

Goldwater-Nichols for the Executive Branch: Achieving Unity of Effort

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The United States military's successful return to dominance following the Vietnam War was marred by a series of setbacks during the 1980s that revealed a need for further improvement in the way the various branches of the military fought together in battle. One of the most compelling examples is Operation Desert One, the failed attempt in 1980 to rescue the Americans held hostage in Iran. Of the many problems that plagued the aborted attempt to rescue the American embassy hostages, a core lesson was the need for the armed services to better train and exercise their ability to conduct joint, complex operations.

Three years later, when the U.S. military invaded the island of Grenada, several mishaps again demonstrated that while the Services each possessed impressive individual capabilities and strengths, they still did not operate together well as a team. Inter-Service rivalries led to friction among leaders, and incompatible communications systems and operational doctrine hampered cohesion among the many units involved.

To address these problems, Congress passed the landmark Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. A chief objective of the legislation was to force the disparate Services to forge themselves into a true joint force able to operate with their collective and unified might, seamlessly weaving together their capabilities for a common purpose.

Just as Desert One and the invasion of Grenada were catalyzing moments for our military, the devastation that Hurricane Katrina wrought on the Gulf Coast must serve as the impetus for change in how the various branches of the federal government operate together in time of crisis. There is a great need for our interagency homeland security community to undergo the same kind of transformation that the Goldwater-Nichols Act brought to the Department of Defense (DoD). On February 23, 2006, the White House released its report, *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned*. The report makes 125 specific recommendations to remedy the shortcomings in how the federal government responded to the storm's deadly aftermath. Among these are a core set of initiatives that seek to do for the federal government what the Goldwater-Nichols Act did for DoD. Many of these actions are already underway, but more needs to be done. Furthermore, whether created by man or by nature, the next major national catastrophe could happen at any time, and there is no time to lose.

Interagency Organizations

A key objective of the Goldwater-Nichols Act was to change the organizational structure of DoD, strengthening the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and creating "Combatant Commands" with staffs comprising military personnel from each of the four Services. These joint, integrated Combatant Commands now form the nucleus that brings the four Services together to achieve unity of effort, fusing their collective capabilities into a single, unified force. Rather than coming together at the eleventh hour to develop complex plans on an ad hoc basis, the military organized itself into permanent, joint commands that better reflected the reality that joint warfare was the new paradigm, rather than the exception to the rule.

Central to the success of the Combatant Command construct is that these commands are independent, neutral organizations, separate and distinct from the various branches of the Armed Forces. For example, while the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) has a large contingent of Army personnel, the other Services do not perceive it to be merely a proxy of the Army, serving only Army interests with only an incidental consideration of the interests and capabilities of the other Services. Similarly, the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM)

comprises a large Navy contingent, but it is viewed first and foremost as a joint command, serving the collective interests of DoD and of the nation, rather than only those of the Navy.

Today's widespread acceptance of the new Combatant Commands was by no means inevitable. In addition to requiring significant legislation, it required visionary leadership at the highest levels to ensure that the new Combatant Commanders did not put one Service above the others, and that the particular skills and capabilities of each were both recognized and valued. After two decades, joint warfare concepts are largely second nature to the military, but the interagency processes of the federal government are still in the nascent stages of applying similar principles to interagency operations. We are still organized and aligned largely in the same manner as DoD found itself prior to the Goldwater-Nichols Act—as separate, distinct departments that attempt to come together on an *ad hoc* basis to develop synchronized plans to conduct complex and critical operations at home and abroad. The interagency community arguably finds itself *in an even more challenging circumstance* than that which DoD faced, for the various federal departments and agencies—each with its own authorities, mission, and culture—are far less similar than were the various branches of the armed forces.

The challenges that the interagency community experienced in achieving unity of effort during the response to Hurricane Katrina reflect the inherent organizational difficulties related to disparate Federal agencies working together to respond to crises. Importantly, none of the difficulties should be attributed to lack of will or energy among the leaders and civil servants who have valiantly thrown themselves into highly challenging situations. Just as the mishaps that plagued the invasion of Grenada were not the result of any lack of motivation among the soldiers, sailors, airmen, or Marines who fought there, the challenges that the federal government faced, and continues to face, in the Gulf Coast stem primarily not from the people, but from the manner in which the federal government is organized.

To overcome these problems, we must consider applying the key principles embodied in the Goldwater-Nichols Act to the interagency community at large. We must find a way to establish joint, *interagency organizations* that synchronize all the elements of national power to

achieve common objectives. As we continue to develop our ongoing efforts to establish a more robust national emergency management capability, we would be well advised to consider the points discussed above. Any interagency organization, such as the National Counterterrorism Center or the National Operations Center, must represent and serve the interests and needs of the entire interagency community, not just those of a particular department or agency. Just as the Defense Department's Combatant Commands must make sure that they provide maintenance support not only for Army tanks but also for Air Force fighters, so must the National Counterterrorism Center and the National Operations Center support the information requirements of all relevant Executive Branch departments and agencies.

Any successful interagency organization must be supported by a staff of professionals from throughout the interagency community that are the best in their respective fields, not merely token representatives. The staff must include senior officials from a variety of departments and agencies with the years of experience and expertise necessary to handle a very complex range of issues. Importantly, the role of the interagency staff is not to serve a passive liaison function, simply communicating information and issues back to their home department or agency. For example, the Air Force personnel assigned to USPACOM are not there to watch what the Navy is doing and channel Air Force issues back to the Department of the Air Force for action; they are the staff of USPACOM, just as much as their Navy counterparts.

Similarly, the interagency personnel assigned to the National Operations Center are not there to support their "home" departments; they are the National Operations Center staff. Furthermore, a successful interagency organization should have the requisite representatives, procedures, and resources to ensure all elements of national power are integrated and synchronized to achieve a common purpose—this means incorporating State and local governments and relevant private sector entities into the interagency organization.

A Regional Approach

Another key aspect of the Combatant Command construct is the concept of regionalization. Recognizing that the likely trouble spots

in the world are far too diverse to effectively manage and engage with from a centralized headquarters, DoD has assigned five Combatant Commands with responsibility for a different global geographic region (U.S. Northern Command for North America; U.S. Southern Command for Central and South America; U.S. Central Command for the Middle East; U.S. Pacific Command for the Pacific and Far East; and U.S. European Command for Europe and Africa). This approach allows each geographic command to become familiar with the particular issues and problems associated with the area of responsibility, developing relationships with the leaders and gaining their trust.

Similarly, our approach to homeland security must emphasize a regional approach to managing the complex security environment that we now face. While the regions of the United States are not divided by language and cultural barriers, each has its own sets of particular concerns (e.g., hurricanes for the Gulf Coast; snowstorms for the Northeast; wildfires in the West), in addition to the common threats that we face everywhere, such as terrorism and pandemic influenza. Moreover, a regional approach provides more opportunity for familiarization and relationship development. No military staff officer working out of the Pentagon could be expected to visit all of the nations in the world, but a U.S. Southern Command officer might very well travel to most of the countries in South America. By the same token, it is unrealistic to expect Department of Homeland Security (DHS) staff or Department of Health and Human Services staff in Washington D.C. to form connections in each state and territory, but their respective regional offices can do so, developing relationships with the more manageable number of state and local counterparts in the region.

Consistent with the interagency organizational principles discussed above, our regional homeland security construct should be based on joint, interagency organizations. Encouragingly, many of our Federal departments already have regional offices. However, we need to promote integrated regional offices where interagency staffs would regularly work together at the regional level with state and local governments and private sector organizations to develop and synchronize plans, just as the Armed Services work together within the regional Combatant Commands, which work together with officials from the Department

of State, the Intelligence Community, the law enforcement community, and the economic community toward accomplishing common United States foreign policy objectives.

Interagency Assignments

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Goldwater-Nichols Act focused not only on commands and units, but also on the *people* serving in them. The Act established an occupational category—the “joint specialty”—for managing officers trained in joint operations, and provided important incentives for the Services to send their best officers to joint assignments, including making joint experience in a joint tour a prerequisite for promotion to the rank of general or admiral. It also required advanced education in joint operations for certain officers, and, perhaps most boldly, required a tour in a joint assignment for promotion to the rank of general or admiral. All of these initiatives created strong incentives for the Services to adopt a “joint” mindset that would gradually transform the way we fight and win our nation’s wars.

These joint assignments served two main purposes. First, from a training and professional experience standpoint, officers in these assignments learned a wealth of information about their sister Services—about their capabilities, their strengths, and how they fight. Second, and just as important, from a personal standpoint, the joint assignments broke down cultural barriers and inter-Service rivalries, as professional relationships and personal friendships formed between military personnel from different Services. The value of this latter benefit should not be understated. As people from different Services were encouraged and at times forced to work together, obstacles to unity were gradually overcome and the green, khaki, and blue colors of the military branches were slowly transformed into a true “purple” force.

Interagency assignments for federal employees would produce similar benefits. For example, the federal government needs to do a better job, collectively speaking, of following Socrates’ dictate, “Know thyself.” To state the obvious, the span of the federal government is enormous and contains a tremendous amount of resources and capabilities that are available to respond to a crisis—critically, however, there is not a collective federal knowledge of exactly what these vast and deep

capabilities and resources are. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, we needed flat-bottomed boats in the flooded areas of the Gulf Coast, but it took the federal government too long to identify that the U.S. Government, within the Department of the Interior, already had just these sorts of boats ready for use. Just as an Army officer might not have known during the invasion of Grenada what equipment his Marine Corps counterparts carried into battle, some key parts of our government did not have a clear understanding of what the various departments and agencies could contribute to the Katrina response mission.

Part of the solution lies simply in doing a better job of leveraging technology such as databases to understand what assets are available to us. *But piecemeal reforms will not achieve the overall end goal.* We need to move beyond merely collecting data and information because in dealing with catastrophic events there is a need for key homeland security officials to develop a greater familiarity with the various components of the federal government. To this end, the White House report on Hurricane Katrina recommends that we institute an interagency professional development program, akin to the one that DoD developed in response to the Goldwater-Nichols Act.

Such a program must be founded to provide the opportunity for appropriate homeland security professionals to develop their knowledge of interagency capabilities and organizations. Just as the Goldwater-Nichols Act requires certain military officers to acquire expertise in joint operations through advanced schooling opportunities, we must ensure that our homeland security leaders are able to broaden their knowledge through a variety of educational opportunities, including long-distance learning programs and short-term seminars and courses. While we should take advantage of advances in technology that enable virtual education programs, we should not undervalue the benefits of people coming together in a classroom or seminar environment to learn from and exchange ideas with each other as well.

In addition, we should create appropriate incentives for a number of homeland security professionals to participate in interagency assignments. It is not enough to create joint interagency organizations without ensuring that these organizations are populated by the highest caliber personnel. Such assignments will enable homeland security

professionals to understand the roles, responsibilities, and cultures of other organizations and disciplines—as well as see their own organizations in a clearer light.

For example, a DHS official could serve for six to twelve months in an assignment with the Department of Justice, or a U.S. Northern Command officer could serve a tour at DHS headquarters. Such assignments would provide great opportunities for “cross-pollination” of ideas and perspectives between homeland security professionals. Interagency and intergovernmental assignments would inherently build trust and familiarity among homeland security professionals from differing perspectives. These assignments would also help break down barriers between organizations, thereby enhancing the exchange of ideas and practices.

At the same time, we should use caution in not stretching the analogy of the Goldwater-Nichols Act too far. The interagency community cannot, and should not, adopt this approach wholesale. We must recognize that the Army and the Air Force are, in spite of their differences, much more alike than, say, DHS and the Department of the Interior will ever be. The armed services have always been united by a common core mission—to protect and defend our nation on the battlefield. In contrast, each of the federal departments and agencies has a unique purpose and mission that it often does not share a great deal of in common with the others. Accordingly, interagency assignments will not be appropriate in all cases, and should be tailored to an appropriate number of homeland security professionals, rather than adopting a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Nevertheless, improved operational capabilities are a must, and Goldwater-Nichols does provide some compelling lessons for massive efforts at joint operations.

Conclusion

Since September 11, 2001, we have made significant strides in creating a “joint” homeland security community. The PATRIOT Act and the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 greatly enhanced the flow of information between our law enforcement community and our intelligence community. We have created joint interagency organizations, such as the National Counterterrorism

Center, which is primarily composed of employees on temporary assignment from federal departments and agencies. In preparing for the 2006 hurricane season, DHS formed a series of interagency task forces to address the key problems facing the Gulf Coast—evacuation, sheltering, and communications.

There is also a greater interagency presence within our departments. For example, DoD has provided experts in operations and logistics on temporary assignment to DHS to assist in developing DHS's planning capabilities. As another example, DHS has led the formation of an interagency Incident Management Planning Team that includes representatives from a variety of departments and agencies. The ten FEMA regions—somewhat akin to domestic versions of the Combatant Commands created by the Goldwater-Nichols Act—now include DoD officials assigned on a permanent basis to assist in coordinating mutual plans, resources, and operations. DHS's National Operations Center serves as a hub for linking together the various Federal departments and agencies, along with key State and local officials.

Events, both man-made and natural, are driving steps that collectively are forcing us in the right direction, toward an integrated federal government that is able to effectively respond in a crisis. While we must accept that we may never achieve the sort of clearly defined “command and control” chain of authority that is found in the military throughout the interagency community, we also must accept that 21st century challenges require more modern and integrated preparedness and operational capabilities. Just as DoD learned the lessons of Desert One and Grenada more than two decades ago, so too must the Federal government learn the lessons of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. These changes will not come easily, and will no doubt be the subject of debate and criticism, but we must be determined in our effort to bring about these changes. The time is now, and the American people deserve nothing less than the best, most effective governance possible.

