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What the Troops Need
1947 National Security Act Tangled in Politics, Turf Fights

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Debate over surging or withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq dominates the national security agenda, but the more fundamental question is whether the long war on terror can be won without major changes to our 60-year-old national security system. A growing list of senior leaders doubts it.

For years, nongovernmental studies have argued fundamental reform is needed. Now, many government leaders also favor systemic changes. Indeed, the secretary of defense was quoted last year as arguing that "the current system of government makes competence next to impossible."

On Capitol Hill, an emergent group of senators and congressmen is preparing to take on this systemic incompetence, and doing so will require a new national security act.

The 1947 National Security Act created a system that operates on the assumption that agencies and departments will work together on all but the most difficult issues, and that for those issues the president has the time and political motivation to intervene and direct Cabinet officials and their organizations to cooperate.

In reality, agencies routinely fight, the president is often insulated from such squabbles, there is little time or wherewithal to enforce collaboration, and political considerations reduce guiding strategy to ambiguous public policy statements.

The National Security Council and its system of powerless interagency committees has always been inefficient and not particularly effective, as investigations of complex military operations from Vietnam to Iraq, the war on drugs, the events of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina demonstrate.

An historical comparison highlights the long-standing, nonpartisan and systemic nature of the current system's inadequacies. Today, a Republican administration argues that discussing troop withdrawal in Iraq undermines our

security, while many Democrats in Congress argue the current effort in Iraq is so mismanaged that an open-ended commitment is counterproductive.

In 1993, the positions and arguments were reversed. The United States was trying to forge national unity in Somalia through nation-building activities despite warring factions and clandestine attacks on U.S. soldiers. The Republicans in Congress demanded a military exit from Somalia, and after multiple attempts, succeeded in passing a troop withdrawal resolution following a battle in Mogadishu that left 18 U.S. soldiers killed and scores wounded. President Bill Clinton fought the resolution by arguing American credibility would suffer should we withdraw in the face of determined opposition.

The stakes and circumstances in the two cases are different, but the interagency infighting, heated rhetoric and blunt instruments wielded in congressional-executive branch national security struggles are the same. Up to a point, different views are a healthy sign of vibrant debate. But the long-standing inability of our national government to organize for unified effort against both lesser and greater security threats is clearly unacceptable.

The executive branch cannot count on Congress for flexible resourcing, and Congress cannot count on the executive branch for effective integrated action with its dysfunctional interagency system. As the secretary of defense complained in 2003, the innumerable hours spent in interagency meetings in Washington "just kind of suck the life out of you" while producing little benefit. The recent special inspector general's report, "Iraq Reconstruction: Lessons in Program and Project Management," detailing confusion and disarray between the departments of Defense and State and billions of dollars of waste, demonstrates that interagency chaos extends to field operations as well.

As our ever-more-complex and interdependent security environment exposes the system's inadequacy, we increasingly tinker with it. The result is a hodgepodge of education and training initiatives, more layers of legal and procedural constraints, limited new funding authorities, and occasionally a czar with great responsibilities but little authority.

Neither these types of piecemeal changes nor the normal lead-agency approach will work for missions like counterterrorism or counterproliferation, which require the rapid integration of all elements of national power. It is not our leaders, past or present, who prevent such integration; it is the entire system

they labor within.

We must institutionalize a new system capable of integrating and resourcing strategies, plans, capabilities and operations regardless of our leaders or their political affiliations. Most likely, we will have to transform the national security bureaucracy's stove-piped decision-making methods by adopting some form of the horizontal organizations successfully pioneered in the business world.

We must revamp the way we resource multiagency missions so that those responsible can surge, sustain and apply capabilities as demanded by evolving circumstances. This will require new mechanisms to provide streamlined congressional oversight. Change of this magnitude can only happen with new legislation and executive branch support.

Producing a new National Security Act during wartime is difficult in the best of circumstances and impossible without bipartisan collaboration. Yet nothing would do more to honor and help the troops making such enormous sacrifices than for our national leaders to rise to that level of statesmanship.

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