



Looking Beyond the Inbox: Reflections on Policy Planning

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I'm delighted to help kick off this topical workshop, particularly in such distinguished company. I know that Rob had invited Steve Krasner, the new Director of Policy Planning, to fill this slot. I presume Steve was understandably daunted about offering his mature reflections after just one full week on the job! I'll do my best to fill his shoes. Having left government, I'm at least free to speak my mind, though hopefully without offending former colleagues.

Jim Steinberg and Lynn Davis have identified some intellectual and practical impediments they encountered in moving beyond the "in-box" to mid-range and long-term strategy and planning. I'll build on their remarks, though I will stray a bit into the mandate of the next session.

In my two and a half years at State's Policy Planning Staff (S/P), I found the greatest hurdle to effective strategic planning to be the most banal -- competing demands on the time and energy of those assigned to take the long view. Too often, our "big think" efforts were crowded out by the force of daily events, bureaucratic fights, and all-hands responses to breaking crises. But beyond this basic impediment, I would point to ten other hurdles. These are as much practical as they are intellectual.

(1) The quest for relevance. Policy and strategic planners are paid to think about the big picture, but they often find themselves chasing the urgent at the expense of the important. This tension is longstanding. (Here I will pilfer from a speech given by Richard Haass in May 2003, and which I helped write, on "Policy Planning in Today's World.")

In *Present at the Creation*, Acheson describes George Marshall's intention in establishing S/P: "The General conceived the function of this group as being to look ahead, not to the distant future, but beyond the vision of the operating officers caught in the smoke and crises of current battle; far enough ahead to see the emerging form of things to come and outline what should be

done to meet or anticipate them. In doing this the staff should also do something else -- constantly appraise what was being done.”

This sounds great in principle. But it is no easy feat to keep one foot rooted in the future and another firmly grounded in the present. “The planner’s dilemma,” as Haass notes, “is “the need to focus on what lies ahead without becoming irrelevant to what is of pressing concern to policy-makers.” Against their best intentions, policy planners often seek to play on everything that pops onto the agenda, with the danger that they may miss the forest for the trees.

Today we lionize George Kennan as presiding over the halcyon era of policy planning, when the US united power and purpose to create the institutions of postwar order. Yet Kennan himself found success elusive. “Pondering today the frustration of the past week,” he wrote in 1950, “it occurred to me that it is time I recognized that my Planning Staff, started nearly three years ago, has simply been a failure, like all previous attempts to bring order and foresight to the designing of foreign policy by special institutional arrangements within the department.”

(2) Planning in fluid and uncertain times: It is hard to undertake mid/long range planning when the threat environment is changing and analysts are unsure (or disagree) about whether recent events represent a fundamental discontinuity or transformation of world politics or a modest, temporary upheaval that will seem less impressive in historical retrospect. Administration strategists continue to debate how much changed on 9/11 -- and how to weigh the sharpened terrorist and WMD threats with ongoing preoccupations like the rise of China, the fate of the global economy, and the future of transatlantic relations.

One lesson of 9/11 is that unpredictable events can challenge even the broadest premises and propositions upon which planning is based, requiring the constant updating and adaptation of outmoded concepts. 9/11 brought a revolution – some say overreaction – in U.S. foreign policy. One need only contrast the traditional preoccupations Condoleezza Rice identified in her 2000 campaign article in *Foreign Affairs* – a traditional realist focus on great power relations, free trade and middle east oil – with the administration’s post-9/11 preoccupation with terrorism, preemption, nation-building and aggressive democracy promotion.

(3) Seizing Opportunities: In planning as in love (and it is Valentine’s Day), timing is everything. Some ideas are not ready for prime time, not because they are inherently half-baked but because it is not yet time to put them in – or take them out – of the oven. The announcement of the Marshall Plan would have been too early in June 1946, perhaps too late in June 1948. More recently, the death of Arafat, while predictable, opened up opportunities for mid-range planning in the Middle East peace process. Successful elections in Iraq created possibilities that did not exist a week before. Policy planners need to be nimble and agile in seizing such opportunities.

Similarly, there are certain seasons when political leaders are most receptive to thinking “outside the box.” Paradoxically, the most creative time is when actual foreign policy is in suspended animation: specifically, just prior to and after a presidential election. Few initiatives are launched in the run up to November 2, to avoid stirring up controversy, or during the subsequent transition, before a new team is in place. Yet such fallow times for diplomacy are ideal for

sowing seeds of future policies, because even a victorious incumbent wants a fresh crop of ideas. I estimate that one third of the big picture pieces we did at S/P were “transitional” memos written over the past three months. No doubt Steve Krasner’s shop will write many more in his initial weeks on the job.

(4) The promise and perils of an overarching doctrine: Big ideas matter in foreign policy. An animating vision can provide an organizing construct for planning and mobilizing resources. Yet grand doctrines imprison as much as they liberate, by oversimplifying reality and discouraging subtlety, nuance, and flexibility. The Global War on Terror is a case in point. More than once, I ruefully recall what Acheson said about NSC-68, that seminal Cold War blueprint. It was, he conceded, “clearer than the truth,” for it was intended to “bludgeon the mass mind of top government” behind a common program. If we are not careful, the “GWOT” has the same potential to skew our diplomatic, security and foreign aid relationships.

One of my biggest disappointments was that our S/P staff never made any rigorous effort to write the “X article” for what the administration had defined as the fundamental challenge of our generation. We never “red-teamed” the terrorist threat and its contours, analyzed the relative weight we should give it versus other objectives, or challenged conventional wisdom about how to fight it. And we were not alone. Across the government, I saw too little appetite for unpacking the “GWOT” label – perhaps because a fuzzy, catch-all definition allows one to lump together diverse threats – terrorists, rogue states, and WMD – and combat them under the same banner. And bureaucratically, it has to be noted, the GWOT has empowered DoD relative to the State Department. By implying that terrorism is foremost a military challenge, it has profoundly expanded the range of DoD’s involvement in foreign policy matters – and its claim to resources.

(5) Constraints on intellectual honesty in the political arena: The word “*in*-box” takes on a double meaning here, in distinguishing what is “in” from what is “out.” Some may fantasize that policy and strategic planning are largely technocratic, as the best minds get together to determine the best policy. But of course they are political undertakings. Some subjects are fair game, while others are excluded by political preferences or ideological commitments. For the most part, I found S/P to be a spin-free zone where members could challenge received or conventional wisdom with relative impunity. But any inherently political office is vulnerable to subtle “group think” pressures and self-censorship in the name of loyalty, and these can close off full and frank discussion, self-correction, and the capacity to think “outside the box.” Without vigilance, one’s talking points intended for external consumption can replace an honest appraisal of reality.

Things get even trickier for planners and strategists when influential elements of a single administration hold distinct ideological commitments, threat perceptions, and visions of the U.S. role in the world. When senior State Department officials complain that the office of the Secretary of Defense and the Office of the Vice President (OVP) are staffed by “utopians,” one gets a sense of the limits of agreement on what constitutes rigorous policy analysis.

(6) Competing Strategic Visions: In general, you cannot have a common strategic vision or effective policy planning on issues like Iran or North Korea when the administration is at war with itself. Healthy competition is one thing, but the NSC needs to impose discipline. Even before 9/11, the proliferation of involvement of U.S. agencies and departments in international

affairs had encroached on State's leadership in foreign policy. The dramatic expansion of DoD into new foreign policy realms and the outsized role of the OVP in policymaking ensured extraordinary rivalry with State, often viewed as being out of step with the White House.

In theory the NSC could serve as a site for government-wide policy and strategic planning (or what the Brits call "joined-up government") -- as the Defense Science Board and others have recommended. That would have the virtue of bringing to the table all relevant agencies, with their diverse components of national power. And the NSC, of course, already coordinates documents like the National Security Strategy and strategies for combating terrorism and WMD. As Deputy NSA, Bob Blackwill sought an NSC-led planning arrangement, involving S/P and OSD Policy, but it met overwhelming resistance from State. In Friday's *Washington Post*, David Ignatius cited Steve Hadley as saying he wanted an NSC policy cell to think about U.S. strategy 3-5 years out. Drew Erdmann, who coordinated State inputs to the NSS and later served as a Director at the NSC, may have his own opinions about whether the NSC is adequately staffed to take on a more ambitious strategic planning function.

(7) The nature of the client: George Marshall's two-word guidance to Kennan -- "avoid trivia" -- signaled his intent that Policy Planning should focus on the big picture. Colin Powell may have revered Marshall, but he took a straightforward, managerial approach to the department. He wanted an operational S/P staff, primarily to ride herd on the building rather than think big thoughts about needed changes to the architecture of world affairs and global governance. My impression was that he was sometimes bemused by the elegant, well-crafted think pieces of Kissingerian sweep that Richard Haass would occasionally send up to him. When Mitchell Reiss took over as S/P director, the Secretary asked for shorter pieces on near-term issues.

With Condoleezza Rice -- a trained academic with a strategic sensibility -- at the helm, the pendulum is sure to shift back. I understand that Steve Krasner intends to focus more on the big picture. This may entail working on a few signature projects -- as Mort Halperin did on the Community of Democracies during the tail end of the Clinton Administration. Whether Steve will be able to hold the in box at bay remains to be seen. Getting this balance right -- between operational and strategic, between specializing and covering the waterfront -- will remain a constant struggle.

(8) Thinking about implementation in the conceptual stage: The Achilles heel of policy planning is that it is too easy to produce reams of policy analyses that are intellectually compelling but disembodied, because they are not connected *from the outset* with concrete initiatives that can be implemented -- and with interagency decision points or key dates on the international political calendar (e.g., the next APEC or G-7 summit). For example, it is one thing to write a memo arguing that we need a new norm of conditional or qualified sovereignty to cope with transnational threats and weak states. It is quite another to propose a practical action plan to advance or institutionalize that norm in the UN and other multilateral forums. Secretary Powell was always focused on implementation. I recall getting back a copy of a memo I had drafted (and of which I was inordinately proud) with a double-underlined scrawl: "Interesting: What Do You Want Me to Do?!"

The risk of producing un-tethered policy proposals is acute for academics (as I was) unfamiliar with the policy process and bureaucratic infighting – and who have little experience implementing the ideas they have generated over their careers. Newcomers need to learn about key decision points and how many bites they can get at the apple, or (to use a cliché) they will get their lunch eaten without even knowing it is being served. Beyond a clear vision, they need a roadmap for implementation, alliances with action agents, and the temperament to share credit.

The challenge of linking policy to implementation at the planning stage is magnified by the disconnect between control over *policy* and control over *resources*. The State-USAID relationship is critical here. State has the ostensible policy lead, but USAID has serious resources. The result is two separate institutional cultures with very different time horizons: a foreign policy culture driven by the in-box and a development culture that focuses on long term, underlying structural changes – but without political direction. Efforts to bring policy and resources into line, such as via the new Joint Policy Council, have been half-hearted. (Others have suggested interagency-wide efforts to better align agreed strategic goals and resources).

(9) Policy planning versus deliberate planning: To the degree that it actually "plans," S/P does so only in the broadest sense, by seeking to define U.S. objectives and set the broad contours of U.S. engagement on particular issues or regions. This is very different from what the Defense Department calls "deliberate planning," or detailed and sequenced plans for the implementation of actions and movement of assets to accomplish objectives. In my experience, the State Department was continually outgunned in the interagency by the Pentagon, which could rely on an army of J-5 planners to generate a steady stream of power points on any topic, regardless of whether these exceeded the formal mandate of the Department of Defense.

One area where mid-range State Department planning has the potential to improve is in the new office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS), which is mandated with anticipating collapse in weak and failing states, and with coordinating joint civilian-military planning to avert or respond to conflict. Whether it succeeds in altering the overwhelmingly reactive State Department culture remains to be seen.

(10) The disengagement of the academy: Finally, as a sometime academic, I note with some disappointment that today's universities have contributed remarkably little to the dialogue on policy and strategic planning. Although there are exceptions – and Bruce Jentleson's work is a noteworthy example that shows it can be done -- the incentive structure of academia appears to penalize rather than reward policy relevant research, so that the discipline of international relations becomes further removed from its core public missions: proposing innovative, practical solutions to those concrete real world dilemmas that are (ostensibly) its subject of inquiry. Things are a bit brighter when it comes to think tanks, which at least regard policy relevance as their *raison d'être* -- and provide invaluable services as incubators of new ideas and forums for convening policymakers.