Abundance of Planning Failures
G.I. Wilson
Webster University

Abstract
This paper explores planning failure. It examines the factors and influences that lead public and private sectors to perpetuate planning failure. Three kinds of institutional failures (failure to learn, failure to adapt, and failure to anticipate) as described in Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch's book *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* are instructive in addressing planning failure. The public and private sectors' planning failures stem from a wide range of reasons. These encompass, lack of resources, funding, imagination, and simply not planning ahead. The challenges of planning failures are nonetheless foreseeable. This paper contends a combination of flawed mental models (e.g. lack of imagination, faulty assumptions, analysis paralysis), lack of risk awareness, preference for the status quo, and factors such as groupthink and "turf" battles contribute to planning failure.

The news is replete with stories about the abundance of planning failures. This paper explores why we fail to plan adequately. According to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) public opinion polls show people believe the government is responsible for protecting them. (Rogers, 2007, p. 2). Despite the public's belief that the onus for protecting them rests solely with local, state, and federal agencies, planning failures persist. The reasons for planning failures are varied ranging from lack of resources, funding, policy, and time to not heeding warning signals and complacency.

Complacency
There is nothing new about complacency and planning failure. The two go hand in hand. Public complacency involves ignoring threat warnings. There is empirical evidence that shows public complacency occurs even under repeated emergency threat warnings. A complacent public is less prepared for emergencies and is a factor in planning failure (Wang & Kapucu, 2007).

Complacency coupled with ' it-can't-happen-here-attitude ' pervades much of our institutional thinking. Both private and public bureaucracies suffer from political inertia and complacency. As a result bureaucratic processes often take precedence over action and problem solving. Nevertheless, ' it-will-happen-here ' mindset is a far more prudent approach. This spurs active planning considerations for risk awareness (i.e. indicators and warnings), prevention, mitigation, and response (CSE Program, 2000). "Ultimately, complacency is the greatest of disasters. From a historical perspective, people have a tendency to kind of muddle through disasters even with the best-laid plans" (Jackson, 2004, p. 19).

Risk Awareness
Risk awareness is a complex issue whose lack there of plays an influential role in planning failure. Too often bureaucracies address risk and planning from a perspective of what is instead of what could be. One of the biggest challenges Helen M. Mitchell, founder and CEO of Strategic Management Resources, sees is companies limit future thinking based on current reality. " They let the problems of the past keep them from realizing the vision of the future "

(Mitchell, 2007). This helps delude public and private sector bureaucracies thinking they know more than they actually do. Also, bureaucratic thinking tends to focus on the irrelevant and inconsequential while disastrous events like wild fires, floods, earthquakes, and emerging market conditions catch agencies by surprise (Taleb, 2007).

Ignoring Blinking Red Signals
Reports on high-profile disasters and tragedies offer rich lessons in organizational and planning failure. Jena McGregor writes, " Tragedies are striking reminders that while individuals can be quite adept at picking up on hints of failure in the making, organizations typically fail to process and act on their warnings" (McGregor, 2005). McGregor also addresses what happens when indicators and warnings of pending diaster are ignored:

> The FBI field agent warning about terrorists in flight schools; the engineers requesting better photos of the space shuttle's wing after it was struck by debris; the department editor who wrote a memo warning that Blair shouldn't be writing for the paper -- all these individuals were sending signals of impending disaster. "The biggest screaming headline is that all the knowledge needed was already inside," says Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, associate dean of executive programs at the Yale School of Management. Or as George Tenet, the former director of central intelligence, told the 9/11 Commission, "The system was blinking red."
>
> Reacting to those weak signals -- to the information trapped within the system -- may or may not have prevented these catastrophes. Indeed, we cannot begin to sift through every cause that led to what are unthinkable disasters. But each report stresses one of three factors -- imagination, culture, or communication -- as the greatest culprit in ignoring, trapping, or suppressing crucial warning signs. These were the factors that made the blinking red signals so hard to see (p. 1).

Ignoring the warnings of 'blinking red signals' frequently precedes planning failure. Based upon research by Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe in *Managing The Unexpected,* " the ability to identify potential risks at a stage when they are still considered to be harmless by most companies, and the ability to respond forcefully to warning signals even when they are weak " are central to avoiding planning failure (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001).

Hurricane Katrina Reveals Planning Shortcomings
Hurricane Katrina evacuations reveal chronic shortcomings that accentuated both planning failures and barriers. Planning barriers hampering Katrina efforts in New Orleans applied " not only to evacuation planning, but to planning in general ". These barriers are closely associated with bureaucracies, priorities, and modes of planning. They are summarized as follows by Sanchez and Brenman (2007):

> **<u>Jurisdictional boundaries as obstacles to cooperation</u>**. This is reflected in "my county, your city, your state, your federal government" approaches to regional problems. In a social equity context, the obstacles to racial integration presented by school district boundaries are a well-known problem. In a transportation context, metropolitan planning organizations are supposed to cross-jurisdictional boundaries. In a disaster-planning

context, infrastructure acquired by individual jurisdictions -- such as electronic communications devices and rescue equipment -- are not necessarily compatible. But disasters, terrorist events, mobility issues, and equity issues naturally cross-artificial governmental lines.

Planning neglect. That fact that nearly half of the 50 largest cities in the U.S. and nearly 70 percent of its MPOs fail to address evacuation planning constitutes planning neglect. The federal government should impose mandates upon cities to have minimum standards in evacuation plans. These plans should include accessibility in evacuating all residents, including the careless and those with special mobility needs.

Institutional racism. Institutional racism is the concept that underlying systems and policies keep whites and people of color unequal. There are certain areas of local policy where racism becomes prominent and visible, including policing, zoning, and housing. Municipal and other government policies and programs can either promote equality, tolerance, and justice, or (consciously or not) promote division and inequality and engender the belief that specific racial and ethnic groups are second-class citizens. With respect to transportation, under-funded transit systems -- predominately used by people of color -- may constitute institutional racism. Although New Orleans was 70 percent African American pre-Katrina, a disproportionate amount of those stranded in the city were people of color. Public transit and evacuation planning policies have to overcome institutional racism.

The misapprehension of risk, failures in communicating risk, and using this misapprehension for political purposes. This can be a function of a lack of transparency and ineffective public involvement processes. Underlying this is also corruption, which undercuts good potential results of public social policy. Risk is the hazard level combined with the likelihood of the hazard leading to an accident combined with the hazard exposure or duration. Risk is also described as the probability of a mishap times the likely severity of a mishap, which is often difficult to communicate in the midst of crisis.

The dangers of inflexibility. Territorialism can be one aspect of inflexibility; however, in terms of evacuation planning this can mean too much reliance on a particular method of evacuation. For example, despite the successes of the New Orleans contra-flow system, not having alternatives resulted in nearly 30,000 stranded within the city. While some people would have certainly chosen to stay even if rides out of town were provided, many had no choice but to remain due to a plan that was too inflexible.

Like all planning, evacuation planning needs redundancy, flexibility, and resiliency. If a disaster made particular corridors inaccessible for any reason, the evacuation plan should be flexible enough to reroute people in another direction or on another mode. Such was the case in Manhattan on September 11th when ferry service provided an alternative to the subway service, which was knocked out due to the disaster (p. 1).

Analysis-Paralysis

Planning decisions and the threat of failure involve high-stakes consequences and risk. Bureaucratic decision-makers often because of politics avoid risk planning. At times planning decisions are relegated to committees that study and analyze problems endless while running in place. This ultimately culminates in a futile effort, which maintains the status quo. (Schultz, 2004):

> Guy Burgess has called this "Analysis-Paralysis," in that the situation remains in stasis while it is analyzed. Analysis-Paralysis can subsequently lead to what Burgess calls the "Delay-Default Syndrome" -- in trying to avoid risky decisions, the difficult choices are continually pushed further and further into the future, ensuring the status quo while waiting on study after study. In this respect, fact-finding can be used as a stall tactic. All this can prove to be a costly game, one that ensures that problems linger in the absence of change (.p 1)

Along with analysis-paralysis and delay-default syndromes, simply failing to plan ahead is another factor that has surfaced. The Economic and Social Research Council ran a series of experiments that found contrary to economic theory; people frequently do not plan ahead when doing a plan of action. The research shows that when faced with a decision-making process designed to test whether people plan ahead, more than half fail to do so (Schultz, 2004).

Underlying Causes of Planning Failure

Failure to plan ahead typifies one of the many underlying causes of planning failure. Sidney Finkelstein, author of *Why Smart Executives Fail*, researched several spectacular CEO failures and underlying causes. Finkelstein emphasizes it is not the unforeseeable that causes failure. In all cases, these failing CEOs knew there was trouble coming, but they chose not to act. He also identified several failure points that are relevant to planning failure (Brusman, 2006):

> 1. Executive Mindset Failures - Breakdowns in how executives perceive reality for their companies.
> 2. Lost Signals - How information and control systems in the organization are mismanaged.
> 3. Patterns of Unsuccessful Executive Habits - How organizational leaders adopt unsuccessful behaviors (p. 1).

World Where Planning Failures Are Endemic

Jena McGregor posits "we live and work in a world where planning failures are endemic -- but where frank, comprehensive dissections of those failures are still woefully infrequent; where success is too easily celebrated and failures are too quickly forgotten; where short-term earnings and publicity concerns block us from confronting -- much less, learning from -- our stumbles and our blunders" (McGregor, 2005).

In blundering bureaucracies the only real difference between planning and failing is the spelling of the two words. The Irish Medical Times points out that "failure, however defined, is generally much more interesting than success. Success is invariably achieved through a combination of vision, drive, intelligence, commitment and good management (Lennon, 2007):

Failure, on the other hand, is inevitably presented as simply bad luck or, as Lemony Snicket might describe it, a series of unfortunate events. Not surprisingly, therefore, failure is usually the subject of understandable understatement. The classic example coming at the end of World War II when the Japanese Emperor explained to his people that the war situation had developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage. A key distinction is quickly discernible in most discussions on success and failure: it is that people are keen to explain success but anxious to explain away failure. There is nothing very original in that observation but it is useful to bear it in mind (p. S32).

Three Failures That Underwrite Planning Failure
Eliot Cohen and John Gooch's book, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* describes three basic kinds of failure that underwrite planning failure: failure to learn, failure to anticipate, and failure to adapt. Cohen and Gooch write, " Learning failures have their roots in the past, and anticipatory failures look to the future, adaptive failure suggests an inability to handle the changing present (Cohen & Gooch, 1990).

Commenting on learning and failure, the Finance Minister of Singapore notes, " Idiocy is when you keep doing the same thing and expect a different result " (Guan, 2005):

Learning from past mistakes is a good idea; learning from someone else's mistakes is an even better idea. A failure to adapt to the present is very much a failure to recognize that the world has changed from the time a policy was introduced. We have to keep asking, "Why are we doing this? Is there a better thing to do? Is there a better way to do it?" Of all failures, however, a failure to anticipate the future is the most common and often the most costly of all. The public service needs the resolve, the discipline and the way to anticipate the future, and at the same time also deal with adapting to the present and learning from the past (p. 6).

Failure to anticipate the future, adapt to the present, and learn from the past all set the stage for planning failure.

Faulty Assumptions Beget Planning Failure
Faulty assumptions corrupt planning and significantly undermine the process if let unchecked. Faulty assumptions beget planning failure. This holds true for the private and public sectors. Nowhere was this lesson more evident then in the first Gulf War (Kipphut, 1996):

In developing initial offensive air plans, planners made several assumptions concerning Iraqi Scud capabilities in early August 1990 that proved faulty. Unfortunately, these assumptions were never adjusted and they continue to provide the basis for counter-Scud planning throughout Desert Shield. The real failure by air planners in the Gulf was not altering operational concepts as new information became available which fundamentally shifted planning assumptions. Assumptions are only intended to take the place of facts when critical information elements are unavailable, but needed to continue planning. Once the information is acquired, the assumption needs to be replaced or altered and plans adjusted to compensate. During the six months proceeding Desert Storm this process did not take place despite the existence of accurate intelligence information. As a

result, Iraq severely caught CENTCOM and CENT AF off-guard when they began mobile launcher operations (p. 76).

Groupthink and Lack of Imagination
Considerable planning is done in groups. Group dynamics may contribute to planning failure as a consequence of ' groupthink '. Social psychologists Irving Janis believes members of a group have a tendency to lose their critical evaluative capabilities because of social and psychological factors. Groupthink has the potential of creating poor decisions. Janis suggests groupthink played a role in the lack of military readiness of U.S. Forces at Pearl Harbor (Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn, 2000, p. 187). The negative impact of groupthink is still with us today. A military study of the Iraqi war " suggests that a combination of flawed mental models, groupthink amongst the senior political and military leadership, and military culture are, in part, to blame" for planning failure (Howard, 2004).

Groupthink stifles imagination. Lack of imagination can result in planning failure. Recall our lack of imagination before the 911 attacks. Many never imagined terrorists armed only with box cutters could turn commercial airlines into improvised cruise missiles. "As one observer said, our failure was not an intelligence failure but a failure of imagination" (Sandia National Laboratories, 2002).

Conclusion
The public and private sectors' planning failures stem from a wide range of reasons. These encompass, lack of resources, funding, imagination, and simply not planning ahead. The challenges of planning failures are nonetheless foreseeable. This paper contends a combination of bureaucratic processes, flawed mental models (e.g. lack of imagination, faulty assumptions, analysis paralysis), lack of risk awareness, and preference for the status quo, couple with factors such as groupthink, fallibility of human reason, and "turf" battles all contribute to planning failure.

Lastly, the solution to planning and intelligence failures is all too often one of throwing money at the problem. This manifests itself in additional layers of bureaucracy, an increased emphasis on technologically based solutions, and granting contracts for studies, analyses, and support. The technology does live up to expectations, the studies gather dust, and both are costly. Unfortunately the bureaucracy quickly loses sight of operational imperatives without any thought of return on investment. Just witnessed the creation of Department of Homeland Defense (Jenkins, 2006):

> In the last several years, the federal government has awarded some $11 billion in grants to federal, state, and local authorities to improve emergency preparedness, response, and recovery capabilities. What is remarkable about the whole area of emergency preparedness and homeland security is how little we know about how states and localities (1) finance their efforts in this area, (2) have used their federal funds, and (3) are assessing the effectiveness with which they spend those funds (p. 13).

References

Brusman, M. (2006). *Executive failure: A look at the dark side.* Retrieved August 18, 2007, from

http://www.workingresources.com/professionaleffectivenessarticles/article.nhtml?uid=10

038

CSE Program (2000). *Securing the future: A manager's perspective appendix c.* Retrieved

August 13, 2007, from

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/pubs/training/securing_future/managers/mgrs_appe

ndix_c_6.doc

Cohen, E., & Gooch, J. (1990). *Military misfortunes: The anatomy of failure in war.*

Washington, DC: Free Press.

Guan, L. (2005). *Leadership role in public service.* Retrieved August 18, 2007, from

http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan020467.pdf

Howard, J. R. (2004). *Preparing for war, stumbling to peace.* Retrieved August 19, 2007, from

http://stinet.dtic.mil/cgi-

bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA430508&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf

Jackson, K. (2004, April 4, 2004). Emergency preparedness: It's best to plan and practice. *For

The Record, 16,* p. 19. Retrieved August 20, 2007, from

http://72.14.253.104/search?q=cache:F6q4VXwSMV4J:www.fortherecordmag.com/archi

ves/ftr_040504p19.shtml+emergency+planning+Complacency&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=21

&gl=us&ie=UTF-8

Jenkins, W. O. (2006). *Emergency preparedness and response: Some issues and challenges

associated with major emergency incidents.* Retrieved August 17, 2007, from

http://72.14.253.104/search?q=cache:WJTuEymot2cJ:www.gao.gov/new.items/d06467t.

pdf+challenges+to+emergency+planning&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=2&gl=us&ie=UTF-8

Kipphut, M. (1996). *Crossbow and Gulf War counter-scud efforts: Lessons from history.*

Retrieved August 17, 2007, from http://stinet.dtic.mil/cgi-

bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA393984&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf

Lennon, P. (2007, June 15, 2007). A humourous look at the nature of failure. *Irish Medical*

Times, 41(24), S32.

McGregor, J. (2005). *Gospels of failure.* Retrieved August 17, 2007, from

http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/91/gospels.html

Mitchell, H. M. (2007, March 27, 2007). *Truth of strategic planning failure revealed at national*

strategy conference. Retrieved August 15, 2007, from

http://mediaserver.prweb.com/pdfdownload/513802/pr.pdf

Rogers, L. (2007). *The risk of uncertainty.* Retrieved August 15, 2007, from

http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/about/CI/CP/Our_Society_Today/Spotlights_200

7/RiskUncertainty1.aspx?ComponentId=21268&SourcePageId=21274

Sanchez, T. W., & Brenman, M. (2007). *Barriers to planning: Lessons from Katrina.* Retrieved

August 18, 2007, from

http://72.14.253.104/search?q=cache:dgT77HOiYBkJ:www.planetizen.com/node/23400+

planning+barriers&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=33&gl=us&ie=UTF-8

Sandia National Laboratories (2002, November 21, 2002). *Terrorist organizations and criminal*

street gangs. Retrieved August 19, 2007, from

www.sandia.gov/ACG/documents/sandreports/SAND2004-1104P.pdf

Schermerhorn, J., Hunt, J., & Osborn, R. (2000). *Organizational Behavior* (7th ed.). New York:

John Wiley & Sons, Inc..

Schultz, N. (2004). *That which cannot be known.* Retrieved August 16, 2007, from

http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/fact_finding_limits/

Taleb, N. (2007). *The black swan*. New York: Rand House.

Wang, X., & Kapucu, N. (2007). *Public complacency under repeated emergency threats: Some

empirical evidence.* Retrieved August 16, 2007, from

http://jpart.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/mum001v1

Weick, K. E., & Sutcliffe, K. M. (2001). *Managing the unexpected*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.