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Brendan Burke
Bridgewater State College

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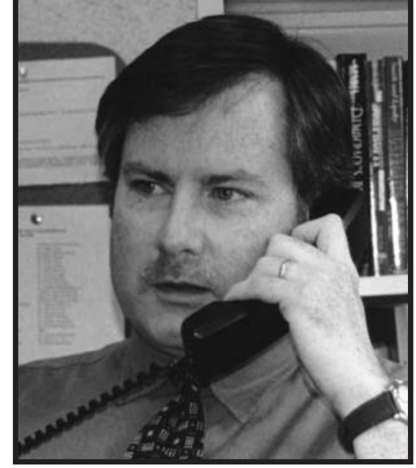
Government Reorganization in the Fight Against Terrorism

by Brendan Burke



Photograph by Greg Thomas

> "This is an administration that will not talk about how we gather intelligence, how we know what we're going to do, nor what our plans are. When we move, we will communicate with you in an appropriate manner."
>
> "Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen. It may include dramatic strikes, visible on TV, and covert operations, secret even in success."
>
> —*President Bush at the outset of the war*

Like most Americans under forty, I have little experience with America at war. Short engagements like "Desert Storm," Grenada, and Panama hardly qualify; they were over almost as soon as they began. Now, we're faced with the real thing, the war on terrorism. But as President Bush warned us, this is a war fraught with confusion. What are we to make of this war, when even the successes are secret and the failures are rich fodder for a media starved for some form of coverage? How do we balance hidden positive outcomes with media overkill pertaining to governmental mistakes?

First, it is important to remember that there have been some clear successes, at the outset in Afghanistan and on the domestic front (probable terrorists captured in Buffalo and Portland, Oregon for example). Second, it is useful to consider success not only from specific threats or incidents averted, or in contrast, to judge the fight on terrorism as a failure when the terrorists pull off specific attacks. Our approach to considering this war needs to involve a longer view, a pattern of effort over the years. As citizens outside of the military or public safety realm, we need to assess whether our governmental leaders appear to be learning over time about better ways to handle the threat of terrorism. There are some encouraging signs, based on recent history, that the government is retooling its organizational capacity in responsive and effective ways to deal with the terrorism threat. This essay discusses two recent failed military and public safety efforts, which have been followed with encouraging reorganizations and reforms that have laid the groundwork for a successful war on terrorism.

BLACK HAWK DOWN, AND LESSONS LEARNED IN WAR

The movie *Black Hawk Down*, based on the book by journalist Mark Bowden, displays in heartbreaking fashion some of the worst of American diplomacy, military decision-making, and tactical choices in modern times. In October 1993, the United States was involved in a conflict with Mohammed Farrah Aidid, a Somali warlord who controlled a portion of his country with a brutal hand. The Battle of Mogadishu was intended as a rapid insertion of Airborne Rangers and Special Forces troops to kidnap two of Aidid's lieutenants. Soldiers would be dropped in from helicopters, take their prisoners, and be removed from the hostile city center by a Ranger ground unit in trucks and Humvees. But the American forces were taken off guard by the hatred and fervor of the locals. The American troops thought their enemy was a narrow group of Aidid's close supporters, where in fact, many citizens of Mogadishu joined in the fight against the Rangers. Two Black Hawk helicopters were shot down with surface-to-air missiles, and the raid on Aidid's leadership team turned into a recovery effort of Ranger units and helicopter crews, stranded in the narrow streets of the ancient city.

The movie focuses on the struggle of these elite American military forces to survive in the streets. In the end, over one hundred American troops were wounded, and nineteen died, while over a thousand Somalis lost their lives. Bowden's book covers the environment of this conflict in rich detail, and describes some of the reasons for this catastrophe. This battle was fought with the wrong forces for the task; with a misunderstanding of how they were perceived in the community where they fought; and with problematic coordination and technical support.

The American forces in the Battle of Mogadishu included two of the best tools in our arsenal. The core of the strike force was a unit of Airborne Rangers, an elite, select group of soldiers who are well-trained and well-equipped for rapid strikes. In Mogadishu, the Rangers operated from helicopters based at the city's airport, with the ability to move quickly to all points in the city where they were needed. The American effort also included a handful of Special Forces troops. These are the most elite of all American soldiers.

Why couldn't these superior American troops prevail against a band of apparently disorganized Somali youths? Bowden builds a case that it was the very elite nature of the American presence that inspired a highly emotional hatred of the invading forces. The American troops were unaware of the negative symbolism that they portrayed. When Kevlar-clad warriors swooped overhead in well-armed helicopters, Aidid's soldiers could criticize them as the real aggressors. Bowden tells of how the helicopters would kick up frustrating dust storms throughout the sandy streets of Mogadishu, and even pull the corrugated metal roofs off of slum dwellings with the backdraft of their propellers. Aidid's forces may have been autocratic and violent toward Mogadishu's citizens, but the warlord's troops could claim that at least they weren't imperialist invaders bent on destroying neighborhoods and homes. Once the battle began, the hatred for Americans proved to be a significant rallying device for Aidid's lieutenants. American soldiers found themselves in a fight not against a handful of well-armed Aidid regulars, but instead greatly outnumbered by a vast mob of street fighters of varying capability.

The book and movie describe one other tragic component of the Battle of Mogadishu, involving battlefield coordination. American troops on the ground operated with "eyes in the sky" officers in a helicopter and even higher, in a Navy spy plane. The idea is that the spy plane can see the entire battlefield, the road grid, and opposing forces spread throughout the streets. When the first of two Black Hawk helicopters was shot down in the middle of the city, Rangers on the ground quickly organized a rescue party. Mogadishu's streets are unpaved, narrow, and have no signage and few recognizable landmarks. In theory, the Navy plane should be able to direct the rescue unit's Humvees across the city to the downed helicopter, even in a manner that avoids certain neighborhoods where Aidid's forces may have blocked streets to create ambush situations.

In practice, this coordinating system failed tragically. The core of the problem was that the spy plane's directions were relayed to the Humvees on the ground through the intervening command helicopter. This created a time delay, which confounded instructions to the lead vehicle on the ground. In the spy plane, the navigator saw that the rescue convoy should take a left turn at the third intersection. He passed this direction on to the helicopter, but by then the lead Humvee had driven past the first intersection. As a result the convoy of Humvees took several wrong turns, into blind alleys and ambushes. At one point, the convoy was only six blocks along main roads from one of the downed helicopters, but the misdirection sent the convoy through fifty-five blocks of back roads in the city, with time wasting away for the downed helicopter crew. The convoy was under steady fire from roof tops and side streets during this time. Eventually, the rescue force was so depleted through injuries that their mission was called off.

Fast forward to 2001, and the War in Afghanistan: America's military preparations show that we learned sufficiently well to avoid the mistakes of Mogadishu. First, the United States and its allies fought the Taliban while using a concept called "steering, not rowing." The broad idea is that government workers need not, and maybe should not, be the ones to carry out governmental goals. We see this increasingly in the delivery of domestic governmental services, such as in the use of non-profit agencies to deliver state-ordered welfare programs. In the context of war in Afghanistan, the Rangers and Special Forces have had a much reduced, but more focused and productive role. One of the core competencies of the Special Forces is to train indigenous military forces in weapons use, tactics, and in the moral and ethical use of both while in the war zone.

Instead of engaging in battle ("rowing"), Special Forces soldiers trained Northern Alliance units ("steering") in what were clearly quite productive techniques to win the early phase of the war.

Why was this a superior strategy in 2001? After the September 11 attacks, Osama bin Laden called upon Arab nations to join together in fighting against America—much the same way that Aidid had called upon Somalis to ignore his own atrocities, and focus on outside threats from America. If the war in Afghanistan had been fought predominantly with American soldiers, Al-Qaeda would have had a powerful recruiting tool, to create local opposition to the anti-terrorist effort. Clearly, this strategy allowed the war to proceed more smoothly from the outset; the potential for opposition to coalesce against an "outside threat" was reduced, since the Taliban were engaged in a battle predominantly against other Afghanis from the Northern Alliance.

This is certainly not the whole story. The fight against the Taliban continues. The stability of the new government under President Hamid Karzai is tenuous, and there are still varied criticisms about the moral and ethical ways of the new government. But the main message remains: The United States made a better start in this fight as a result of difficult lessons learned in Somalia.

See **Table 1** for a full summary of the organizational improvements made between the engagements in Somalia and Afghanistan.

TRAFFIC AND DOMESTIC LESSONS LEARNED

During the summer of 2002, we were shown the plans for "the most extensive reorganization of the federal government since the 1940s." President Bush announced a huge realignment of most of our domestic security apparatus, involving approximately 170,000 Federal government employees from agencies as diverse as the Coast Guard, the Federal Emergency Management Administration, and the National Institutes of Health. This mammoth bureaucracy would be called the Department of Homeland Security. Indeed, no government program so large had been intended for implementation on such a tight time frame since World War II.

Up to this point, coordination of domestic effort in the war on terrorism had been in the hands of the White House Office of Homeland Security. Its director, Tom Ridge, had resigned as Governor of Pennsylvania in the days after the September 11 attacks, and had worked in conjunction with Attorney General John Ashcroft to plan and set policy for the fight against terrorists. Ridge is the identified leader of these efforts, and was thus called the homeland security "czar." The Department of Homeland Security proposal was initially well received by both Republicans and Democrats in Congress, but met with delays and opposition to its specifics. The key question in Congress surrounding the Department of Homeland Security: Is it better to have a coordinator of the anti-terror effort in many agencies, or a monolithic department, including almost ten percent of the Federal workforce within its boundaries? Eventually Congress and the President reached a series of compromises and passed legislation establishing the Department of Homeland Security.

Modern organization theory tends to point us toward solutions that are more flexible and responsive to changing demands in the operating environment. A common form is the "matrix," which involves the establishment of leadership and planning networks both by functional area (such as public health threats) as well as by site (such as in the New England region). When a specific functional area rises in importance, that network becomes the focus of overall effort. Advocates of matrix management contend that the old hierarchy is outdated and hard to reorient in a crisis. They can point to the greater responsiveness of a more fluid, pragmatic military strategy in Afghanistan as part of their supporting evidence.

But on the other hand, a case can be made that consolidation of many units has a better chance for success. First, the current domestic security structure is convoluted, and appears to be impossible to manage. The Homeland Security Department established an array of agencies with a role in the domestic war on terrorism. The **organization chart** shows twenty-two cabinet or department level organizations, and 119 functional agencies as playing a part in this fight. This chart despite its expansiveness ignores two other complex circumstances: Each cabinet-level agency is aligned with at least one Congressional committee to help in setting policy; and many of the 119 functional areas are further supported by state and local units and agencies. In many instances, it is not the entire agency (such as the Department of Interior) which would fight terrorism, but a much smaller police unit within. This deepening of the organization complexity raises numerous questions and political problems. Would the Interior Secretary, for example, easily concede to a Department of Homeland Security request to free up these police forces to fight terrorism, as opposed to some other part of Interior's mission?

Second, the coordination of many agencies has already been tried, and has met with more failure than success. The best comparable example of matrix management at the Federal level has been in the war on drugs, where the White House Office of Drug Control Policy operates under a "czar," a coordinator of far-flung agencies with a stake in controlling the importation and use of illegal drugs. We can look to some of what occurred in the movie *Traffic* to see the failure of a "czar" to coordinate a widespread effort with multiple and competing policy goals. *Traffic* is the story of the war on drugs; similar to *Black Hawk Down*, it is based on documentary evidence, but with a few more liberties to make the story interesting. *Traffic* is a rich, textured movie, with an ironic plot line about a committed drug "czar" with a horribly crack-addicted daughter, and a compelling contrast between "street-level' drug enforcement officers in San Diego and Mexico.

The drug "czar" and the Secretary of Homeland Security sound like powerful positions, but their actions are constrained by the complexity of the issue and the variety of the participants in the policy area. Chances are, the office holder won't outlast the problems. In reality, Governor Ridge shares his authority, especially with the Attorney General. The coordinating function can be overstated, whenever separate agencies, with different missions and legislative sponsors, disagree.

In the movie, Judge Calloway "manages by walking around" traveling to the agencies and places that matter in his job as the "czar." He only hears of the difficulties, no successes, in the War on Drugs. A supervisor at a bor-

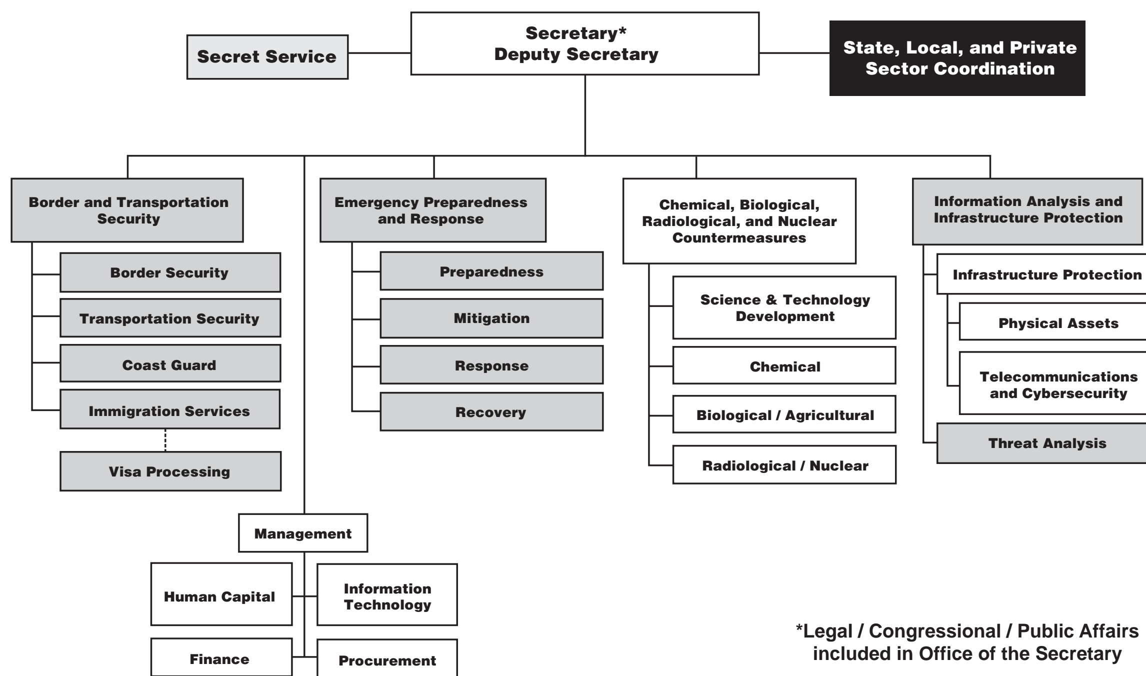
der checkpoint in San Diego says that he'd like to be able to attest that they're catching forty or fifty percent of the drugs that "mules" try to smuggle into California, but in reality, he estimates that seventy percent of the drugs get through. While on an airplane back from San Diego, with representatives from the FBI, DEA, and other agencies, Calloway tries to initiate a brainstorming session—but nobody has any new ideas. Even worse, each agency leader is afraid to reveal any ideas in front of the other agencies that compete for limited budgetary resources.

The War on Terrorism is different. It is encouraging that in organizing for this war, we likely won't make the same mistake of having a White House "Coordinator" in charge of the effort. Here's one argument in support of the consolidation of all, or at best most, resources to fight terrorism.

Table 1

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPROVEMENTS MADE BETWEEN THE BATTLE OF MOGADISHU AND THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

Organizational Aspect	Mogadishu	Afghanistan
Lead Military Forces Used on the Ground	*U.S. Rangers most prominent, but with some Special Forces soldiers involved*	*Some U.S. Special Forces, mostly in a training and support capacity, with local Afghani militias most prominent (e.g., Northern Alliance)*
Policy Focus	*U.S. intervention, with use of a few paid local informants*	*U.S assistance, support, and coordination of sympathetic local Afghani militias*
Metaphor for War Effort	*"Rowing"*	*"Steering"*
Public Relations Consequences	*The U.S. seen as intruder and aggressor*	*The U.S. seen as supportive of local autonomy*
Cooperation within U.S.Military Forces	*Lacking; U.S. Rangers and Special Forces were rivals, competing rather than cooperating toward goals*	*Enhanced, as the merits of conventional and non-conventional forces are recognized*
Battlefield Coordination	*Leadership uses traditional top-down, command and control, from the air and remote posts; "Eyes in the Sky" orders confounded as they reach soldiers*	*Leadership allows a more fluid, pragmatic, and empowered responsiveness at the centers of action; relays of information are also reduced, through the use of enhanced technology*



Ashton Carter, the Coordinator of the Preventive Defense Project at Harvard, points out the difficulty of specifying our goals in this war. He asks, Is fighting terrorism to be considered in the same vein as conventional war? Not exactly; we do not work against nations, through treaties, with identified combatants. Is fighting terrorism like fighting crime? Again, this is not a good match; there is much more to this fight than finding perpetrators and bringing them into the criminal justice system. The war ahead may be closest to disaster response and recovery; that was the most important part of reestablishing New York after the World Trade Center attacks, but we wouldn't want to stop there. The fact is, the war against terrorism falls into all three policy areas. But all three focuses have distinct political and bureaucratic cultures. The intent of the Department of Homeland Security is to give a high degree of command and control when the policy focus needs to change, from crime prevention to disaster recovery to emergency preparedness. This wouldn't be possible under a system where all of the terror-fighting agencies were able to retain their own identity. See **Table 2** for a summary of the contrasts between the "czar" approach used in the War on Drugs and the consolidated approach toward domestic organization in the war against terrorism.

Table 2

CONTRASTS IN ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE BETWEEN THE WAR ON DRUGS AND PROPOSED FOR THE DOMESTIC WAR ON TERRORISM

Organizational Aspect	War on Drugs	Domestic War on Terrorism
Programmatic Representation	*Wide; many agencies have a stake in this fight*	*Wider; terrorism is an even more varied and widespread threat than drug violence, sales and use*
Coordination of Effort	*Limited; agencies remain independent but are organized as members of a "team"*	*Strong, at least in theory; all agencies and programs serve the same chief*
Description of Organizational Structure	*Matrix, with the ability to treat regional problems or functional problems, under the guidance of a "czar"*	*Hierarchy, with all resources and agencies operating under the orders of the Secretary of Homeland Defense*
Agency Autonomy	*Maintained relatively intact; only in certain situations and under specific circumstances does an agency's broad mission need to focus on the shared problem*	*Significantly reduced; the mission of agencies and programs within the Department is made more narrow and focused*
Structural Advantage	*The matrix is well equipped to respond to a changing external environment, in theory, as long as the "czar" has real coordinating power*	*The hierarchical agency should be able to reduce internal dissent among separate agencies and programs, as long as the resources are not too diverse and diffuse*

CONCLUSION: HAVE A LITTLE FAITH?

> "At the end of the day, do [federal workers] serve the broader interest of homeland security where they are? Or is it conceivable that they should be cross-trained, or should they be moved into a different role? Who knows? We just don't know."
>
> —Tom Ridge, 10 July 2002

Is Tom Ridge's comment reassuring, or discouraging? Some may be frightened that even he doesn't know the answers. I see it differently: Ridge cannot predict the future, and we should respect his honesty in this regard. Further, we should be pleased that the government is trying different options, even ones that buck current trends and philosophy on organizational improvement.

This essay does not predict success or failure in the war on terrorism, but it does point toward the strong potential that our governmental leadership and organizations are learning from the recent past. The fighting in Afghanistan was dramatically different from the successful war effort in "Desert Storm" back in 1991, or the failed one in Mogadishu in 1993; we need to give credit to our leaders that they got it right, at least late in 2001, even if there are future unforeseen problems in Afghanistan in months or years to come. If the reorganization underlying the Department of Homeland Security winds up a failure, at least it won't be a repetition of the most comparable recent failure, in the manner of our organization to fight the War on Drugs. That is the main lesson: We can't predict the future, but we can and truly are learning from the past.

—Brendan Burke is Assistant Professor of Political Science