

Roundtable becomes national security debate

Kelly Schloesser, Army War College Public Affairs Office

Roundtable becomes a rousing debate on national security, 'the interagency'

Author Bill Olson (far right) discusses the failings of the interagency alongside fellow panelists Gabriel Marcella, and John Finney. The author roundtable at George Washington University presented the SSI publication "Affairs of State: The Interagency and National Security."
Photo by Kelly Schloesser.



Feb. 25, 2009 -- Few people in this world could gather and intellectually debate the application of national security policy within our major government organizations, discussing shortcomings and providing suggestions for improvement.

That rare opportunity occurred on Wednesday, Feb. 25, in our nation's capitol at George Washington University. Sponsored by the USAWC Strategic Studies Institute, an author roundtable of some of the most experienced minds in government affairs gathered to debate just that.

Select authors included on the panel of the SSI-published "Affairs of State: The Interagency and National Security" included Gabriel Marcella, Ph.D., editor & USAWC adjunct faculty, Alan G. Whittaker, Ph.D., Dean, Industrial College of the Armed Forces, William J. Olson, Ph.D., National Defense University, Dennis E. Skocz, Ph.D., Department of State, and John D. Finney, Ph.D., National Guard Bureau and former Department of State.

The book analyzes challenges faced by the interagency system as a whole, its weaknesses, and how it can be changed for the better. The authors all brought their own philosophies on how to assess the problems within 'the interagency' and of course, how to fix them. Though the authors disagreed over methodology, they all agreed that something needed to be changed.

The debate also allowed the individual authors to present their findings before many of their experienced national security peers.

Participants included foreign dignitaries, former U.S. ambassadors, international economists, members of the National Security Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, and the Departments of State, Homeland Security, Commerce, and Defense. The crowd debated along with the panelists presenting ideas, posing questions, and sharing their own experiences within the government agencies.

Imbalance between the interagency players was designated as one of the most significant problems preventing coordination.

“The Department of Defense is the big guy in the room. He gets all the resources. So, unless we address that issue first, even if we begin to restructure and redefine the interagency, everyone else will still have to comply with DOD,” said Olson.

“Right now the DOD has the mission and the resources. Its relationship with the DOS is strained,” said Finney. “There is just no way to ignore that. If we can better balance the relationship the more effective it will be.”

Olson argued to reorganize the structure of both the State and Defense departments.

“We have the military leading the political. Combatant commanders divide the regions of the world and have state department political advisors report to them,” said Olson. “And yet, it is argued over and over that most regional problems do not have a military solution.

“Why not flip roles? Reverse the system and have senior civilians in regional commands and military advisors?” asked Olson.

As to why the two major agencies are imbalanced, the National Security Act of 1947 was characterized as extremely outdated.

Marcella noted that the National Security Act of 1947, which first formed the main government agencies, was created to address a simpler time for a bipolar world. He argued that the overall structural organization has not changed, the management has not changed, and yet ‘the interagency’ has grown.

With significant growth and no reorganization, redundancy in mission among the interagency organizations was also presented as a significant deterrent to achieving national security goals.

Audience opinions were as diverse as the panelist.

“In our National Security Strategy, where is the line between DHS and NSA?” asked John Dulany, liaison to the Department of Homeland Security. “At first DHS was protecting our international borders and now we are pulled back to domestic issues only.”

That’s the major bias in defining strategy, said Skocz.

“We are then assuming there is one singular National Security Strategy. One problem. One threat,” said Skocz.

“We are not in the Cold War anymore. Containment, for instance, was a singular National Security Strategy. Today, we are constantly dealing with emergent threats and phenomena,” added Whittaker.

Olson contended that our National Security Strategy needs to be “a living document.” He argued it needs to be fluid and consistently reassessed.

Myles Frechette cited another important point. The former U.S. Ambassador to Colombia asserted that in his experience the National Security Advisor to the president makes all the difference in the world.

“If you provide a president with a sound advisor, he will help direct the president in creating a strategy. If the advisor, like under the previous administration, only presents the bits and pieces of information because it’s what they think the president wants to hear, then you have a completely different strategy,” said Frechette.

Whittaker agreed, but countered that at the end of the day the system operates the way the president wants it to operate.

Ultimately, over the two-hour discussion, all panelist and many audience members presented numerous failings within the interagency and ideas for reform. Few were in complete agreement.

This forum was certainly a first step on the long road ahead, said Marcella.

Find the full book online at <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?PubID=896>.