

Building a Foundational Understanding of Interagency Coordination

by Patrick Naughton

As the American military shifts from a counterinsurgency focus to one oriented on large scale combat operations (LSCO) against a peer-competitor and further develops the Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) concept, interagency coordination will remain critical. As the largest ground force, the United States Army is continuing to refine its conceptual understanding of LSCO as first laid out in the recent *Field Manual 3-0: Operations* (FM 3-0), where the Consolidation Area is first introduced and the Joint Phasing Model adopted. FM 3-0 recognizes that interagency coordination will be crucial during the Shape Phase of the model, which will set conditions for future success before the onset of LSCO.¹ In addition, as commanders learn to consolidate gains to capitalize on operational success after the termination of LSCO, working with interagency partners is necessary to fully stabilize an area of operation.²

The initial steps toward understanding how other federal agencies function and operate must take place before rather than after the commencement of LSCO against a peer-competitor. During LSCO, all branches of the military will interact with federal agencies on a daily basis. Military leaders in the different services under the Department of Defense (DoD) quickly become accustomed to how their organizations function and tend to project that belief onto other federal agencies. However, these agencies, though often working toward the same goals as the military in combat zones, operate differently. Learning some basic differences now will assist military leaders in establishing a whole of government approach and unity of effort prior to the start of LSCO.

To develop a solid foundation of understanding, military leaders must understand the five basic core differences in how most federal agencies and the military services operate. It is vital to recognize these five areas when conducting interagency coordination. They are as follows: first, how budgeting is applied defines a federal agency's priorities; second, not all federal employees operate within the same guidelines or scope of work; third, leading by consensus building over directive leadership is often the norm; fourth, personal relationships are often more important than defined ones or

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official policy; and finally, due to the national informational environment where everything is reportable, federal agencies often become risk adverse to act or release items until a thorough legal review has been conducted. Appreciating these differences is key when functioning in an interagency context. Often, misunderstandings in these areas can lead to friction and frustration between the various branches of the military and federal agencies over their perceived slowness or seemingly misplaced priorities.

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Budgeting Drives Everything

The allocation and prioritization of funds drives everything within federal agencies. As outlined in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2019, *An American Budget*, released by President Donald J. Trump, the FY 2019 budget plan seeks to enshrine “fiscal responsibility and fiscal restraint while prioritizing spending to programs Americans need most.” It seeks to do this through “fiscal responsibility and prioritizing the most effective programs.”³ One can immediately tell what an agency's priorities are via the efforts that agencies back with a budget and the application of funds. As President Trump states, “One of the most important ways the Federal Government sets priorities is through the Budget of the United States.”⁴

While the military services also function within budget constraints and must prioritize their funding, they operate within a more general set of guidelines that consistently fund numerous efforts where one does not drastically suffer due to the prioritization over another. This is especially true under the current administration, for which the FY19 budget statement declares,

“Foremost, the Budget rebuilds and modernizes the military.”⁵ The current increasing military budget contrasts sharply with many federal agencies, who at times may find programs and personnel being redirected or even removed due to the reallocation of funds that is driven by a change in priorities.

Priorities are set from the top down, often coming directly from the President; as such, priorities can change rapidly within a federal agency. When the military interfaces with another federal agency, it is important to understand that budgeting is aligned heavily against priorities. At times, the priorities of the military commander on the ground may not necessarily align with those of the federal agency they are working with. This can lead to frustration and a belief that the federal agency is not contributing to the desired unity of effort or participating in a whole of government approach, which will be critical during LSCO. This can be avoided by determining what the federal agency's priorities are, where the funding is applied, and then communicating an intent to nest within those already established priorities.

Federal Agency Personnel - Not One and the Same

As opposed to military service members, federal agency personnel are not identical in employment status, benefits, authorities, and scope of work. Historically, employment within the federal government was ripe with nepotism and abuse by political leaders who would reward supporters with lucrative government jobs, with little to no work expected of them. Future U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, who served as the Civil Service Commissioner for two Presidents, declared that he wanted to eradicate what was known as the spoils system: “The use of Government offices as patronage is a handicap difficult to overestimate from the standpoint of those who strive to get good government.”⁶ Beginning with his efforts, employment

within the federal government was completely revamped in 1883 with the passing of the Pendleton Act. Today, the federal government operates in a manner that subscribes to the belief that nothing “is more important than our statutory responsibility to oversee civil service hiring that is based on merit after fair and open competition.”⁷

The current professional and highly competent federal agency employees are a far cry from those seen under the spoil system of history, and consist of three main categories. The first category is the Competitive Service; these employees must compete for their positions via a set of rules and regulations that include a number of tests and evaluations. They make up all civilian positions in the Federal Government that are not excepted from Civil Service laws, the President, or by rules under the Office of Personnel Management, and are not in the Senior Executive Service.⁸

Excepted Service employees are the second category, these positions are excepted from the Competitive and Senior Executive Service for a variety of reasons. These excepted positions are further divided into three categories: Schedule A, B, and C. Schedule A are positions that require a specialty and therefore cannot be hired via normal civil service examination procedures, chaplains being an example. Schedule B are positions that it is not practicable to be examined for, such as students hired under temporary employment programs. Schedule C personnel are crucial to understand for military leaders. These positions are specially authorized and consist of policy-determining individuals who have a close and confidential working relationship with the head of an agency or other key appointed officials. Often, these are called political appointees and require the confirmation of the U.S. Senate.⁹

The last category is the Senior Executive Service employees. Also known as careerists, these are seasoned members of federal agencies who, through merit and hard work, have earned

their way to the top of their respective agencies. They provide leadership at senior levels and possess a wealth of knowledge and experience in interagency coordination. They usually serve alongside political appointees, which at times can result in friction. Political appointees may focus on the short term goals of the present administration that appointed them, whereas Senior Executives view the organization through a long-term lens; at times, both views do not necessarily nest.

Finally, many federal agencies consist of union employees and work with outside contractors to execute much of their work. Both of these entities also operate under a set of guidelines and rules, which may restrict how they are employed.

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It is of vital importance that military leaders know the difference between Competitive, Excepted, and Senior Executive Service employees as well as be aware of any union or contractor constraints that the federal agency is functioning under. Each category consists of a different pathway for entry into the service, resulting in varying degrees of competence and knowledge levels. This directly contrasts with the military, where all leaders share a common background and professional military education experience. Lastly, each category of federal employee does not necessarily have the same authority to speak or commit the agency to a course of action. In order to avoid misunderstandings during any interagency coordination activities aimed at establishing a unity of effort during LSCO, it is important for military leaders to gain a situational understanding of the federal agency they are

dealing with and the status of its employees within the Consolidation Area as soon as possible.

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Consensus Building Verses Directive Leadership

Due to the varied make up and authorities of its employees, leading by consensus is a common practice within federal agencies. Doctors J. Edward Russo and Paul Schoemaker, in their influential book *Winning Decisions*, note that reaching a consensus decision can be a powerful process as it “allows all team members to feel that the decision-making process has been fair, enables a group to be more confident that they have found the right decision, and ensures that everyone is ‘on board’ when it comes time to implement.” However, as Russo and Schoemaker acknowledge, sometimes achieving a true consensus is virtually impossible due to time, personalities, workloads, and a host of other reasons.¹⁰ It is due to this and the fast paced nature of conflict that military leaders are trained to use their “authority to generate a clearer understanding of the conditions needed to focus effort and achieve success.”¹¹

While the military encourages and supports consensus building leadership and decision-making techniques during its service specific planning processes, evidenced by the practice of Red Teaming, throughout each step commanders maintain the ability to step in and break any deadlocks so planning can move forward.¹² In contrast, due to the various authorities and positions found within federal agencies, the clear commander figure who can guide and direct decision-making is at times missing. As such, a much more consensus building leadership

approach is undertaken during planning processes and with final decision-making. This approach, of course, lengthens the time it takes to achieve a unanimous resolution to move forward, which can be frustrating to military partners.

Military leaders must appreciate the different types of federal employees they are interacting with and the authorities they possess, which will drive the type of leadership styles being executed within the organization. Leading by consensus takes time, though it is a necessary approach for many federal agencies to take due to the various personnel types and authorities within their organization. However, if military leaders understand the importance of this and even extend a liaison to participate, they will find that once a decision is achieved it will have the entire backing of the federal organization, which will contribute to a true whole of government approach during LSCO.

Relationships Matter

Within an interagency context, personal relationships can often be just as, if not more, important than official directives, policy, or guidance. Relationships are frequently how interagency coordination is executed and tasks are completed. They can serve as a way to legally work around policy roadblocks. Excepted Schedule C (politically appointed) leaders frequently have direct access to key decision makers and influencers that do not necessarily fall within the chain of command of the agency they are serving in. In addition, the Senior Executive Service (careerist) have built up a number of relationships over their years of service that can also be leveraged to make things happen. These connections become even more important as federal agency field representatives often do not have the authority to make immediate decisions. Personal relationships can aid with speedy decision making or assist with empowering those field individuals with the

necessary authorities.

The DoD codifies the importance of personal relationship building in the Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, and Multinational (JIIM) environment in *Joint Publication (JP) 3-08, Interorganizational Cooperation*. The JP states that the “institutionalization of personal relationships should be a goal.” This ensures that when individual relationships do not exist due to personnel changeover “then the command’s positive reputation, built over time, can enable coordination.”¹³ An earlier version of JP 3-08 summarizes it best, declaring that successful interagency coordination rests on the ability of all entities within the elements of national power “to personally work together.”¹⁴

In order for military leaders to fully influence and steer other federal agencies to work toward a whole of government approach and unity of effort, they must appreciate the importance of personal relationships. In addition, military leaders must understand the different types of federal workers that exist, in addition to their capabilities, limitations, and longevity. Knowing the various federal employee types can also assist with determining the motivation of certain individuals that can be leveraged to gain their support for military efforts. This understanding will contribute to building those personal long-lasting relationships between federal entities that are crucial in the JIIM environment during LSCO and within the MDO concept.

Risk Adversity and the Negative News Cycle

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) enacted in 1967, allows the public to request access to records from any federal agency as long as the request does not fall under one of the nine exemptions.¹⁵ In addition, today’s 24-hour news cycle and the increasingly hostile stance of a number of media establishments toward the U.S. government has demonstrated that federal agencies can find themselves

portrayed negatively at any time. As a result, federal agencies can be extremely risk adverse and will not act, commit to a course of action, or release any public comments or statements until an often lengthy and thorough legal review is first conducted.

In contrast, DoD activities are regularly protected under “Exemption 1: Information that is classified to protect national security” and are not as affected by FOIA requests.¹⁶ Additionally, the fast-paced environment of conflict requires commitments and decisions that rely on the instant legal review of commanders and leaders at the direct level. The combination of these two items diverge sharply from the protracted processes that many federal agencies have imposed on themselves to avoid being portrayed negatively in the media.

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This hesitancy to act instantly can be misperceived by the military services as an unwillingness to support the unified mission. However, understanding that federal agencies often function under different FOIA guidelines than the military is vital when attempting to garner commitment from a federal organization. Military commanders need to be patient and encourage the development of personal relationships between the various organizations’ legal teams. This will assist with obtaining approval quickly and efficiently while still protecting the federal agency from unwanted negative publicity. In addition, interagency coordination in legal areas will avoid events that adversely influence the informational environment, which can have far-reaching

effects when conducting LSCO.

Conclusion

With the shift from a counterinsurgency focus to LSCO and the further development of the MDO concept, the American military must adapt its doctrine and training to match. Though this may seem like a daunting task, it has been done before. Since the end of World War II (WWII), the U.S. military has had to adjust to a new nuclear age and the pentomic concept, LSCO on the Korean peninsula, the threat of a massive conventional Soviet force, numerous small engagements across the range of military operations (ROMO), counterinsurgency in Vietnam, major combat operations in the first Gulf War, and the recent Global War on Terror.¹⁷ Over that time-period, doctrine evolved to face the possible perceived threat, just as the military is doing now with the issuance of FM 3-0 and its continuing efforts to refine the MDO concept. Since WWII, there has been the slow realization that conflict will no longer be primarily military focused. All future engagements across the ROMO will require a whole of government approach and a unity of effort, with the application of all the elements of national power to achieve success.

Examining LSCO conducted in the 20th Century by the U.S., it becomes apparent that the application and synchronization of all government resources are necessary to achieve success through all phases of the conflict. In World War I, Congress authorized and directed the President to employ all of “the resources of the Government to carry on war against the Imperial German Government; and to bring the conflict to a successful termination all of the resources of the country are hereby pledged.”¹⁸ At the start of WWII, Congress also similarly authorized the President: “all of the resources of the country are hereby pledged” for victory.¹⁹ At a conference in Wake Island in 1950 to discuss the ongoing conflict in Korea, the U.S. President and General Douglas MacArthur had an interesting exchange over what today would be recognized as interagency coordination occurring at the cessation of LSCO in the Consolation Areas. MacArthur declared, “Nothing is gained by military occupation. All occupations are failures.” Throughout the meeting, he continued to discuss the importance of the other elements of national power exercising coordination after the cessation of conflict. MacArthur emphatically stated “Again, I emphasize the fact that the military should get out the minute the guns stop shooting and civilians take over.”²⁰ Lastly, as noted in FM 3-0, recognizing the importance of interagency efforts during the Shape Phase of the Joint Phasing Model in the first Gulf War, the Joint Resolution approved by Congress required the President to first affirm that the U.S. “used all appropriate diplomatic and other peaceful means to obtain compliance by Iraq” before the use of military force.²¹

As evidenced by major combat operations in the 20th Century, interagency cooperation and the hard-working employees within the various federal agencies are crucial to achieve success within the MDO concept and possible LSCO against a peer-competitor. As the 39th Chief of Staff of the Army General Mark Milley stated in his initial message to the force about the future fight, “We need to listen and learn—first from the Army itself, from other services, [and] from our inter-agency partners.”²² To avoid misunderstandings, friction, and frustration when conducting interagency coordination, it is important for military leaders to possess a foundational understanding of how federal agencies operate. It is essential to recognize five main areas when functioning and operating within an interagency context: priorities supported by budgets, the different types of federal employees, consensus decision-making efforts, personal relationships, and their risk adverse nature.

One common overarching theme recognized by those working with federal agencies is the significance of personal relationships. Military doctrine codifies the importance of this in its Field Manuals and Joint Publications. One successful way that the U.S. Army is attempting to build these relationships is through the Command and General Staff College Interagency Fellowship. This Fellowship fully imbeds and integrates Army Majors and Lieutenant Colonels for a year within various federal agencies as members of their staff in order to develop long-lasting personal associations and a thorough understanding of interagency coordination. These field grade officers will be able to leverage those connections for years to come, which will be decisive when facing a peer-competitor during LSCO within the MDO concept.

Interagency coordination will be crucial during all phases of the Joint Phasing Model to successfully achieve a whole of government approach and unity of effort during LSCO. Successful integration and partnerships with federal agencies will make up a large portion of U.S. efforts in the Consolidation Area. As such, it is critical that military leaders familiarize themselves with how federal agencies function and begin to build and leverage long-lasting relationships that will benefit all for years to come. Establishing a foundational knowledge of federal agencies and the forming of relationships must occur *before* the onset of LSCO. The nation cannot afford to learn these lessons *during* the next conflict against a peer-competitor. **IAJ**

NOTES

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