The Scenario
Forward Engagement Spring 2008

A national election has taken place, and preparations are underway for inaugurating the new President. A Transition Office has been established, and is well underway in its task of helping the President Elect assemble a team to run the government, and of readying that team for its responsibilities, which begin with plans to convert the President-elect's signature themes from the campaign into action. In the course of the campaign, the candidates of both parties – to their own surprise – stumbled into agreement on one point: something needed to be one urgently to better equip the government of the United States to handle, major, concurrent challenges to fundamental assumptions about the capacity of governance itself to guide the nation's destiny. . The outlines of this change are understood to involve a new way of looking at oncoming issues, and of appreciating the implications of their complexity; combined with a new way of organizing a national response.

There is a strong expectation that the next Congress will push this process hard, as a way to reverse rock-bottom public ratings of Congress' record over an extended period of time. Important members of both parties have picked up on the need to respond to an extremely sour and pessimistic public mood: one that had that had surprised them by is intensity, and by its apparent indifference to party ideologies on either side. There was talk of the need for an overhaul of some kind, and a bipartisan group of some of the most influential members was known to be working on plans for legislation that was said to involve the most important changes the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, which marked a fundamental reform of how the Executive Branch manages war. Except this time, the focus was not the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but the Office of the President, itself, and how it manages the country.

The President-Elect agrees with all this in principle, but intends to lead this process, rather than to follow in the wake of a Congressional initiative, and so has proposed a counter-initiative: to use the White House as a test-bed for new concepts. The President-Elect's initiative is to establish an ad hoc arrangement centered in the White House, with instructions to jump- start the incorporation of new methods. The question is how: and in order to think this through, the President-Elect has established a task-force comprised of the most-trusted associates within the Office of Transition, some of whom may well end up operating at Cabinet-level in the new administration. .

The President-Elect has asked this group to think through the simplest and most direct paths towards redesigning White-House operations that guide the formation and execution of policy. One of the President-Elect's inner circle has introduced an additional level of specificity to the instruction: the task force is specifically asked to design an approach based on the application of complexity analysis tor policy issues, and of applied networked systems for policy development and execution. This system is to depend on finding new ways to use established components of the Office of the President; and of the Cabinet. During the design phase, a limited number of "stakeholders" will participate as sources of counsel. Stakeholders are selected NGOs, governors of states (operating through an existing umbrella organization), and members of the Congress. The working group's report should show how their approach would be applied in the case of a specified policy "cluster." It should also show how to create a capacity for learning from error, as a fundamental attribute of the proposed system.

Memorandum

TO: Transition Team on Networked Governance
FROM: Director of Policy Planning: Transition Office

The team's December 13th, 2007 presentation of its findings in response to the President-Elect's request went very well. But the reviewers comments make clear also that there is more work to be done before your concept is ready for decision. I've taken the liberty of converting the verbatim record of their exchange with the Team into a set of basic questions.

- The report used a definition of national security that the reviewers felt might be too broad, although they recognized that the present definition may be too narrow. They wanted a definition of the scope of the term "national security." There was a suggestion at the time that "national security" and national defense" are concepts that should be separated, and that looks like a good move, but it still leaves the question open. Is "national security" an open-ended concept that expands to embrace all manner of issues not relating to the primary task of defense? And if so, what are the appropriate boundaries?

- In any event, reviewers felt that the presentation was excessively heavy on threats to national security (however defined), as opposed to opportunities. Was this asymmetry just a reflection of how the real world presents itself? Or was it an inadvertent distortion, owing to the personal views and group dynamics of the Team? There appears to be room here for more thinking about how the term national security should encourage a search for ways to promote positive developments, in addition to ways to minimize loss.

- The reviewers pointed out another asymmetry: they were impressed with the ability of the proposed system to identify issues and inter-actions among issues; but they felt that the report did not demonstrate a similar ability to excel at formulating solutions.

- On the operational side, reviewers wanted to know how the proposed new system for dealing with "complex priorities," would relate to the existing interagency process, especially to the Principles and Deputies committees as presently understood. A related question was how this system would influence management of resources (eg. Via the Office of Management and Budget).

- There was a significant question about metrics for success. One of the reviewers pointed out that the Department of Defense has had "hundreds" of cross-cutting committees, with little to show for the effort. The real issue he appears to be raising is how to assure that such organizations are able to exert more effective pressure for change in the way the parent organization functions, and how to measure such change.

- The reviewers were impressed by the weight the report placed on indoctrinating senior level officials into a new form of White House operation created to deal with "complex priorities." The question they raised was whether it would be necessary to provide training for the bureaucracy at large, and if so, how? In short, how to change the culture of governance – an issue related to the question of measures of merit, above.

- Finally, one of the reviewers felt that setting up a new locus for long-range, complex planning and operations could work, unless a new institutional identify could be established among the participants. The suggestion was that the traditional paper-memo system be replaced by more rapid electronic communications – perhaps along the lines of a WIKI based system – to create the virtual effect of a continuing, intense interaction among the participants.