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# The United States: Anticipating and Conducting War, 1939–1942

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The subject for my talk is listed as "The United States: Anticipating and Conducting War, 1939–1942." More specifically, I have been asked to discuss this historic period in the context of "the interagency process," a term that is often used among the American government and defense analysis community to refer to the process by which the "instruments of national power"—diplomacy, intelligence, judicial and police, economic, public relations, military—are coordinated to best serve national interests. However, there are reasons why the period between 1939 to 1942 is not a good one to focus on.

First, for the United States, the interagency process between 1939 and 1942 was largely improvised, unanticipated, and reactive. The United States was faced with an absolute threat to its national security and to its existence as a nation. The recognition of this threat by both the population and the government inspired great sacrifices and radical changes.

Today, Americans are not willing to do the things they were quite willing to do in World War II—pay higher taxes, submit to military service, work in war industries, give up their consumerism, and put aside partisan political, religious, and economic differences. If anything, partisanship is even greater than it was before 11 September. Nor, it should be added, for all its rhetoric about a "Global War on Terror," does today's government expect the public to make such sacrifices. Nor is it willing to do so itself. The single driving ideology that created nonpartisan interagency cooperation between 1939 and 1942—

## Talking Points

- Instead of asking how to make the interagency process more streamlined and centralized, it might be good to look at the interwar period and ask whether today's plethora of agencies may actually inhibit an effective interagency process.
- Even within a recognized interagency process, participants may choose to ignore fundamental conflicts, making interagency cooperation little more than mutual cooperation by mutual enabling.
- If U.S. officers had had more experience with civil–military projects and a little less expertise in rapid decisive operations, they might have adjusted better to the situation they found in Iraq.
- Recognition that the military was not the most important member of the interagency process enabled the officers who helped mobilize the nation after 1941 to accept the importance of using all the instruments of power, not just the military.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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a perception that there was an imminent threat to the nation's existence—is lacking. And for that reason, historical comparisons are instructive primarily for the differences they reveal rather than as guides for today.

Second, summarizing the 1939–1942 period in a 20-minute talk would lack context to any but a few historians. Simply explaining the creation and responsibilities of the dozens of federal agencies that emerged during World War II—agencies such as Office of War Information, the Office of Strategic Services, the Office of War Mobilization—and then dealing with the enormous changes in agencies within the armed forces would take all my time and more. Describing the process by which these constantly expanding and evolving agencies interacted, and what possible lessons today's audience could draw from that interaction, would take hours.

Yet if the original topic proved an intellectual cul de sac, it suggested another of far more interest for the theme of this conference, and that was to discuss the first half of the proposed topic: "The United States: Anticipating War, 1919–1941." This period between the two world wars was characterized by almost no interaction on the interagency level and by deep divisions between the Army and the Navy. Yet somehow, these problems were overcome very quickly once war was declared.

In exploring the period before the United States' involvement in World War II, it is useful to ask four questions.

*First,* what was the civil–military interagency process prior to World War II?

*Second,* what was the Army–Navy or interservice interagency process like prior to 1941?

*Third,* why were American military personnel able to adjust so quickly to the challenges of World War II and establish what is, arguably, the most effective example of mobilizing and coordinating the nation's political, military, informational, and economic resources?

*Fourth,* what are some lessons that today's policymakers may take from this study to better help today's interagency process?

## The Interagency Process Prior to 1939

Prior to World War II, there was no interagency apparatus to speak of. There was no equivalent to today's National Security Council, where strategy and policy are discussed on the interagency level. There was not even a unified Department of Defense. When war was declared in 1941, the U.S. armed forces were administered, as they had been since 1798, by two distinct, separate, and often rival federal agencies: the War Department (Army) and the Department of the Navy. In marked contrast to the dominant role played by today's Secretary of Defense, the interwar service secretaries were political and administrative nonentities.

Civil–military relations before 1941 were characterized by mutual ignorance and mutual indifference. Within four years of the Armistice, the United States Army shrank from almost 4 million to 130,000 and the United States abandoned claims to naval predominance in the Washington Naval Treaties. In contrast to today, in the 1920s, successive Republican Administrations boasted that they had reduced military spending; they reiterated their commitment to negotiations and to disarmament, and, less openly, to political and military isolation. What one senior officer noted about President Herbert Hoover—that he "neither knows nor cares anything about the Army. For him it is just a nuisance"—was true of most American Presidents and the federal agencies they administered for much of this period.

For their part, most American military officers held parochial, uninformed, and impractical views of the proper civil–military relationship. They were hostile to interagency cooperation, believing both that it was unnecessary and that it intruded on their own professional expertise in the conduct of war. Many had little respect for either politicians or federal agencies, or what one officer termed the "amateurs and empty-headed demagogues brought after each recurring election day to our city halls and state capitals."

Such parochialism was made possible, even nurtured, by the compartmentalization of federal agencies, the lack of organizations that facilitated interagency cooperation, and the lack of sustained mutual desire to work together. Perhaps the best indication of the lack of interagency cooperation occurred in 1921, when the Joint Army–Navy Board—the sole military agency charged with developing national military strategy—requested that a State Department representative attend its meetings to provide guidance on foreign policy. The request was turned down by the State Department on the grounds of possible military interference in U.S. foreign policy. It was not until 1938 that a liaison committee was established to coordinate foreign and military policy, and it focused only on Latin America.

## The Interservice Interagency Process

One consequence of the vacuum in civil–military interagency cooperation was that military strategy was left to military agencies. At the highest level was the Joint Army–Navy Board, charged with coordinating all joint issues, including coastal defense, war plans, aviation, and overseas defense. In contrast to the thousands of planners the services now employ, the Joint Board and its planning committee comprised perhaps a dozen officers. It had no command authority; it was purely advisory; and even in that limited capacity, it had an uneven record, as Secretaries and Presidents routinely ignored its recommendations.

The lack of interest by civilian leaders—and the lack of participation by civilian agencies—meant that the Army and Navy were allowed to ignore inconvenient realities and gloss over significant disagreements in strategy and policy. For example, Army industrial mobilization plans ignored political realities by assuming that when war broke out, the direction of the nation's resources would be turned over to the military. It retrospect, it appears obvious that no President, and certainly not Franklin Delano Roosevelt, would tolerate such a usurpation of his power.

Another example is the long interservice impasse over whether or not the battle fleet would be committed to the relief of the Philippines' garrison. Only in the late 1930s did Army officers, outraged at the Navy's insistence that the U.S. retain a base in the Philippines after independence, threaten to go to Congress. It is a measure of the lack of interagency cooperation that this was the only way to resolve the strategic impasse between the services.

Further compounding these problems in the interservice interagency process was the tendency of military personnel, particularly senior commanders, to deliberately circumvent not only other agencies, but their own staffs. One of the most prominent examples of this is Douglas MacArthur.

As commanding general in the Philippines in 1929, MacArthur drew up a war plan for defense of the islands against Japan that was almost the opposite of the Joint Board's "official" war plan. As Army Chief of Staff between 1930 and 1935, MacArthur continually imposed his personal views on the General Staff, so that much war planning was essentially faith-based. Convinced that the existing war plan with Japan was "a completely useless document" and that working with the Army General Staff would be "wasting my time," MacArthur had a private meeting with President Herbert Hoover to outline his own strategy for defending the Philippines—a plan that would have virtually stripped the United States of its army at the outset of war. Although MacArthur is exceptional, his actions illustrate the great problems in developing an interagency process when the individual commander reserved the right to obey but not comply.

## Adjusting to the Interagency Process in WWII

If the interagency process was so fragmented and dysfunctional, why were military officers able to improvise and adapt so well in World War II? Where did Army and Navy officers learn to cooperate with civilians as they did in a host of activities in World War II, from drafting millions of young men through Selective Service, to mobilizing the "arsenal of democracy," to developing the atomic bomb?

Much of the answer lies in the distinct perception of warfare that emerged after 1919 among some American officers. The lessons these officers took from World War I were that modern warfare transcended military priorities and that economic, political, and social factors could actually be more important than military ones in determining victory.

In partial recognition of this larger definition of warfare, the National Defense Act of 1920 created the new office of Assistant Secretary of War, charged with preparing for wartime mobilization. The Army established its Industrial War College to study the transition from peace to wartime production. Throughout the interwar period, students at the Army and Navy War Colleges attended lectures from prominent industrialists, labor leaders, and economists and took courses in industrial relations. The Army's Command and General Staff College developed a second-year course almost entirely devoted to logistics. Thus, after World War I, there was far more emphasis placed on the need to cooperate with civilian agencies—even ones that did not exist prior to 1941—in order to wage war effectively.

The careers of individual soldiers during the 1930s reveal a great deal of informal and formal training in the interagency process. Dwight D. Eisenhower served for six years in the War Department, where his major duties were related to industrial mobilization. He then went with Douglas MacArthur to the Philippines and gained both an appreciation for the problems inherent in creating a citizen-soldier army and some very practical insight into the dangers of dysfunctional civil–military relationships. General Frank McCoy headed a commission to supervise the Nicaraguan election. Major General William Lassiter, on his own authority, brokered an agreement to prevent both arms trading and skirmishing near the Mexican border.

Such opportunities were not only given to senior officers. During the Great Depression, thousands of officers were seconded to public works projects. In some cases, these projects were directly for military use—such as the construction of fortifications, warships, or highways. In others, the Army provided leadership, administration, and logistics for other public works agencies.

One of the most significant was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which began in 1933 and continued until 1942. The CCC ultimately employed over 2,500,000 volunteers, and in 1935 alone it numbered 500,000 members, or roughly four times the size of the entire Regular Army. The Army was charged with training and commanding the CCC forces; the most typical CCC camp had about 200 members, three officers, and three NCOs. Although there were complaints within the Army about the decline in training and preparation for war, astute officers noted that public works gave officers invaluable training in practical military skills such as how to take care of troops and deal with supply shortages.

The CCC also required officers to work with a host of federal and state governmental agencies and to work with private industry, if only to scrounge sufficient food, clothing, equipment, and transportation to outfit their charges. It provided future wartime commanders such as George C. Marshall and Omar N. Bradley with a practical knowledge of the American citizenry who would compose their wartime armies—something that many of today's officers lack.

Officers also gained a great deal of preparation for the interagency process through numerous other contacts with civilians. In Hawaii, for example, Army intelligence cooperated with federal agencies to spy on suspected Japanese agents and labor organizers. The Army was instrumental in securing millions of dollars in federal funding to construct the highway system, and it cooperated with government agencies on public health and agricultural production. Indicative of these close ties between military and civilian agencies is the fact that one commanding general of the Hawaiian Department became the director of the sugar planters' association upon his retirement.

In summation, in the period prior to 1941, despite the compartmentalization of agencies and the numerous barriers to the interagency process, connections between federal, military, and non-government agencies occurred on a variety of levels, both formal and informal. And perhaps ad hoc connections were in some ways closer and more effective than the elaborate formal interagency connections and processes that have been legislated into existence since World War II.

## Conclusion

This brief survey of the interagency process reveals some interesting points that might be of use to today's policymakers.

*First,* within the United States defense analysis community, there is a tendency to assume that problems with the interagency process can be resolved by reorganization—and perhaps the creation of larger agencies. But Hurricane Katrina and the controversial "War on Terror" indicate that, at least in the United States, the interagency process is unable to function effectively in the two areas where we most expect it to work: in anticipating future problems and in developing a coherent and unified reaction. Instead of asking how to make the interagency process more streamlined and centralized, it might be good to look at the interwar period and ask whether today's plethora of agencies may actually inhibit an effective interagency process.

*Second,* today it is assumed that interagency cooperation is a "good thing," and a great deal of time, effort, and money is devoted to making the U.S. national security process more "joint." But the historical record shows there are powerful incentives for agencies to avoid cooperation and focus instead on their own parochial interests.

Moreover, even within a recognized interagency process, all participants may choose to ignore or overlook fundamental conflicts. Interagency cooperation becomes little more than wishful thinking or mutual cooperation by mutual enabling. This was true of the Joint Army–Navy Board's treatment of Pacific strategy prior to World War II, when the issue of the defense of the Philippines was consistently discussed but the disagreements between the Army and the Navy were never satisfactorily resolved.

*Third,* one of the greatest lessons of the interwar period is the military benefits of cooperation with civilians in non-military areas for professional military development. Prior to World War II, officers were exposed to a variety of experiences, ranging from supervising public works organizations like the CCC to cooperating with civilian charities.

It is customary for military officers to claim that the professional demands of being warfighters and preparing for conflict preclude them from all other duties, but how valid is this claim? Certainly it is possible to argue that had U.S. officers had more experience with civil–military projects and perhaps a little less expertise in rapid decisive operations, they might have adjusted better to the situation they found in Iraq.

*Fourth,* the period prior to World War II taught many officers the importance of cooperation because the military services were relatively weak. Officers, even senior officers, participated in the interagency process as equals or even subordinate members—not as occurs today, when the Department of Defense is often the only agency with the money, personnel, and power to effectively implement policy.

The recognition, whether willing or unwilling, that the military was not the sole, or even the most important, member of the interagency process made those officers who helped mobilize the nation after 1941 uniquely qualified to accept the importance of using all the instruments of power, not just the military. America's officers—and, perhaps even more important, the nation's hypermilitarized political leaders—would do well to study their example.

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