2011

Avoiding Trivia: The Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy

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Organizational adaptations. Especially useful are the four “context” tables, one for each decade starting with the 1970s, that list by year who was presiding as CNO, along with the relevant Navy capstone documents, the Navy’s “total [that is, financial] obligation authority,” total number of ships in the fleet, new ships arriving in the fleet, active personnel, and new capabilities introduced. Juxtaposed against the numerous organizational charts in the report, these context tables help in understanding how each CNO has reorganized, not only responding to the variety of exogenous forces but also to implement his own vision for the future of the Navy. By recounting in detail the reorganization that the current CNO, Admiral Gary Roughead, has made to the staff, readers can see for themselves the most consequential changes enacted and, by extension, the most consequential issues facing the Navy today, in Roughead’s view.

Swartz and Markowitz identify two major changes made by Admiral Roughead. First is the consolidation of the Intelligence (N2) and the Communications Networks (N6) directorates into a newly created Directorate for Information Dominance (N2/6), a move that underscores the critical importance of a holistic approach to communications and intelligence, including the emerging preeminence of cyber and electronic warfare. The future impact of this consolidation could be quite large, given the issues at stake.

Second, equally as revealing has been the morphing of the staff’s internal think tank, “Deep Blue,” into the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) cell to meet the challenges of the recent QDR, and finally into the Naval Warfare Integration Group (00X), in late 2009. One function of 00X will be, acting as a “special assistants” group, to provide the CNO with direct assessments of Navy programs and systems. Plainly, this CNO sees a critical need to be armed with as much information and analysis as possible to address the tremendous budgetary pressures affecting the Navy, which pose a special challenge to the future health of the naval force, a challenge requiring particular attention and focus.

Where the study itself is admittedly thin is in its narratives—which might have been richer—of the colorful personalities, nuanced forces, and institutional rivalries that sculpted the shape of the OPNAV staff during a very dynamic period. Those wanting an Allisonian-like examination of the organizational, political, and personal dynamics shaping this change will have to wait for what Swartz and Markowitz recommend as next steps: an expansion of the study to personalities, relationships, and in-depth answers to the “why” question.

Until then, scholars of U.S. Navy history and organizational studies can be content with this well researched, accurate, and informative report.

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Students of American national security policy, particularly those without the benefit of firsthand policy-making

Published by U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons, 2011
experience, frequently under- or over-
estimate the difficulty of formulating
and implementing strategy in the U.S.
government. As a result, observers tend
either to portray senior policy makers
as dolts or incompetents or to engage in
a sort of strategic nihilism holding that
it is impossible to develop sound strat-
егия in this day and age.

Daniel Drezner’s informative collection
Avoiding Trivia deserves to be read by
scholars of both varieties. It contains es-
says that were commissioned for a 2008
conference held at the Fletcher School
of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University
to commemorate the sixtieth anniver-
sary of the State Department’s policy
planning office, an organization best
known for its first director, George
Kennan, and his successor, Paul H.
Nitze. The contributors are largely
scholar-practitioners, including several
of my own counterparts during my ser-
vice as deputy assistant secretary of
defense during the George W. Bush
administration.

The first section of the book includes
contributions by Richard Haass, David
Gordon and Daniel Twining, and
Jeffrey Legro, who discuss the strategic
environment and the challenges it poses
for policy planning in the United States.
Bruce Jentleson, Aaron Friedberg, and
Peter Feaver and William Inboden are
found in the second section, discussing
how strategic planning can best be im-
plemented in the executive branch. The
latter chapter, describing the resurrec-
tion of the strategic planning function
at the National Security Council during
the George W. Bush administration, is
particularly insightful.

Essays by Amy Zegart, Thomas Wright,
Andrew Erdmann, and Steven Krasner
cover the opportunities and limitations
for strategic planning in the final
section.

This work collectively emphasizes the
imperative of strategic planning as well
as why it is an art whose practice is dif-
ficult. It deserves the attention of schol-
ars and practitioners alike.

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Samuel J. Huntington published his
seminal work on American civil-
military relations, The Soldier and the
State, in 1957. His analysis, reflective of
the U.S. experience in World War II,
Korea, and the Cold War, was designed
to “maximize military security at the
least sacrifice to other social values.” It
has provided a theoretical and practical
guide to civil-military relations for
more than fifty years. However, in this
“new era” of the first decade of the
twenty-first century, many have chal-

In 2007, editors Suzanne Nielson and
Don Snider assembled an impressive in-
terdisciplinary group of scholars to ana-
lyze Huntington’s theories in light of
the American experience since 1957.
Fifteen researchers produced a dozen
essays addressing Huntington’s main
theoretical contributions: the func-
tional and societal imperatives that
shape the nature of the military or-
organization, the subjective and objective
patterns of civilian control of the military,