

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

IAFF 288.11

Forward Engagement: The Study of Long-Range Developments as Factors in Contemporary National Policy

The Scenario

Fall 2008

It is the first year of the new administration of the 44th President of the United States. During the campaign it became evident that public confidence in governance had declined sharply, across party lines. In greater or lesser degree, both candidates wound up agreeing on a central point: the need for urgent action to better equip the government of the United States to handle major concurrent challenges affecting the state of the nation. With the campaign over, this resolution might well have slid away like other campaign promises, but for the fact that members of Congress came out of the election alarmed by the public mood. In their home districts many of them had personally experienced public demand for governance that would more be alert, more responsive and more successful in dealing with multiple, intersecting challenges. The Congress returned to Washington determined to induce radical change, by legislative fiat if necessary. This sentiment existed not only among the opposition, but within the President-elect's own party.

The president-elect was determined to lead the process of change rather than be forced to accept it in forms that would be prescribed by the Congress. He instructed his transition team to set up a special group that would focus on ways to jump-start change in the executive branch. This team ultimately produced two reports. The first report was a plan for reorganizing White House operations to better reflect the complex, interactive nature of new challenges. It created the concept of "complex priorities," and then described innovations in the use of the White House senior staff, and the interagency process. The second report, in response to a supplementary instruction from

the President –elect, suggested how to extend these ideas more deeply into the operations of the executive branch agencies. Taken together, these proposals were designed to enable government to deal with complex, long-range issues and to encourage networked solutions to the organizational problems that are associated with such solutions.

After inauguration, the new president put these recommendations into practice, by executive order where possible, and by legislative action when needed. One of the consequences of his action is the creation of the Principles and Deputies Committees on Complex Priorities (PCOM and DCOM). These committees were presented in the first transition team report as purely advisory to the President. The second transition team report went further towards giving the PCOM/DCOM system deeper influence in the operations of the executive branch, and greater significance in relation to the Congress. A particularly important feature was to give the DCOM a role in the basic conceptualization of the agenda for development of complex priorities, and a small staff to help it.

Specifically, the second transition report suggested that:

Annually, DCOM will present a report to Congress and the federal agencies in the fall on issues regarding strategic planning for future contingencies of interest (FCIs). This document, entitled the “Complex Priorities Report” will:

- *Summarize the past year's work of the PCOM and DCOM.*
- *Elaborate on FCIs needing consideration.*
- *Recommend policy, legislative, or budgetary changes.*

This suggestion was accepted by the President and the Congress, and incorporated into law. Students in the Fall semester will consider themselves as members of the DCOM staff, responsible for submitting the first report on Complex Priorities. The document they are working on will be considered to be a formal draft of this report for initial presentation to the President and his key staff for review.