

An *Integrative Approach* to the Interagency Process

by **Leonard Lira**

In his book, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*, James Q. Wilson cites American political scientist Harold Seidman's description of the quest for interagency coordination as the "twentieth-century equivalent of the medieval search for the philosopher's stone." Seidman believes that "if only we can find the right formula for coordination, we can reconcile the irreconcilable, harmonize competing and wholly divergent interests, overcome irrationalities in our government structures, and make hard policy choices to which no one will dissent."¹ The latest campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate that war is not only the province of the military but of the entire government. The interagency problems prevalent in those campaigns make Seidman's description of this quest still applicable.

However, the problems inherent in the interagency process are not confined to just the policy coordination process, which the NSC facilitates quite well. The problem is the operational implementation of that policy. For example, General Peter Pace, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, states, "The current National Security Council process works well in 'teeing up' decisions for the President...the problem comes after...the various parts of the government take their pieces and go back to work on them."² In other words, there is no operational level executive agent or process to pull together the various elements of national power—diplomatic, intelligence, military, and economic. Further, even when an executive agency seems the likely and practical candidate as the lead agency, such as the State Department for stabilization and reconstruction efforts in pre or post conflict settings or the Department of Defense in conducting governance operations during low to medium conflict settings, it often lacks the capacity to effect proper execution of the policy.

Despite the enthusiasm for the National Security Council (NSC) process, the national security actors, those governmental agencies that make up the NSC construct, still lack the ability to consolidate all the various government agencies' resources into one mechanism for the implementation of policy.

Lieutenant Colonel Leonard Lira is a U.S. Army Strategist currently teaching strategic and operational art at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He has recently published "Design: the U.S. Army's Approach to Negotiating Wicked Problems" in *Venturing Beyond the Classroom: Volume 2*.

This is an operational problem; however, it is one of capacity and not structure. The solution for this is to harmonize the executive agencies' actions through "collaborative" measures that work through the current structure, functions, and authorities of the government agencies, rather than attempt to restructure.

Historical Review of Interagency Process—Common Themes

Several historical examples from Vietnam, El Salvador, Haiti, Bosnia, and then Kosovo, and Afghanistan suggest similar interagency problems have existed for a long time. Common throughout the history of the interagency process are the obstacles—rules, structures, authorities, and politics—to interdepartmental implementation of policy in general and national security policy, specifically. For example, agencies did not have clear incentives to work together, and they lack institutional memory to learn from experiences. Failures stemmed more from poor implementation than weak policy. Success often resulted from strong individual actors and/or presidential emphasis. These obstacles can be traced from post World War II through the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The realization after WWII that the U.S. now shouldered the burden of managing global responsibilities brought about the creation of the National Security Act of 1947. One of the act's primary purposes was to bring strategic coherence, consensus, and decisiveness to the burgeoning global responsibilities that the U.S. was assuming as an emerging superpower. WWII demonstrated the huge effort required to integrate resources and budgets; coordinate diplomacy and military power; collect intelligence; and conduct combined air, land, and sea military operations while managing allied strategies.

As the U.S. continued to emerge as a superpower and increase its influence in global affairs, executive agencies realized the need to synchronize their efforts to support the nation's

strategic goals. In Vietnam, the problem of synchronization led to the civil-military program called Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS). CORDS evolved from disparate programs that attempted to coordinate political, economic, and intelligence activities. The U.S. Information Agency initially implemented these disparate programs, known as the Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of Vietnam (PROVN), under the leadership of William J. Porter, the Deputy Ambassador to Vietnam. However, Ambassador Robert Komer lobbied and eventually persuaded the White House to separate these programs from the embassy, form CORDS, and embed it within the U.S. military command structure in Vietnam.³ Robert Komer attested to the interagency failings in Vietnam in his RAND monograph, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*, and attributed these failings to bureaucracies returning to their familiar patterns of operating when they encountered problem sets atypical from their previous historical experience. The CORDS program is a prime example of how a strong personality at the working level could ensure that synchronization occurred. Such strength of leadership is now recognized as an important requirement for effective implementation of policy in a coordinated manner. Komer's strong-willed personality and his ability to integrate with the military, in particular General Abrams, proved pivotal to the success of CORDS.

In El Salvador, civil and military governmental agencies failed to apply lessons learned from the CORDS experience and relied on the strong personalities of the lead actors. Again, strong influential leadership backed by presidential decree rather than organizational harmony seemed more successful. Three ambassadors, Dean Hinton, Thomas Pickering, and Edwin Corr, led the embassy in El Salvador from 1982 through 1988 and "commanded" all government agencies in country in accordance with the role defined in their presidential appointment letters.⁴

Cold war conflicts such as Grenada and

Panama also demonstrated that successful actions have included strong individual actors and/or presidential emphasis. For example, the Army Center of Military History historian Edgar F. Raines points out, “The student of the Grenada decision-making process is left with the disquieting conclusion that the issue appears to have received its most thoughtful consideration when the president took his own counsel.”⁵ John T. Fishel, former Professor of National Security Policy and Research Director at the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, suggests that the decision to intervene in Panama, even with many adaptations to the interagency process via organizational changes, demonstrates the process still comes down to personalities and relationships. For example, Fishel writes:

Although mechanisms, often [called] ‘work arounds,’ have been developed to address issues of interagency concern, they still depend, far too much, on the personal chemistry of the principals. If it is good, as it was in the case of General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker in Iraq, it can be very, very good. If, on the other hand, it is bad, as it was in the case of Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez and Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Administrator, Ambassador L. Paul “Jerry” Bremer, also in Iraq, then it is horrid!¹⁶

A prime example from Iraq is the success or failure of the stability and reconstruction operations based on the relationships between State Department entities, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Department of Defense entities, such as the Civilian Provisional Authority (CPA), and Multi-National Force Iraq. According to James Stephenson in *Losing the Golden Hour*, the early relationship was terse, predominately due to CPA attitudes and need for centralized control. Stephenson explains that USAID’s culture was one of independence in developing

and implementing policy, something not afforded USAID while it was under CPA’s control. Although the relationship was much better when dealing with the military, the USAID’s long-term goal for the democratization of Iraq was at odds with the military’s short-term goal of providing security. Stephenson credits Major General Peter Chairelli’s integrative approach and collaborative personality with the success that the 1st Cavalry Division and USAID had in Baghdad. When MNF-I wanted to employ the same method across Iraq, it met with lesser degrees of success. Stephenson implies this was because they replicated the method but failed to replicate the integrative and collaborative relationships.

Why Public Sector Organizations Act the Way They Do

The bureaucratic environment in which government agencies operate is a paradox. Executive departmental agencies are created and funded by the legislative branch of the U.S. government, but controlled by the executive branch. Therefore, many of the interagency problems prevalent today are a by-product of the American federal form of government. The founding fathers laid the foundation for an effective government to do the people’s bidding but also placed checks and balances both horizontally among its branches and vertically between the national and state governments in order to maintain the diffusion of political power and prevent tyranny. To understand this system, one can draw on the literature from political science, management, and public administration.

At first glance, literature on the subject from political science appears to present two views on bureaucracies, neither of which relate to the interagency arena. Amy Zegart, Associate Professor of Public Policy at UCLA’s School of Public Affairs, indicates that this might be because political scientists tend to treat the study of bureaucracies at one of two extremes. At one end of the extreme, the rationalist in the international relations field treats bureaucracies

as rational actors that conform to the designs of the state in the international environment. At the other end of the extreme, new institutionalists of American politics characterize bureaucracies as “ineffective, inefficient, and incapable of serving any broad based national interest” and fashioned by special interests as “creatures of politics.”⁷

There are, however, some samples in the political science literature that study the circumstances of the individual actors in each bureaucracy and the context of the environment in which they operate in order to determine the variables that affect their abilities to integrate and work together. One example confirms that domestic issues affect the actions of bureaucracies. Steven Hook, professor and chair of the Political Science Department at Kent State University, writes that the nation’s lawmakers who control the purse strings have strong predilections about the State Department, which traditionally has been under resourced, which limits its ability to work effectively in the interagency environment. Hook states, “Members of Congress expressed an actual disdain for diplomats...Congress strictly limited State Department budget and closely scrutinized the diplomatic corps.” He goes on to state that Congressional creation of the National Security Act of 1947 in effect created two ministries of foreign affairs, the State Department and the NSC, which forces the Secretary of State to not only contend with foreign governments, “but also with rival power centers in the executive branch.”⁸

Political science professors Dan Wood and Richard W. Waterman attempt to demonstrate empirically, via a time series study of seven different public bureaucracies, that the probable primary factor influencing the actions of the bureaucracies is the power of political appointments. Strong leadership personalities may account for effective actions more than budget manipulation, legislative changes, or administrative reorganization. Specifically, they find that “modern presidents select political leadership not only for their expertise and to

reward supporters but also for their ability to administer the president’s plan.”⁹ The implication of their study for the interagency is that personal factors, such as relationship to the appointer and the capacity to facilitate agency actions, determine how effective they are as interagency actors.

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Another sample of political science research takes the interpersonal factor a step further. Political science professor Timothy J. Mckeown completely revokes the view that organizational processes and rules control institutional actions. Instead, he provides evidence that human capacity to anticipate events and act in strategic manners provide a better explanations for actors in the interagency arena. To elaborate this assertion, he cites the following from James G. March, Professor Emeritus at Stanford University: “The decision processes of [government actors] seem to be infused with strategic actions and *negotiations* at every level and every point.”¹⁰ The obvious implication for the study of the problems in the interagency process is that changes to structure may have less of an impact than changes to interpersonal relationships at all levels from strategic to tactical.

Management literature further expresses the effects of strong interpersonal actions in the interagency process. Abram Shulsky and Francis Fukuyama’s review of classical literature on management identifies three structural forms—hierarchical, networked, and flat/virtual—and finds the structure of an organization is determined by the flow of information within it.¹¹ While their

research focuses primarily on the structure and effect of organization on commercial institutions, their findings have implications for the study of problems in the interagency arena. These findings support the idea that changes in structure may not fix the issues plaguing the interagency process. Interagencies do a good job of teeing up the issue, which requires gathering the required information for decision. Agreeing on the

settings could include working groups, cubicle mates, and water cooler meetings. In their book *Driving Results Through Social Networks: How Top Organizations Leverage Networks for Performance and Growth*, Rob Cross and Robert J. Thomas recommend organizations harness these informal networks to cultivate an interpersonal climate of collaboration that allows the organization to be more effective at accomplishing its purpose.

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Based on the samples from the management literature above, the implication for the study of issues in the interagency arena may be that traditional approaches to increase agency effectiveness that start with formal structural changes may not lead to the desired result. Rather, modifications that enhance the informal or interpersonal processes may have a better chance of producing the desired effect.

objective and providing the capacity to comply and collaborate among all interagency players is the real problem. Therefore, structural changes alone, which according to the management literature fix information flow, may not be as effective.

The negative attributions of structural changes and the positive attributions of interpersonal skills are also present in the literature from the field of public administration. Robert Maranto and Douglas Skelley point out in *Public Administration Quarterly* 27:3 that many researchers question the effectiveness of structural reforms on government institutions and determine that the political leadership of government institutions must contend with contingencies, such as culture and organizational processes, to garner support from the career civil servants charged to implement reforms.

Other samples from the management literature point to interpersonal variables, such as leadership, that may provide a better catalyst for effective interagency process. For example, Warren Bennis and Robert Townsend indicate that the leadership paradigm under which organizations currently operate may be impeding their ability to operate as effectively as they could. Bennis and Townsend write: "The paradigm for the [leadership] structure is control, order, and predict. The other paradigm is acknowledge, create, and empower."¹² In their research, Bennis and Townsend find that leaders of organizations primarily attempt to implement change through structural changes; however, the real catalyst for change occurs in the informal structural and relationship-based settings. Such

Rutgers University and University of North Carolina public administration professors Sanjay Pandey and Bradley Wright take the examination of structural reforms further by empirically studying the effect of such changes within the context of inherently interpersonal environments. Their study indicates that structural reforms primarily aim at optimizing the efficiency of organizations, a similar finding to that in the managerial literature. However, they point out that "public organizations address complex social functions, providing goods and services that cannot be easily packaged for exchange

in the economic markets.” Extrapolated to the interagency setting, the implication is that structural changes may further hamper actors involved in the interagency process from coordinative or collaborative activities in complex environments.¹³

To operate in this type of political environment, agencies require what Wilson calls autonomy and resources. To achieve autonomy requires that the agency match its mission to its jurisdiction in order to meet congressionally mandated purposes and presidential directives. Government agencies do this by acquiring appropriations; personnel; and most importantly political support from Congress, the President, and in some cases, the citizenry and from adjacent agencies working on the same issue. Wilson explains that public agencies encounter obstacles to achieving autonomy and resources when they face inadequate budgets, complex tasks, several rivals, and many constraints.¹⁴

Recommended solutions to this problem should increase budgets, simplify tasks, reduce the number of rivals, and mitigate constraints on the authority of the executing agency. However based on the literature from the field of political science, management, and public administration, structural changes such as those recommended by the Goldwater-Nichols Act for the interagency may not work. Rather, informal modifications to the capacity of each agency based on collaborative skills and interpersonal variables may have more of an effect, especially if other agencies with a stake in a particular issue contribute to that capacity.

Recommendations for Improvement

As the historical review of interagency issues shows, systemic problems have been present throughout the history of operations requiring integrated interagency solutions. Further the theoretical research from political science, management, and public administration seems to indicate that interpersonal variables could have a greater impact on making the interagency

process effective than organization reformations. Therefore, the question remains. What can government do to resolve the issues plaguing the interagency process?

Researchers of this issue have provided several recommendations. One recommendation, offered by many authors, would make one functional command responsible for the interagency process, either by allowing the NSC to take charge of the process or by creating a new entity to do so. Another recommendation would do away with the geographic combatant commands in the U.S. military and turn them into joint interagency commands. Depending on the level of conflict within the region, either a civilian or military leader could lead a joint command and would have full command authority to accomplish any mission in the region.¹⁵ Both of these recommendations appear to be based on the premise that interagencies should restructure authority or reform how authority is organized. The research above would seem to dispute that. Additionally, placing complete authority in one agency while rescinding the capabilities

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and authorities of other agencies would violate what Gabriel Marcella describes as the fundamental law of the interagency—“functional interdependence (where) no national security or international affairs issue can be resolved by one agency alone.”¹⁶

By far, the most compelling recommendation

raised to date would legislate interagency cooperation by creating a Goldwater-Nichols Act for the interagency. Given the conclusion drawn from the literature above, this would not only be less effective, but also less prudent. The primary reason Goldwater-Nichols worked well for the military services—all four services shared the same principle purpose of defending the nation through military means—is also why it will not solve interagency coordination shortcomings. Institutions routinely involved in the interagency process have different missions and most certainly do not focus on the defense of the U.S.

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by military means. Zegart’s assessment of the problem supports this point: “some of the very hallmarks of American democracy—separation of powers, regular elections, majority rule—inhibit good agency design and provide incentives for political actors to keep it that way...agencies are created by political actors who must operate in a reality suffused with conflict, contention, and compromise.”¹⁷ Therefore, the issue is not so much the structure or the authorities allotted by the structure but the politics influencing the reasons behind the structures. This assessment harkens back to the interagency adage that nobody is in charge of the process. If viewed as an informal organization, the interagency is, in fact, leaderless by design. However, according to authors Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, this condition may not be such a bad thing, and in fact, the nebulous organization of the interagency

system may be on the cusp of harnessing the exponential power of the type of leaderless organizations that Brafman and Beckstrom write of in their book, *The Starfish and the Spider*.

Brafman and Beckstrom’s theory asserts that leaderless organizations are some of the most powerful as a result of decentralization and social networks that facilitate collaboration. They contend that decentralization is a good thing in implementing action through social networks. However, centralization to a certain extent is still necessary to ensure compliance within agreed upon norms. They explain that the federal government, as designed by the Constitution, already displays two key principles of a Starfish organization: it is split into three autonomous and independent branches, and it is inherently weak and diffuses power to the states and among the many parts of the federal government.¹⁸

Narrowing the focus from the entire federal government to just the various agencies of the executive branch, one can extend this analogy. In fact, the President or Congress created these agencies independent of each other, purposefully diffusing power among them. This design leads to the frustrations of many presidents tasked with controlling these agencies and departments within their own executive branch. If looked at as an informal organization held together by a political construct, the interagency system would resemble what Brafman and Beckstrom term a “hybrid organization.” A hybrid organization benefits from the best of both types of organizing principles, centralized and decentralized control.

Based on this idea, one could imagine the centralization of intent and purpose coming down from the President and conveyed by the National Security Council, which would act as a catalyst for implementation of that purpose, but not be the actual implementer or controller of that policy. A catalyst ignites the action and provides the reason and ideology but does not control the action. Taken a step further, if one imagines the NSC allowing one of the agencies to champion that policy based on its mission and capabilities,

one can easily apply the hybrid starfish analogy to the interagency setting.

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a valid interagency model based on the Starfish concept as developed by Brafman and Beckstrom. However, previous reform recommendations have continued to prove allusive to interagency coordination and collaboration. Additionally, the theoretical research literature seems to indicate that interpersonal and social variables may be more statistically sensitive to accomplishing interagency effectiveness. Therefore, there is compelling evidence of the need for additional research along the line of implementing some of the ideas proposed by Brafman and Beckstrom on the interagency process.

In the meantime, the above analysis suggests that changes to the interagency process need to be more integrative in nature, allowing each agency to implement collaborative measures fully with other agencies. Any modifications that focus on enhancing the personnel capability of each individual agency from the strategic to the tactical level to develop the interpersonal skills necessary to negotiate the interagency bureaucratic environment should serve this purpose.

Specifically, modifications should educate personnel of individual agencies on the nature; roles; missions; and more importantly, constraints of their adjacent agencies. In addition, the government should provide agency leaders with additional education in transformational collaboration, a process that focuses on “exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources, *and enhancing the capacity of another for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose.*”¹⁹ In a true hybrid Starfish fashion, the functions of each agency could be compartmentalized under shared leadership arrangements at every level. Shared leadership would allow each organization to know better when, where, and how to share capacity capabilities. The ebbed PRT model of individual members possessing honed

interpersonal skills could serve as an example.

Conclusion

This article has examined the problems in the interagency process through a historical lens and a literature review from the political science, management, and public administration perspectives. Additionally, it analyzed recommendations to enhance the implementation efforts for national security policies among executive agencies. It suggests that the initial reactions to reforming the interagency process at each level that involve structural reforms may be misplaced. The historical review touches on scenarios where many structural changes occurred, yet problems such as rules, structures, authorities, and politics continued to plague the interagency process.

The theoretical literature review from political science, management, and public administration indicates that perhaps variables of interpersonal and collaboration skills may be more effective if combined with informal modifications to the capacity of each agency, rather than structural changes such as those recommended by a Goldwater-Nichols Act. While adjusting the authority structures may have some effect, they might only register that effect at one specific level, either the strategic, operational, or tactical. Beyond that one level, organizational structural

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changes may prove transitory to the other levels. However based on the constraints identified above developing the interpersonal and collaborative skills of the individuals, thus changing the interagency from the inside out rather than the outside in, may prove more useful. In other words, the solution may lie in efforts to harmonize the executive agencies' actions through collaborative and integrative measures that work through the current structure, functions, and authority of the government agencies at all levels, strategic to tactical.

The introduction of this article indicates policy is easy to decide while execution is much more difficult. Komer cautions that this may be a "grievous oversimplification," and that policy should take into account the capabilities of the institutions involved to execute that policy effectively. The various operational recommendations proposed start from a premise of solidifying authority or needing to change the structure without fully realizing the lack of capabilities inherent in each organization as established by federal system.

This article explored the application of emerging approaches, such as Brafman and Beckstrom's theory for hybrid Starfish organizations, to the interagency process. Conclusions from this limited investigation indicate that the capacity of each agency can be enhanced through education and collaborative transformation. This transformation requires agencies to enhance the capacity of each other for mutual benefit and achieve the common national purpose through compartmentalized leadership sharing arrangements. The end state requires understanding that the interagency process is a purely political process. Therefore, any study of the issues that are present in that process should begin with that premise and look for the integrative processes that would function as the interagency philosopher's stone. **IAJ**

NOTES

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