argument against fiscal reductions in the federal budget has focused on the impact on individual government departments, agencies, programs, and personnel or social programs—not the overall impact on a comprehensive federal approach to supporting the national security strategy. Reduced budgets that emerge from Congress provide the opportunity to embrace jointness among the individual military services; adopt a comprehensive approach among the DoD, State, and USAID; and integrate the U.S. government response with nongovernmental and international governmental organizations. Fewer available resources among federal departments demand policies and practices that enforce complementary budgeting processes, sharing of resources, and full integration of policymaking and planning. It is imperative during a period of reduced budgets that federal departments find new ways and new procedures to cooperate and collaborate that do not jeopardize the national interests and U.S. government interactions on the international stage.

DoD, State, and USAID generally plan and budget for response to national and international programs as stove-piped defense, diplomacy, or development efforts. Government leaders fail to fully analyze, assess, and consider the value of interconnected capacities. Even now, in the face of fiscal constraints, military services within DoD focus on protecting and defending their programs without offering new proposals for collaboration with other services or government departments or even nongovernmental institutions. Collaborative approaches produce better efficiencies and reduce costs, especially in hardware acquisitions, logistics, and communications technologies. Economic belt-tightening serves as the fuel for policymakers to search out, understand, and use the untapped strength of combining resources within the government with those outside the government to respond to emerging crises and international responses vital to U.S. interests.

Developed in the 1950s–1960s, the concept of a comprehensive approach to solving emerging crises called “community capacity building” once again became part of the international development community’s lexicon during the 1990s. International government organizations, such as the United Nations Development Programme, and nongovernmental organizations, such as Oxfam International, enable community capacity building through a number of development activities at individual, institutional, and societal levels.

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) offered a catalyst for a comprehensive approach to defeating our enemies, stabilizing Afghanistan and Iraq, and reconstituting their capacities to participate in a global society of peaceful nations capable of defending themselves and providing for the welfare of their citizens. In reality, because of
The U.S. government interagency system developed for collaboration and cooperation has made great, albeit, insufficient strides in the last decade.

The U.S. government interagency system developed for collaboration and cooperation has made great, albeit, insufficient strides in the last decade. State and the DoD began to work more collaboratively. Both departments published limited guidance within individual agencies and shared resources when it was practical to do so. Nevertheless, the specter of significant economic constraints threatens to doom the limited collaborative initiatives to create a whole-of-government response.

Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006, as amended and regularly extended, was a successful example of collaboration and cooperation, however, much more collaboration and cooperation is critically needed whether or not fiscal constraints have catastrophic consequences. The departure of Secretary of Defense Gates and Secretary of State Clinton, who pursued a truly comprehensive approach between the departments, places additional strains for progress on the effort. Integrated training, education, planning, resourcing, and execution continue to elude the U.S. government and nongovernmental organizations.

Although highlighted in regulations and doctrine, regular serious collaboration with private international organizations is rarely effected prior to crises response. The legislative and judicial branches of government have not been engaged, which further weakens the executive agencies’ requirement to work together. An extremely significant, recent, legislative action regarding interagency collaboration is the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), Fiscal Year 2013 (Public Law 112-239, January 2, 2013), Section 1107. This section’s purpose is to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of U.S. department and agency collaboration. The law creates an interagency personnel rotation program for emergency management and stabilization and reconstruction within interagency communities of interest. The law establishes a Committee on National Security Personnel to manage the program, and specifies that each agency participating in the program will give strong promotion preference to those who perform interagency rotational service.

Rather than see the fiscal challenges as the opportunity to demonstrate responsive change in a comprehensive manner, agencies are circling their wagons to preserve as much of the budget pie for each department as they can.
Adaptation via Experimentation

Collaboration requires mutual understanding of and respect for potential partner contributions; it is not something agencies can accomplish as needed during a crisis. Collaboration requires information sharing and working regularly with potential partners. Necessary familiarity and comfort levels develop only over time. The fiscal crisis in America serves as a catalyst for the interagency community to renew experimentation. The effects of budget reductions and collaborative responses to those reductions can be measured, recorded, validated, and analyzed prior to implementing changes.

During experimentation, variables influencing collaborative policymaking, planning, and action can change in an organized manner. The effects of these changes on associated conditions within each organization can also be measured, recorded, validated, and analyzed to make such collaboration effective and efficient. Experimentation can take the lessons of the past ten years to set the stage for the new approach. U.S. departments and agencies should embrace as future fiscal resources become more uncertain and regional and international threats likely multiply.

Interagency experimentation offers a method to explore new ways of operating across diplomacy, defense, and development missions in a whole-of-nation approach. Modeling and simulation can develop collaborative capabilities while applying new technologies. Interagency experimentation places participants in an environment conducive to discovering new tactics, techniques, and procedures. Experimentation is a proven method to help organizations test and evaluate new methods and procedures under controlled conditions. Experimentation allows for trial and error so that participants have a foundation of confidence in the results produced by modeling and simulation.

Policymakers should use fiscal challenges to implement interagency experimentation as a strategic approach through whole-of-nation doctrine. They should identify key customers inside and outside the federal government; agree upon collaborative visions, goals, and strategies; and refine integrated processes and tools to support peacetime, contingency, and stability preparation, planning, and implementation. Interagency experimentation facilitators should define training and education processes and leadership experience requirements. The goal is to develop a whole-of-nation strategic baseline that combines the elements of diplomacy, defense, development, and intelligence in the national security architecture with the strengths of private organizations that rely on information and economic factors to generate successful solutions. As budget cuts and program realignments influence national budgets and nongovernmental budgets in the next decade, the objective is to plan and implement limited financial resources to ensure the U.S. government is getting the best “bang for the buck.”

Staring Over the Precipice

The current multi-year fiscal crisis should alter the way strategists think about engagement. The norm for many years has been to consider planning for unthinkable crises that could demand U.S. intervention—“big picture” scenarios that can define Presidential
Recent history consistently shows the importance of preparing for the unanticipated in resource-constrained environments.

Recent history consistently shows the importance of preparing for the unanticipated in resource-constrained environments. In 1990, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell convened a small group to develop and recommend plans to reduce the number of combatant commands. At the time resources were dwindling, and there was pressure to reduce the total number of commands and flag officer billets across the DoD. The small group identified U.S. Central Command as the first command to be eliminated. 

Before the group completed its work and offered its recommendations, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, and the Chairman permanently shelved his plans to reduce the number of commands. Instead, U.S. Atlantic Command was renamed and given a new mission as U.S. Joint Forces Command; U.S. Africa Command, U.S. Northern Command, and U.S. Strategic Command were created as unified commands; U.S. Cyber Command was formed as a sub-unified command; and each new command developed service components to provide support. Ironically, the only command disbanded was U.S. Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM) whose mission was to integrate and experiment with joint, interagency, and comprehensive approaches to national security response.

No one will know the different scenarios and responses that could have played out in the Middle East and South Asia from 2002–2014 if resource constraints had driven the Chairman to continue with combatant command reductions post-Desert Storm. Few can conceive what may have resulted without a USCENTCOM in the region throughout the 1990s. Under resource constraints driven by a fiscal crisis scenario, U.S. government departments and agencies should collectively revisit the number of combatant commands but in a way that balances U.S. national interests across all appropriate peacetime and contingency responses by both governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

Fiscal reductions demand U.S. policymakers reconsider the reality of current scenarios and how responses can be more effective. In the nearly 70 years since nuclear weapons were used in conflict, strategic decision makers planned and prepared for a global or regional nuclear exchange. Yet the reality is that the world has more often felt the devastating effects of nuclear accidents at military and civilian facilities. Governments with nuclear weapons may be better trained to launch them
than they are able to protect these weapons and materials from theft or accidents. The world is now gripped with images of terrorists releasing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in cities and at embassies and sports venues via bombs and commercial aircraft. Commercial chemical accidents have forced the use of chemical weapons response plans and procedures that were originally envisioned for far more sinister attacks.

Governments spend more planning and response resources on the ability to protect WMD materials than on protecting populations from the use of commercial vehicles as weapons. Governments are better at averting WMD-enabled crises than disease and starvation crises. By using experimentation, the U.S. government can determine how all resources of the government and nongovernmental organizations can be brought to bear on a crisis rather than the resources of just one or a few.

Fiscal challenges should cause policymakers to better balance collective response planning participation. There are a number of Department of Homeland Security-developed, national planning scenarios for interagency responses to WMD, radiological attacks, earthquakes, and hurricanes. These scenarios identify needed capabilities and resource requirements and establish an exercise program to test local, state, federal, nongovernmental organization, and private sector responses. However, if the scenario is not sufficiently catastrophic, the Pentagon does not participate, and if the scenario is sufficiently catastrophic for the Pentagon to participate, other sectors are overwhelmed and do not participate. Because of this ever-present problem, sectors outside the Pentagon learn little from these scenarios and, therefore, they develop few comprehensive approaches.

There is insufficient collaborative planning among agencies. Few agencies outside of DoD have robust staffs to support comprehensive planning, training, and exercising. Departments and agencies are not sufficiently versed in other departments’ missions and capabilities to coordinate. Moreover, there are few collaborative environments for federal agencies to be educated, trained, and exercised on a routine and systematic basis. Additionally, non-DoD agencies do not have staffs dedicated to considering these scenarios nor to plan their agencies’ responses to these scenarios should they occur. Staffs in these agencies are often “one deep” and focus on their primary responsibilities. They consider WMD-related issues and similar scenarios as secondary responsibilities.

The problem is compounded because national planning scenarios support the much simpler effort of responding to crises, not to preventing and managing a developing crisis before the response is needed. More than a decade after 9/11, when the lessons learned from fragmented interagency missions, leadership, doctrine, policies, planning, resourcing, education and training, and operations should have been learned and addressed with a whole-of-nation approach, U.S. federal, state, local, nongovernmental, and private organizations are still not prepared to respond to massive or individual assaults on national sovereignty or to support stability operations overseas. Since 9/11, no significant Congressional legislation equivalent to Goldwater-Nichols has driven the interagency to function collaboratively. In fact, federal budget constraints and inaction caused
the elimination of the single organization tasked to support and prepare military forces for such collaboration—the USJFCOM—and is driving the military services and interagency departments and agencies to cooperate less, not more. As budgets decline, cooperation wanes.

Surviving Fiscal Realities

Logic suggests that interagency departments and agencies should see the benefits of more collaboration in a resource-constrained environment. In reality the opposite occurs. Sharing resources, closing gaps, eliminating overlapping missions, better delineating supported/supporting relationships among interagency partners, and obtaining greater knowledge of the capabilities and resources within each organization would benefit each of the departments and agencies. But there must be a forum that encourages these actions. The Diplomacy, Development, and Defense (3D) Planning Group was formed to demonstrate a commitment to improve a whole-of-government approach and develop interdepartmental coordination for national security challenges, but very little information is available on what they accomplished. Sadly, dwindling resources are engendering a “circle the wagons” mentality in all agencies, at a time when broader cooperation and collaboration is called for more than ever.

The exception once found in the collaboration between the State Department and DoD appears to be withering with the wearying of the Middle East conflicts and the arrival of budget restraints. These agencies reached an accommodation through a memorandum of understanding that they would work on common issues. Prior to the most recent fiscal constraints, DoD had been increasing the number of personnel working at the State Department in Washington and diplomacy specialists working at the combatant command levels. The two organizations agreed to contribute cooperatively to a $250 million Global Security Contingency Fund for use in emergent and urgent challenges in “areas that were not planned for in the budget but popped up.”10 The State Department understands that “DoD has more money and has a lot of planning capability, [so this level of cooperation] ensures these efforts are not stove-piped, but working together.”11 This is a far cry from the original intent of Presidential Study Directive-1, “Organizing for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism,” to organize a cohesive and integrated structure”12 and does not even address cooperation outside of crisis response. It also falls short of Secretary of State Clinton’s statement made after the release of the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review that the State Department must be recognized for its statutory authority to lead in these efforts beyond U.S. borders as well as the responsibility “to make this civilian-military partnership something more than just a phrase,”13 and it is inconsistent with DoD Instruction 3000.05, “Stability Operations,” policy guidance that recognizes the leadership role of the Department of State in international crisis situations.14

The State Department and DoD both recognized and began to address the problems in a collaborative approach, but such collaboration seems to have stalled. Now is the time for the U.S. government to capitalize on lessons learned and develop a whole-of-nation approach based on restructuring brought about...
Adapting to Maintain Relevance

Fiscal constraint lessons require a more strategic approach to interagency cooperation than the one evolving in the post-Iraq and Afghanistan reduced-budget environment. To date, interagency coordination has had only two models: (1) the Cold War, where each agency’s mission was clearly defined and resourced adequately to support its individual mission; and (2) during the 11 years of OIF and OEF, where military forces led or co-led diplomacy and development efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Neither model suits the future of government and private organization cooperation in a whole-of-nation approach where budgets are constrained. It is also time for the National Security Council (NSC) to pull together the interagency engaged in international activities and begin an experimentation program that supports whole-of-nation collaboration at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. The NSC should develop a concept of interagency force capabilities that considers and embraces nongovernmental and corporate abilities to provide material and non-material solutions. Because of the continuing imbalance of resources, DoD should provide the facilities and the bulk of experimentation resources, but there must be State and USAID commitments to fully engage, as well as commitments from other government and private organizations to participate.

In the past 10–15 years, especially as a result of U.S. engagement in both Afghanistan and Iraq, the departments have accepted the view that crisis prevention, crisis avoidance, and state reconstitution all require dynamic blends of military, diplomatic, and development initiatives. The U.S. government should focus on finding the most efficient and effective means for virtual, live, and constructive training for all interagency and relevant nongovernmental organization professionals—not just a select few who are assigned in other departments. Taking resources and staffing into account, effectively addressing future whole-of-nation cooperation, collaboration, and response will require innovative new approaches as well as sacrifices from all agencies of the government.

Experimentation can develop interagency doctrine, processes, and tools that expand upon the “Interagency Contingency Planning Online Toolbox” to support peacetime, contingency, and stability preparation, planning, and implementation. It can define training and education processes as well as governmental leadership experience requirements. It can bring out best business practices currently being developed separately by each of the military services, interagency departments and agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and corporations to help shape a consistent, comprehensive, collaboration regime. Experimentation can make each level of government and private organizations comfortable with working within supported/supporting relationships and help other government, nongovernmental, and corporate organizations understand how best to relate to U.S. government diplomacy, development, and defense organizations supporting stability, crisis, and reconstruction tasks.

Among many other benefits, experimentation can also help DoD, State, USAID, and supporting agency leaders build stronger relationships and assess the value...
If done correctly, experimentation identifies what works and what does not work in a setting where failure is not catastrophic and resources are not squandered.

of corporations, contractors, and consultants who support interagency coordination. The results can provide comprehensive and consistent guidance to the combatant commands and military services, as well as all the bureaus within interagency departments. Material developed during the past 11 years on interagency coordination is available to identify and consolidate the best recommendation and discard those no longer needed. By using experimentation, all partners can recognize and appreciate the advantages of introducing new ideas and developing evaluation processes and procedures in an environment where simulated failure is accepted and educational. If done correctly, experimentation identifies what works and what does not work in a setting where failure is not catastrophic and resources are not squandered.

Collaborative interagency coordination education has diminished since the closure of USJFCOM, and whole-of-nation experimentation has struggled to find a sponsor. The NSC staff must lead. DoD must take a more active role in collaborating with State to lead each organization’s bureaus and components into supporting whole-of-nation experimentation, actively enlisting nongovernmental organizations and federal/state agencies participation, and implementing resulting lessons learned. Joint Staff Directorate for Joint Force Development (J7) is responsible for joint force development experimentation but not equipped or staffed to approach whole-of-nation experimentation. A new Whole-of-Nation Concept Development Experimentation Campaign Plan (WON CDE Plan) patterned after the original USJFCOM plan should serve as the template for NSC action to define a more balanced experimentation approach that supports all whole-of-nation concepts.

Conclusion

Darwin rationalized his theory concerning evolution in nature to the manner in which mankind had accomplished mutation in domesticated animals and plants through selective breeding. Experimentation from generation to generation improved the survival or elimination of selected species. Experimentation uncovers solutions for remaining relevant in a resource-constrained world. The answer—the whole-of-nation approach—is apparent, but few grasp the question, “How does the U.S. remain responsive to change in a fiscally-constrained world where threats have evolved, continue to evolve, and where ‘business-as-usual’ policymaking and response structures are less responsive or relevant?”

Preliminary analysis and concepts must determine the sorts of problems the whole-of-nation approach can solve. Not every national security question needs a whole-of-nation solution, and not every scenario needs to be of a catastrophic nature. While policymakers, planners, and budgeters have been dealing heavily with post-conflict stabilization actions over the last decade and developed concepts and processes to deal with such issues, whole-of-nation approach scenarios are now more applicable.

Policymakers should recognize the inherent benefits stemming from an interagency tabletop exercise to discuss and determine the types of scenarios that would require, or at least benefit from, a whole-of-nation approach. Agencies should ensure scenarios consider resource
constraints as they might actually occur, rather than develop scenarios that play out in an unlimited resource environment.

Over time every agency of the government has developed its own procedures, policies, doctrine, and processes that support its unique mission. Because missions are unique, no single way of collaborating will be common to all the agencies or to private organizations. Rather than seeking a “one size fits all” way forward, experimentation should help practitioners understand the unique methodologies used by other agencies and determine practical bridging mechanisms that effectively manage disparate ways of doing business.

Trying to make everyone do things the same way is counterproductive. In fact, the differences between the agencies involved in addressing a common challenge offer strengths for achieving success. Different organizations bring distinct perspectives, skills, and expertise to the table. The combination of different professional perspectives is necessary to understanding and responding to complex challenges in complex contingency instances.

A key component of success in future operations will be the “capability, capacity, and will to leverage the appropriate balance of national power in a coordinated, synchronized, and focused manner to mitigate risk and exploit opportunities.”18 The U.S. usually possesses the will. The challenge is to identify correctly the available capability and capacity that most effectively and efficiently performs the task. Experimentation may not provide clear answers, but experimentation can identify the wrong paths and increase the understanding needed to achieve capability and capacity. The overall focus of effort should be the same no matter what individual organizational processes and goals direct.

Experimentation does not substitute for training nor is it a replacement for rigorous training. Experimentation allows for trying new ideas, new processes, and new systems at minimal risk. Different experimentation environments provide the means to enable interagency partners to develop the ways to work together. Previous DoD experimentation uncovered the challenges to integration, the need for more capacity among civilian agencies, and the short- and mid-term requirements for capacity and capability building in foreign nations.

Conducting innovative and dynamic whole-of-nation experimentation to meet real-world challenges can achieve successes simply by identifying shortcomings, needs, and capabilities. It can help decision makers understand the overlaps and gaps in government and nongovernmental organization capacities to work together to achieve common goals in building stable environments that enhance each organization’s capability to succeed. Fiscal crises require the U.S. government to find new and innovative ways to operate successfully, effectively, and efficiently. Whole-of-nation experimentation can minimize waste and identify false pathways as fiscal crises are confronted head on. It can ensure better adaptation for current and future environments to enable survival of the fittest. IAJ
Notes


3 An exception is found at Office of Management and Budget Memorandum M-13-02, Subject: “Improving Acquisition through Strategic Sourcing,” where a structure is established to manage government-wide acquisition contracts. However, this does not provide for potential efficiencies through broader scope with non-federal organizations. See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/memoranda/2013/m-13-02_0.pdf>.


7 Mark Sweberg was assigned to this small group from the Joint Staff J2, where he was the senior Long Range Planner on the J2 staff. From 1995–1998, Lieutenant Colonel Allan Childers was assigned to HQ USCENTCOM J5 as South Asia Branch Chief and country desk officer.


11 Ibid.


14 DODI 3000.05.


16 One such consultancy is Development Transformations (DT) that specializes in improving the effectiveness of stabilization and development programming in post-conflict environments. See <http://www.developmenttransformations.com/>.
