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THE ANNUAL COLLINS CENTER SENIOR SYMPOSIUM

Aligning the Interagency Process for the War on Terrorism

By Professor Bert B. Tussing and Dr. Kent Hughes Butts[1]

Charges have been levied, from both inside and out of the United States government, that the War on Terrorism is currently encumbered by an interagency process ill-suited for the task. That process, developed for the challenges of the Cold War, is characterized by "stove pipe" operations and resourcing initiatives in an era that demands an efficient integration of efforts for results. Endeavors to address failed/failing states, reconstruction and stabilization, and other diverse efforts focused on the underlying conditions that foster terrorism appear to be disjointed, with no central authority (save the President himself) to direct them. While the National Security Council (NSC) is tasked "to advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign and military policies related to the national security,"[2] critics contend that it has neither the charter nor the authority to mandate interdepartmental cooperation. As a result, parallel but separate agency concerns ripe for synergistic gains remain isolated, with no means of orchestrating limited ways and means towards the most effective set of ends in our strategies for combating terrorism.

On 24 and 25 May 2005, the U.S. Army War College's Center for Strategic Leadership hosted a senior symposium to examine these purported shortcomings, and to focus on the question of how the interagency process can be improved to better address the War on Terrorism. The forum brought together a distinguished panel of retired flag and general officers and government officials to engage in an examination of the issues:

- Admiral Dennis Blair, United States Navy, Retired, former Commander-in-Chief, United States Pacific Command
- The Honorable James S. Gilmore, former Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia
- Lieutenant General Patrick M. Hughes, United States Army, Retired, former Assistant Secretary for Information Assurance, Department of Homeland Security
- Dr. William J. Olson, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Low Intensity Conflict
- The Honorable William S. Sessions, former Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation

The immediate intent of the symposium was to gather insights for incorporation into future studies, exercises and syllabus development addressing the threat of transnational terrorism. At the same time, the symposium's organizers hoped to use these same insights as a "springboard" for an expanded symposium, "Addressing the Underlying Conditions that Foster Terrorism," held at the Collins Center from 8-10 June 2005. Both forums were supported by the Central Intelligence Agency's National Intelligence Council.

Discussions touched upon the "attack and disrupt" mission traditionally associated with the military's role, but centered more on steps required "to diminish the underlying conditions that terrorists seek to exploit."[3] The forum examined a series of questions designed to explore the current interagency process as it is dealing with the war on terrorism and other complex contingencies; addressed whether or not procedural modifications in the current

[1] Dr. Butts is the Director of the National Security Issues Branch, part of the Operations and Gaming Division of the Center for Strategic Leadership (CSL). Professor Tussing is the Director of the Homeland Defense and Security Issues Branch, also of the Operations and Gaming Division of CSL.

[2] The National Security Act of 1947.

[3] *The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism.*

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organizational construct can improve that process; and addressed whether or not new organizational structure would provide a better way to direct our means in combating terrorism. The role of the NSC was viewed against that of the Administration's cabinet departments, and the particular strengths and weaknesses of the Council in the interagency process were explored. Likewise, participants explored the feasibility and advisability of structuring regional response mechanisms to evolving requirements, juxtaposed against capabilities that remain largely "within the beltway."

The depth and breadth of experience of the symposium's participants yielded fruitful discussion across a wide variety of subjects, but particular value may be found in their observations on strategic communication and the Interagency process.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

The overwhelming consensus of the forum was that the United States government is not doing a good job of managing its message to the world. Numerous organizations and entities have recently been established within the U.S. Government to coordinate, integrate and synchronize our strategic themes and messages. Among these are the Office of Global Communication and several policy coordinating committees under the leadership of the Office of the Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Unfortunately, and for a variety of reasons, all of these have failed to implement a national communication strategy. In fact, a Defense Science Board Study published in September 2004 states that U.S. strategic communication is "in crisis."[4] One participant attempted to frame the dilemma: "What do we want the world to think about us? Do we want to be liked, understood, or respected? Our vision must state this clearly, and become the foundation of a strategic communication plan."

The forum agreed that there should be two elements to a Counterterrorism (CT) Strategic Communication Plan — Domestic and International. In both, one participant noted, "we must convey the notion that we control the moral high ground and, beyond the message, we must genuinely believe we are there." Domestically, panelists agreed that we must make our people clearly aware that we cannot "protect everything all the time;" that another attack, in spite of all efforts, could well occur again. But they noted that the Nation should not be hamstrung from an inability to decipher the "possible from the probable;" that a certain element of acceptable risk would have to become a part of our realistic hopes to prepare and (if necessary) respond. Likewise, in seeking to inform our people of the measures we are taking to ensure their safety, we must be guard against compromising those measures for exploitation. The communication challenge among our own people, therefore, lies in balancing openness, education, security and confidence. The forum also noted that these challenges were exacerbated by an open, and occasionally irresponsible press, and by a political climate that was fearful of acknowledging and accepting risk.

The forum reiterated the position that the International component of a Strategic Communication Plan is equally important to the Domestic component; and that currently we were losing ground on the international front. In spite of efforts emanating directly from the White House, Islamic fundamentalists are casting the current crises as a war against the Muslim world, and are selling that message on the Arab street and throughout much of moderate Islam. Participants held that the lack of a dedicated, sustained strategic focus in overturning that position has effectively surrendered the rostrum to these extremists. At the same time, members of the forum warned that much of the message that is being conveyed is laced with a frightening hubris; that a perception that "we are prepared to compel anyone who doesn't cooperate with us" immediately stands in the way of building coalitions, casts us in the role of "rogue state" in many corners of the world, and could ultimately contribute to placing our country "in grave danger." Symposium participants opined that the Nation's message must be tailored for cross-cultural acceptance—by our friends, by our enemies, and by our own people—but must remain consistent throughout.

Members of the Senior Symposium cautiously noted room for optimism in new measures taken by the Administration to address these shortcomings, including changes in the construct of the NSC and the potential strengthening of the State Department's Under Secretariat for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. However, until the strength and resources of the Administration are devoted to the issue, genuine progress will never materialize.

[4] "Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication", Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, Washington, DC, September, 2004, p.2

One participant suggested that if the government was to devote the kinds of energy and focus in delivering our global message as that invested by our political parties in the course of our elections, the challenge of strategic communications in the war on terrorism would be met.

INTERAGENCY PROCESS

A recurring theme among the panelists' discussion was that the National Command Authority's focus (and the NSC's as a reflection of the same) was "too close in." One participant voiced particular concern over the current proclivity to "analyze from the top of the pinnacle," rather than depending upon the tiers of analytical development that should be utilized in executive decision making. Some members of the forum suggested that this malaise was due partially to the so-called "CNN effect" and partisan politics, which focused the Administration on defending its policies instead of "taking the longer view." Perhaps as a "trickle down" effect of this tendency, another member of the forum bemoaned the fact that top level executives were being "held hostage by two or three PCC's [Policy Coordination Committee meetings] a week" resulting in an inability of anyone in the National Security structure to "get out ahead of the game."

Symposium participants from the left: Dr. Butts, Professor Doug Campbell, LTG Hughes, Professor Bill Flavin, Judge Sessions, Govenor Gilmore, Colonel Scott Forster, Professor Olson, Admiral Blair, Mr. Jeff Reynolds and Professor Tussing.

Participants held that this inability has resulted in the Nation's leadership becoming ensconced in "short-term, almost tactical-level" deliberations, reacting to world events rather than pursuing a path of preemptive forecasting that would allow the government to identify challenges and threats early or even before they occur, and prevent crises before they happen. The members noted new initiatives, such as the Department of State's Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization, USAID'S Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, and the National Counterterrorism Center, all of which claimed some authority/responsibility for this kind of forecasting. At the same time, members were concerned that these efforts would be disjointed and fail to draw upon potential synergies. One participant suggested that the new initiatives reflected an "unfortunate tendency to establish new organizations" to handle functions that should reside in the NSC. Another suggested that, on the contrary, these new centers "should actually feed the NSC."

The symposium suggested that a more elemental problem in the interagency's handling of the war on terrorism, and indeed other evolving "complex contingencies," was the fact that we have made no real effort to reconstruct that process to address a remarkably transformed world environment. One panelist charged that we continue

to apply a "Cold War model" to address both opportunities and threats for which it is no longer suited. This centralized, "stove-piped" construct is particularly burdensome in dealing with rapidly evolving regional issues. One participant suggested that a focused and informed national policy will always be essential in the regions, but that it should be accompanied by an operational flexibility that will allow combatant commanders to respond quickly to issues as they develop.

This observation highlighted the fact that there still exists no State Department counterpart to the Regional Combatant Commander. The forum suggested that executing proactive measures to address terrorism and/or its causes at a regional level will require artistry and the authority to overcome a diplomatic structure bounded solely by borders. One suggestion for overcoming this Westphalian paralysis was to establish a "regional ombudsman." This individual would be a Presidential appointee who would work closely with the regional bureaus, but would ultimately be responsible for crafting strategies that utilize the breadth of the interagency's capabilities to deal with terrorism, and the conditions that foster terrorism, within the regions. Working in concert with the theater's combatant commander, this official could devise means of implementing national strategies and develop measures of effectiveness to gauge success in achieving unique regional objectives.

Focusing more on the domestic front, members of the forum were concerned that the interagency was "still struggling over parsing out responsibilities for the war on terrorism." Panelists noted that from the domestic perspective, the war is far less about conventional military actions and more about criminal activities with political purpose, and suggested that the U.S. National Security architecture was not organized for this purpose. They noted pervasive ties between criminal activity and terrorism, ranging from narco-terrorism to money laundering and beyond, provide another aspect of a threat to our people both inside and out of the country. These activities, characterized by one member of the forum as "counter-stability criminal activities," are "networked, coordinated, and organized," and will demand a new focus of all elements of national power through the interagency to defeat them.

CONCLUSION

The complexity of the trials that lie ahead for the interagency, especially as it deals with the challenge of combating terrorism at its worst and at its source, is without historical precedent. The transnational nature of the threat must be met by a transcendent attitude in the interagency that provides a stronger central focus, a freer decentralized application, and a greater integration of capabilities. The Senior Symposium offered significant insights into how our government should proceed in the War on Terrorism, and how it should portray those proceedings to the world. The organizers of the symposium hope that these insights may be useful in continuing discussions surrounding how best to disarm this danger to our people, our friends, and our posterity.

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Center for Strategic Leadership
650 Wright Avenue
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