In principle, the idea of “interagency” in U.S. governance extends back to February 25, 1793, when President George Washington held the first meeting with his full cabinet—Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of War Henry Knox, and Attorney General Edmund Randolph. Their interactions stemmed from the constitutional provision that the President “may require the Opinion, in writing, of the principal Officer in each of the executive Departments, upon any subject relating to the Duties of their respective Offices.” George Washington desired that his most trusted circle represent divergent geographical and ideological perspectives so as to lend credibility and balance to executive deliberations. In that regard, his inclusion of Thomas Jefferson—a southerner from Virginia and an anti-federalist—and Alexander Hamilton—a northerner from New York and a federalist—provided both the divergence that Washington sought and probably much more. Referring to the oftentimes acrimonious exchanges between Jefferson and Hamilton, Jefferson would later write, “The pain was for Hamilton and myself, but the public experienced no inconvenience.” That is as it should be; the interagency is the place to sort out the many inconvenient details of governance that never could be sorted out via public referendum.

This glimpse into Washington’s cabinet illustrates several points that collectively capture the essence of the interagency. First, the interagency is the practical means through which the President directs the executive activity of government. Second, the varied functions of government are not necessarily complementary. They involve competing priorities informed by the different emphases of each distinctive bureaucratic mission and the different ideologies that inform the world view of those called upon to deliberate upon and execute decisions and then interpret the specific meanings of those decisions in the ongoing course of implementation.

Even in Washington’s world—with four cabinet members, a small interagency, a modest budget, a tiny set of laws to execute, and an operational context in which time moved at a comparatively slow pace—interagency work was hard work. Compare this setting to the world
of the twenty-first century—with 16 cabinet members; an enormous interagency; a budget featuring numbers so large as to have no real meaning to most people; an ever-burgeoning set of law overlaid with a bewildering array of rules, regulations, and executive orders; and an operational context in which nanoseconds cannot be dismissed as irrelevant—and the contrast speaks for itself. It is in this latter context, however, that the interagency encounters the challenge of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Once the issue of what constitutes a “weapon” is resolved, there remains the question of what modalities of weapons should be included in the universe of WMD.

WMD and the Interagency

What is it about WMD that poses such an operational challenge for the interagency? Although the “pie” of possible responses might be sliced in any number of ways, no matter how it is sliced, it contains the following problems:

Definition

“What is a WMD?” is not nearly as straightforward as it may appear, because it presupposes three subsidiary questions: “What is a weapon?” “What does ‘destruction’ entail?” and “How much ‘destruction’ must occur before it can be classified as ‘massive’?”

Weapons typically function as parts of a larger weapon system. For example, even if a nuclear gravity bomb is called a weapon, its weaponization is not especially meaningful if it does not have a delivery platform—a bomber or a fighter jet. Moreover, not just any bomber or fighter jet will do. The delivery platform must be specially outfitted with equipment that will enable the delivery of the gravity bomb in a very specific manner contextualized by a plethora of mission criteria. Similarly, one can imagine an intercontinental ballistic missile system that is not strictly classified as a “weapon” because it is presently disengaged from its targeting computer or lacks some essential component. Once the issue of what constitutes a “weapon” is resolved, there remains the question of what modalities of weapons should be included in the universe of WMD. Over 50 definitions “with some official standing in the United States and elsewhere”5 fall into one of the following six categories:

- WMD as nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons (NBC).
- WMD as chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons (CBRN).
- WMD as CBRN and high-explosive weapons (CBRNE).
- WMD as CBRN weapons capable of causing mass destruction or mass casualties.
- WMD as weapons, including some CBRN weapons but not limited to CBRN, capable of causing mass destruction or mass casualties.
- WMD as weapons of mass effect capable of causing mass destruction or mass casualties or that cause mass disruption.6

This latter category at least contemplates the possibility of cyber weapons that could turn Western society—dependent as it is on computer technology—upside down. It also contemplates the possibility—disputed by some but increasingly recognized as plausible—of an electromagnetic pulse attack. Such an attack, produced by a nuclear weapon detonated high in the atmosphere and entailing virtually none of the thermal, blast, or radiological effects traditionally associated with nuclear weapons, would generate a wave of electromagnetic
energy of such magnitude that every electronic device within a one-million-square mile radius could be rendered inoperable. The effect of such an attack could transport the affected area from the twenty-first back to the seventeenth century instantaneously. In addition, the dark side of the emerging world of nanotechnology can create robotic gadgets small enough to flow through the blood stream to sicken or kill their host organisms.

Defining the last two words of the phrase weapons of mass destruction presents another set of challenges. World War II conventional attacks on Tokyo and Manila resulted in destruction as extensive as that visited upon Hiroshima or Nagasaki. However, the former are rarely referred to as WMD attacks. What counts as “destruction” appears to depend, at least in some measure, on whether one is on a weapon’s giving or receiving end. For example, a radiological dispersal device that results in the leveling of a single-family dwelling and contaminating the immediately surrounding area may be assessed by the perpetrators as having been only minimally successful; however, to the former occupants, who will never be convinced that the site is sufficiently decontaminated to enable reconstruction, the attack was maximally destructive. In a related vein, the concept of “massiveness” is similarly dependent upon one’s perspective. The Center for Disease Control may assess a biological attack with a deadly virus that kills 20 people as fairly minor and eminently manageable; however, for the persons who may have unwittingly interacted with infected persons—not to mention the family and friends of the deceased—the attack is catastrophic and life altering.

This much is clear: Not one of the critical sectors of U.S. infrastructure—not chemical facilities, not commercial facilities, not communications facilities, not manufacturing plants, not dams, not the defense industrial base, not emergency services, not energy production facilities, not financial services centers, not food and agriculture, not government installations, not healthcare and the public health apparatus, not information technology nodes, not nuclear reactors, and not transportation systems—are immune from the risk of a WMD attack. Hence, the proposition that WMD is not an interagency problem is untenable, and the proposition that WMD is an interagency problem is unavoidable.

---

**Resourcing**

WMD incidents are by their very nature very high-consequence affairs. However, they are also very low-probability affairs. The relationship between consequence and probability of occurrence is exactly inverse: The higher the likely consequence, the lower the likelihood of occurrence; the lower the consequence, the higher the likelihood of occurrence. Hence, the response protocol to lower-consequence scenarios tends to be subsumed under the response protocols for similar, low-consequence scenarios. Higher-consequence scenarios tend to fall in the realm of the unthinkable, and the natural tendency with respect to planning for the unthinkable is not to think about it, and hence, not to plan for it. When coordinating nuclear policy issues for a massive, international military exercise, I once asked the question: “Where in the exercise does the nuclear play occur?” I was frankly informed that such exercise play was totally impractical, as the inclusion of a nuclear event would utterly destroy any possibility of the exercise objectives being accomplished. “Utterly destroy” indeed.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the threat of WMD is one of infinite competing practical...
and political priorities. Given the scorn that attaches to WMD, the political path of least resistance is often to act as though WMD do not exist and then to bet on the viability of opening the emergency appropriation floodgates once a WMD event occurs (pausing periodically to hold committee hearings and conduct investigations to ascertain who was at fault for not having anticipated this low-probability/high-consequence event). It is here that the interagency will receive its “day in court”—only it will be as defendant and not as plaintiff.

In all fairness, most agencies have not totally ignored the problem of WMD. However, even if an agency is successful in assigning a relative priority to this low-probability/high-consequence event, it may still struggle to answer the question of how to spend money to address the problem. The breadth of the WMD challenge is such that “one-size-fits-all” solutions, elegant as they may seem and politically appealing as they may be, rarely work; they typically address only one rather specific aspect of the problem. However, if that solution cannot cover all areas at risk, what does it cover and how does it prioritize those risks? Similarly vexing is the question of where along an operational planning continuum to spend money. Does an agency direct its resourcing effort toward prevention, defense, or consequence management? Does it anticipate a general scenario, the particulars of which it almost certainly will not obtain, or does it wait until an incident arises before it acts? (The proactive leader who summarily dismisses the latter course as “reactive” may find it to be the only available course, such as could be the case with the emergence of a heretofore unknown biological threat.)

**Division of labor**

Still to be answered is the question of who is to resource what with respect to defending against WMD. The solution is not as simple as fixing bureaucratic responsibility with this or that office or even divvying up bureaucratic responsibilities across the interagency. Of course, this must be done, but which agency should be responsible for which aspect of the WMD is not intuitively obvious. The word weapon suggests that WMD is a Department of Defense problem, and it is, but by no means exclusively. Rather, the essence of the interagency—the thread that binds the present to the nascent days of the interagency in George Washington’s cabinet room—is the realization that everything is somehow connected to everything else, and at no time has that interconnectivity existed to a greater degree than in the globalized world of the twenty-first century. The problem, then, becomes not only how, where, and when to act, but also how to do so with the realization that whatever actions are taken (intentional or witting) affect the actions of (many) other players in the interagency.

The task of defending the nation from the threat of WMD is, in all probability, the single-most challenging human-initiated problem the interagency could ever face. While incremental progress is evident and welcome, the need for self-critical evaluation endures.

**Exploring the Interagency Challenges with WMD**

This special edition of the *InterAgency Journal* on WMD and the Interagency is fortunate to have the opportunity to highlight the work of Fellows from the National Defense University (NDU), Countering WMD Graduate
Fellowship Program. This highly competitive graduate program administered by the Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction at NDU brings together a diverse array of mid-career professionals from the uniformed services and the civil service to study the complexities of the twenty-first century WMD challenge. In this issue, they share valuable insights with respect to the interagency’s encounter with WMD.

Chi K. Cheung provides what is likely the definitive account of the interagency effort leading to the demilitarization of Syrian chemical weapons.

Timothy W. Fisher explores the interagency challenge of WMD-related intelligence analysis.

David F. Grieco highlights the underappreciated but nonetheless very real threat of agroterrorism and the need for interagency synergies to counter that threat.

In a related vein, Cindy A. Landgren focuses attention on the imperative to secure the U.S. food supply—very possibly the quintessential interagency task.

Quan Hai T. Lu surveys the critical infrastructure of the U.S. and argues for how a massive cyber-attack—something that many are coming to understand as a new form of WMD—could cripple American society in ways that the average citizen rarely contemplates.

Finally, Matthew J. Moakler raises the question of whether the professional jurisdictional boundaries in the interagency and beyond are properly aligned to counter the threat of biological weapons research that could be accomplished behind the cloak of research for legitimate scientific purposes.

Together, these authors illustrate WMD to be one of the interagency’s greatest but possibly least acknowledged (or perhaps even understood) challenges. It is one that will require heroic leadership efforts as U.S. government agencies work to identify common interests and reach an agreement as to who must do what when to protect the nation from what has been aptly described as “the gravest danger”—the use of WMD at the crossroads of radicalism and technology.  

NOTES


2 The Constitution of the United States of America, Article II, Section 2, Clause 1.

3 “Cabinet Members.”


6 Ibid.
