

Outsider:

The Army Interagency Experience at the Department of Commerce

by **Samuel T. Fuller**

"Holding to a supposed ideal that national security decisions ought to be 'above' politics, personalities, and organizational interests... constitutes an academic dereliction of duty by failing to prepare officers for the realities they will encounter."

—Dr. Nikolas K. Gvosdev, U.S. Naval War College¹

A U.S. Army strategist's core competency is the ability to take an executive-level concept and turn it into an order. This order will move or manage personnel, equipment, and effects between military formations in line with the commander's intent. The term "strategist" merely describes a functional area. To that end, a strategist is not on some higher plane of thinking as compared to his peers. In fact, today's strategist began as stopgap. The essential command function of turning guidance into action in large headquarters had atrophied from certain force design, generation, and management realities. Now fifteen years on, strategists have become the stewards of this function. In a sense, they serve as fixers for the larger Army and Joint headquarters.

If a strategist can turn guidance into orders reliably, they can practice strategizing and start working toward the earned-title aspect of their craft. Strategizing is keeping a strategy sturdy, yet adaptive. In the absence of a strategy, a strategist will collaboratively develop one—that is strategizing as well. Using the sparest terms possible, a strategy is a living-document process that military formations can hold on to in good faith while they undertake their respective or collective missions. Naturally, the strategy always belongs to the commander—the strategist does not own the strategy. Woe to the strategists who believe they own anything.

That does not mean that the strategist does not lead. Rather, how the strategist goes about leading a given headquarters to believe in and adhere to a strategy is just as important as what that headquarters accomplishes. This is the critical aspect of strategizing: the proper design and

Major Samuel T. Fuller is a U.S. Army officer from Naperville, Illinois. He earned a Bachelor of Art in Political Science from the University of Illinois – Chicago via DePaul University, a Master of Art in Public Administration from Webster University, a Master of Science in Business from University of Kansas, and a Master of Military Art and Science in Operational Planning from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College's School of Advanced Military Studies.

management of a strategy serve to better motivate and inspire a formation toward the commander's goals. In a way, an elegant strategy literally animates the Army's mission command philosophy. When executed properly it builds *einheit*, or the mutual trust necessary to conduct distributed operations. Elegant strategies make risk easier to articulate up and down the chain of command. Any witness to this kind of candor can speak to its power.

In large, non-profit business, interagency, or political settings, processes substitute for orders when turning guidance into action. The military term "strategy," with all its semantic implications, becomes an organization's strategy, although there is typically no stated adversary. That is the only real difference; everything else is cosmetic. In fact, one can only hone the technique of strategizing through its practice in diverse environs with different combinations of inputs and outputs. To this end, each strategy has a unique culture and history. Building a portfolio of multiple strategies in different environments and over time is critical to recognizing patterns and developing the mental models that equate to strategic experience.

When building this experience, organizations that value strategic scanning to determine what the environment is trying to tell them and then practice performance management to gather feedback after an action thrive in times of turbulence. This is the essence of discretion and deliberation in strategy. At what level that deliberation occurs is the key question of educating the reflective strategist.

As Gary Klein famously stated, "...novices tend to deliberate about which option to select, whereas experts deliberate about what is really going on in the situation."² This passage profoundly outlines the target of organization development—turning the headlights on and harnessing latent expertise to produce favorable outcomes.

The Problem

All too often, strategists tend to flit among the clouds, galloping like a fox at the "strategic" or "policy" level of a given organization and scrunch their noses at mere mentions of "tactics." Some become downright nauseated at the mention of "process" or "procedure." This approach damages the brand and, even worse, the resident organization. Only through the act of zooming into and out of micro-tactical situations can one truly learn what is going on in an organization and begin to understand its basic culture.

In large, non-profit business, interagency, or political settings, processes substitute for orders when turning guidance into action.

The idea of poking one's head into the janitor's closet in a 47,000-person organization to check for cultural artifacts may seem absurd. However, examining these very types of artifacts in relationship with the espoused values of an organization can reveal both how and why strategies succeed or fail. Consider a strategist's career progression and development: apprentice strategists frequently start developing their commander's strategies by sketching out success criteria first. Only journeymen know to observe as much as they can about an organization's culture, because they recognize that only through the continuous practice of cultural appreciation will they build a strategy that sticks. Masters can construct and manage multiple strategies at the same time. Experts know when a strategy should be disposed of completely, an all too rare talent borne from lifelong honing of strategic "knack."

Military strategists should be considered apprentices until they have had a difficult planning job, and journeymen when they

“come up for air” in a broadening assignment to understand how non-military organizations practice strategy. Most important in this broadening assignment is the consideration of what the military strategist can bring back to the Army. Those that use a broadening assignment as a flourish to their promotion packets or to pad their curriculum vitae are fouling both the Army and the gaining partner. The central thrust for applying to a broadening program should be to create understanding and relationships for the Army’s use. In the spirit of service, a strategist must work hard everywhere, and working hard breeds trust in the gaining partner’s eyes.

The most dangerous man on today’s battlefield is the “lieutenant-strategist” carrying a copy of Clausewitz’s *On War* in his rucksack.

The most dangerous man on today’s battlefield is the “lieutenant-strategist” carrying a copy of Clausewitz’s *On War* in his rucksack. Reading is fundamental. Strategic training and education are vital. However, diverse experiences with multiple organizations’ cultures, means of development, and practices of strategy are the real keys to building an effective strategist who is recognized and called upon for expertise in the field of strategy. It takes time and a breadth of experience. These experiences build tacit knowledge, which is why it is so hard to describe what strategy is and is not. Examples are best; a specific departmental experience suited to describe a strategy and a culture from context to detail and back is fitting.

The Environment

Only the Department of Interior could hope to rival the Department of Commerce in terms of the diversity and federation of bureaus and responsibilities in the executive branch

of the U.S. government. From the Patent and Trademark Office to the National Weather Service, the Department of Commerce has a suite of missions and capabilities spanning at least twelve chapters of Title 15, U.S. Code.³ It can affect many more, depending on one’s definition of economic well-being in relation to national security.

In a sense, deductive reasoning does not work when approaching such a complex organization. There are too many tendrils in other parts of the international community—the U.S. government itself, business, and private citizenry. As such, outsiders who succeed in harnessing the Department’s latent policy and technical expertise use inductive reasoning. Lacking a thread at the start, they consult with a coach to find the person or office they need to begin the process of asking the right questions.. As the forefather of cybernetics Norbert Wiener would say, “Whether we entrust our decisions to machines of metal, or to those machines of flesh and blood which are bureaus, and vast laboratories and armies and corporations, we shall never receive the right answers to our questions unless we ask the right questions.”⁴ This can be problematic, depending on one’s perspective.

From a pathological perspective, part of the job of a policy advisor is to be aware of barracudas looking for data points contrary to the department’s narrative or strategy. As the saying goes in Washington: “If you are not at the table, then you may be on the menu.” There is a lot on the surface in terms of hierarchy and process in government, but at the end of the day, the city is not so big and the varying sectors of administration are not either. The President can only distribute approximately 3,200 of his party’s Schedule-C appointees. They will help execute the President’s vision with the remainder of the federal government’s civilians, of which there are just over two and half million worldwide. Therefore, the political operators are easy to

spot. That is because personal relationships matter, as does the political organization of the country. It can be hard to resist a call from the many halls of power coursing about. One's reputation as a collaborator may be on the line. The system rewards its survivors and eventually grows to revere them.

From an ecological perspective, one only needs to look at how the law has shaped government organization charts. As they have been for centuries, these laws and charts are transparent to the public and the press. Their purpose is in clear view, and there are means to amend them, if not at a rapid pace. Today, one can use the internet to look up the positions and pay grades of every appointee and civil servant working for the federal government, call almost any office, or can go as far as to petition the White House for his or her individual, highly-tailored cause.

Through the Freedom of Information Act and statutory requirements (such as Circular A-11 from the Office of Management and Budget), every executive department and agency must publish an annual or semi-annual strategy and a report that determines funding levels for the next years.⁵ Even the President must clearly articulate his cross-agency priority goals for the Executive Office of the President. In addition, the President must show where congressionally-allotted funding is being spent and report on its performance.⁶ Few, if any, governments in the world are as transparent. This transparency only serves to prove that our country's governance of power comes from its citizenry, as accounting is the essence of legitimate, democratic rule.

Since there are many subtexts at play in this realm, one would be sensible to point out that a political discussion is unbecoming of a commissioned officer. While it would be imprudent to ask appointees or elected officials to explain their actions or motivations regarding a specific activity or effort, it is not hard to figure out after a few months' worth of exposure to

their culture. Commissioned officers, especially field grade ones, must learn to differentiate between "capital-P" Politics that consist of endlessly repeated gaffes and politics as the system that enlivens the nation's and the free world's government.

The following points are essential to understanding how to divine a strategy from politics in the President's Cabinet, particularly at the sub-interagency policy committee level.

The sub-interagency policy committee level is where the vast majority of Army officers and strategists will interface with civil control of the military. Of the many organs of the Executive Office of the President, they will find themselves primarily within the National Security Council's structure. One may ask why the strategist should care about power at the highest levels of the government, as the strategist is only supposed to turn ideas into orders. The answer is plain: policy limits strategy with constraints and restraints. This scoping is a very good thing for the strategist and can be a great thing if there is room for dialogue. In short, a strategist had better know that politics is the name of the organ that decides what would be politically acceptable in terms of expending capital to accelerate or defend a narrative..

As the saying goes in Washington: "If you are not at the table, then you may be on the menu."

For example, the administration may ask a question from the Executive Office of the President to build political momentum toward a certain goal. This could be to drive public perception, to answer a statutory requirement, or to advance an ideological conversation. These are just a few reasons why; the question of how one flow of power streams through this country is beyond any one explanation. However,

the manifestations can become concrete. In terms of the Department of Commerce, these manifestations may come via the National Security Council, the National Economic Council, or the Council on Environmental Quality, from the executives themselves, or even from other branches of government. With so many mechanisms generating movement throughout the Washington, it is dizzying and difficult to stay focused.

...Military minds may read this as parochialism, but politicians would call this a “narrative,” the essential currency of modern politics in America.

Some Manifestations

Depending on which office of the Department of Commerce is calling for information, recommendations, actions, decisions, or above all, appropriations necessitate different responses. Military minds may read this as parochialism, but politicians would call this a “narrative,” the essential currency of modern politics in America. The next time someone asks the Department of Commerce what it is doing in a particular area, these immediate actions become the core narrative. There are flourishes on any given narrative, stemming from a simple line of inquiry. For example, if certain named agencies and departments are “at the table” in a sub-interagency policy committee, what started out as an effort to boost aid to the heavy machinery sector can become critical to U.S. export and cyber security. The administration will start to see threats against exports using “big data” and will want to protect this data with a cyber-electromagnetic safeguard. Different combinations of agencies or departments would have resulted in different narratives. Policy has

defined the parameters and grammar of the conversations.

In terms of common interest between the U.S. Army and the Department of Commerce, there are literally thousands of potential narratives. U.S. Code decrees:

(a) It is the intent of Congress to provide an Army that is capable, in conjunction with the other armed forces, of:

- (1) preserving the peace and security, and providing for the defense of the United States, the Commonwealths and possessions, and any areas occupied by the United States;
- (2) supporting the national policies;
- (3) implementing the national objectives; and
- (4) overcoming any nations responsible for aggressive acts that imperil the peace and security of the United States.⁷

The law in this case is purposefully broad. Just as many joint and service chiefs have said in the past—the military can do anything its asked. A few short years ago, during the base realignment and closure process, the Department of Defense’s Office of Economic Adjustment worked closely with program managers from the Department of Commerce’s Economic Development Administration to help ease economic depression from base closings across the country. This indubitably helped allay fears for dozens of communities and garrisons.

In other areas, such as advanced or industrial manufacturing, the Departments share supply-chain, risk-management techniques, which could be institutionalized in the future. In this vein, in March 2015, the White House announced a supply-chain initiative to help combat fragility and vulnerabilities across a myriad of different national security and economic manufacturing interests. Considering it takes at least decade to launch a major military platform, this is good

news for the Army and even better news for the Air Force and Navy, where development of aircraft and ships can take a generation or two. The V-22 Osprey is a perfect example of the evolution of a complex and intricate supply chain over time: its production plants in Pennsylvania and Texas certainly had federal grant money available, if not applied in total. As in theme with federal distribution, accessible money is only a narrative away—one that is sorely lacking for the Army’s Future Combat Systems. There are countless areas of common interest between the Department of Defense and the Department of Commerce.

Practicing Strategy in this Context

These departments can learn much from each other in terms of culture and process, as well through the practice of strategizing and the subsequent creation and implementation of strategies. Strategy in this context would be knitting together the multiple entities from the Department of Commerce and the Department of Defense around a narrative. The most effective way to accomplish this knitting is through the simple construct of boards, centers, cells, and working groups (BCCWG). Often overlooked in Army academic settings, the BCCWG step of the military decision-making process is arguably the most important aspect of the orders briefing. It answers the question of how the headquarters will implement the order and how it will manage and lead people through activities. Usually, the staff displays the BCCWG schedule on a slide as “battle rhythm” before the “Guidance?” slide in an orders briefing. The commander and staff have hit diminishing returns in terms of the ability to process new information or make decisions. The journeyman strategist knows this and knows that the orders briefing template in doctrine allows for re-ordering if information that is more important warrants it. The journeyman strategist also knows that when bringing doctrine to a non-military environment,

one brings the sentiment and the footnotes, not the exact language or the book itself.

Beyond process sharing, there are many opportunities for collaboration and partnership between the Departments of Defense and Commerce.

Beyond process sharing, there are many opportunities for collaboration and partnership between the Departments of Defense and Commerce. The main friction here is that the federal government will do little to address a problem until it must be addressed. From a pathological perspective, this reads as stodgy inaction. From an ecological perspective, this reads as a conservation of resources. In fact, the military would call it “economy of force,” which happens to be a principle of war. So therein lies the rub for many interagency efforts: it is hard to justify unfunded requirements, especially with the Office of Management and Budget strategic vision and performance management models in effect. In a way, a given department or agency’s past successes reinforce the next year’s strategy. While the Office of Management and Budget has proven effective to the nation’s Congress and therefore its citizenry, no organization is ever fit for purpose. Its designers work in a static environment and the world, especially at the political level, is ever dynamic.

Now and in the Future

If we continue to design organizations cyclically with budget lines, we lose the ability to adapt quickly. Whether or not the government is better off being less reactive and oh so deliberative is an argument for a different forum. One would be wise to remember that if the nation really needed something addressed, the President could use executive authority to

address it. The U.S. does pretty well during terms of national crises, especially in comparison to other countries around the world.

The government is certainly capable of action on many fronts. One issue on the horizon is that of disaster response: the citizenry has increasing expectations from the federal government in this area. Since the disaster space and particularly resilience is so broad, there are many opportunities to harness Defense Department capabilities with those of the Department of Commerce and by extension, the National Security Council. Of course, this would be in concert with the Departments of Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, and Interior to name just a few. The list can get even more expansive, again depending on the narrative.

On that note, the definition of force generation is in a constant wrestling match with etymology, although most military theorists have settled that it is different from force employment. In modern times, that distinction is increasingly blurry: we go to war with the military we have. This begs the question of how far down the roots of force generation grow? Is it an activity that is, ultimately, reliant on a robust and resilient economic base that supports a large standing force, or is it better measured by the energy potential of a given economic system? At the less philosophical level, will global dynamics allow for a warming-up period prior to the start of a conflict or must capability development hinge on rapid deployment? Up until this point, the U.S. government has been able to generally influence global security where and when it wants. The strategist should be wary that this kind of freedom is not a given, and the narratives of boundless reach likely accumulated via civil-military dialogue in all past cases. In a way, the nation has deployed force where it could and not where it should.

Regardless, there is a tie between economic and national security, and the Department of Defense and the Department of Commerce certainly have many areas of common interest, now and in the future. What they both lack is the capability to navigate each other's bureaucracies and cultures, and sadly the strategists that can do this—those who have matured past journeyman status—are in short supply. To that end, there are a smattering of politicians, civil servants, officers, and strategists that “get it,” and “getting it” requires diverse experiences on top of the training and education efforts that the military is already addressing. Other government institutions do not have the institutional float to afford it, so it is natural that the military would lead the effort. Also, consider what Dr. Tami Biddle at the Army War College recently asked, “Does the Army owe the nation some degree of readiness to do messy jobs it would rather avoid but might be ordered to do?”⁸ Most officers and especially strategists would resoundingly answer in the affirmative, because a lot of them have been there when the military missed something. It does not happen all that often, but when it does, it is hard to forget. A good strategy and, by extension, good strategizing is an armor against bad assumptions.

Strategizing is not the sole purview of the Defense Department, it can and does happen at many levels and throughout many sectors, and not just in government work—our bustling economy proves that. The nation has many strategists. The U.S. government can help shape getting these people into a room in a crisis, but can do little other than sponsor small-scale programs like fellowships that will one day grow strategic masters. These programs build *einheit* at the institutional level, which is priceless in building a governmental “no wrong door” approach to national prosperity. It is the absolute best that the military can manage in the current system, which has proven to be—in context—pretty well suited to the global environment, despite what capital-P Politics may contest, particularly in an election year. **IAJ**

NOTES

- 1 Nikolas Gvosdev, “Should Military Officers Study Policy Analysis?” *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 76, 1st Quarter, 2015, p. 30.
- 2 Gary Klein, *Streetlights and Shadows: Searching for the Keys to Adaptive Decision Making*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2009, pp. 101.
- 3 Title 15, U.S. Code, <<http://uscode.house.gov/>>, accessed on May 13, 2015.
- 4 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*, Da Capo Press, Boston, 1954, pp. 185–186.
- 5 Office of Management and Budget Circular A-1, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/circulars_a11_current_year_a11_toc>, accessed on May 8, 2015.
- 6 Performance.gov, “Cross-Agency Priorities,” <<http://www.performance.gov/>>, accessed on May 8, 2015.
- 7 Title 10, U.S. Code §3062(a), <<http://uscode.house.gov/>>, accessed on May 13, 2015.
- 8 Tami Biddle, “Considering Why We Lost,” *Parameters*, No. 44, Winter, 2014–15, p. 9.