

The Downfall of Adaptive Planning

Finding a New Approach after a Failed Revolution

Lt Col John F. Price Jr., USAF

The dream that was adaptive planning (AP) is slowly dying. Despite great fanfare during its launch more than six years ago, this strategic transformation initiative within the Department of Defense (DOD)—intended to revolutionize the approach to war planning of the world’s largest bureaucracy—has failed by almost any measure. Ironically, this failure is not the result of budget cuts or war-time distractions; rather, it is a casualty of its own institutional culture. Fixated on the virtues of planning, the military could not see that the desired outcomes depended on a revolution in strategic thinking, not strategic planning. Although planning will remain a cornerstone of military culture, today’s environment demands more focus on the application and development of adaptive thinking as our primary discipline. Only then will we position ourselves to realize the dream of AP.

The Adaptive Planning Revolution

The US military has a rich history of strategic planning. In fact, one may reasonably argue that the entire DOD system is a perfect model of what Henry Mintzberg, Bruce Ahlstrand, and Joseph Lampel call the “planning school” of strategy.¹ In a recurring cycle, senior leaders create policy to direct planning by the services and combatant commands (COCOM), which creates requirements to feed the services’ programming and budgeting processes. This system results in the creation of massive strategic and contingency plans intended to guide commanders through the perilous future landscape. The process of strate-

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gic planning has obvious value, but its cumbersome, time-consuming nature puts it at odds with the demands of senior leadership at the turn of the century.

Following the review and subsequent execution of Operation Plan 1003V for the invasion of Iraq, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld expressed his dissatisfaction with the output and pace of the existing planning process. His guidance to find ways to conduct planning “quicker and better” led to development of the AP concept. On 13 December 2005, Secretary Rumsfeld signed out the *Adaptive Planning Roadmap 2005* to formalize implementation of a concept that had been maturing for several years.² The first of what would soon become two road maps highlighted dissatisfaction with the existing system: “The traditional contingency planning process is insufficiently responsive to the demands of today’s security environment.”³ To substantiate this claim, the road map cites the following shortfalls:

- Existing deliberate plans are difficult to implement, or adapt.
- The 24-month deliberate planning cycle is too long and inflexible. . . .
- Plans do not incorporate sufficient branches and sequels. . . .
- Authoritative data is stovepiped [and] not readily accessible for planning. . . .
- . . . No formal mechanisms [exist] to ensure early and frequent consultation among civilian and military leaders during plan development. . . .
- . . . Interagency involvement generally occurs very late in plan development.⁴

To address these issues, developers intended AP to become “the Joint capability to create and revise plans rapidly and systematically, as circumstances require” (fig. 1).⁵ The idea called for identifying and addressing significant roadblocks at the primary area of implementation—strategic plans divisions on the COCOM staffs—to allow production of better contingency plans. This initial concept quickly morphed into Adaptive Planning and Execution (APEX) in order to include both the development and execution of plans.

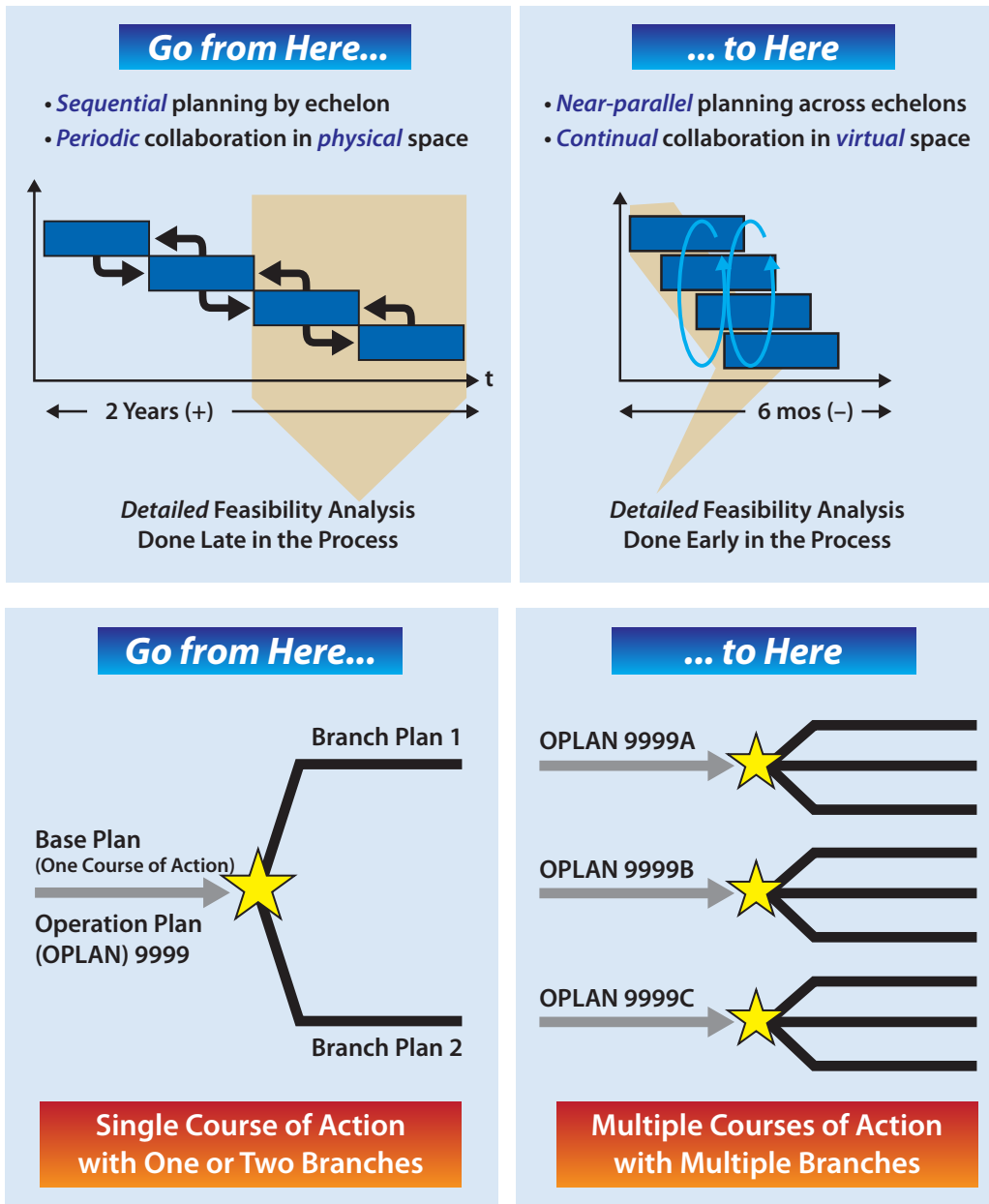


Figure 1. What are we trying to do? (Adapted from Briefing, Andrew Hoffman, Joint Forces Staff College, subject: Adaptive Planning, February 2006.)

The vision of AP was indeed revolutionary. Developers envisioned it “produc[ing] plans significantly faster, . . . and to a higher level of quality than is currently achievable” and “produc[ing] [relevant] plans with enough embedded options (e.g., branches and sequels)” designed for rapid execution.⁶ The grand dream involved “net-centric ‘living plans’” capable of rapidly reacting to “triggers” within a collaborative planning environment (fig. 2).⁷ Implementation of AP would use spiral development that emphasized products, process, people, and technology (P3T), with the goal of reaching full operational capability in 2008. Unfortunately, at the dawn of 2012, we can no longer recognize the original timetable, and we have little chance of realizing the grand vision in the absence of significant changes.

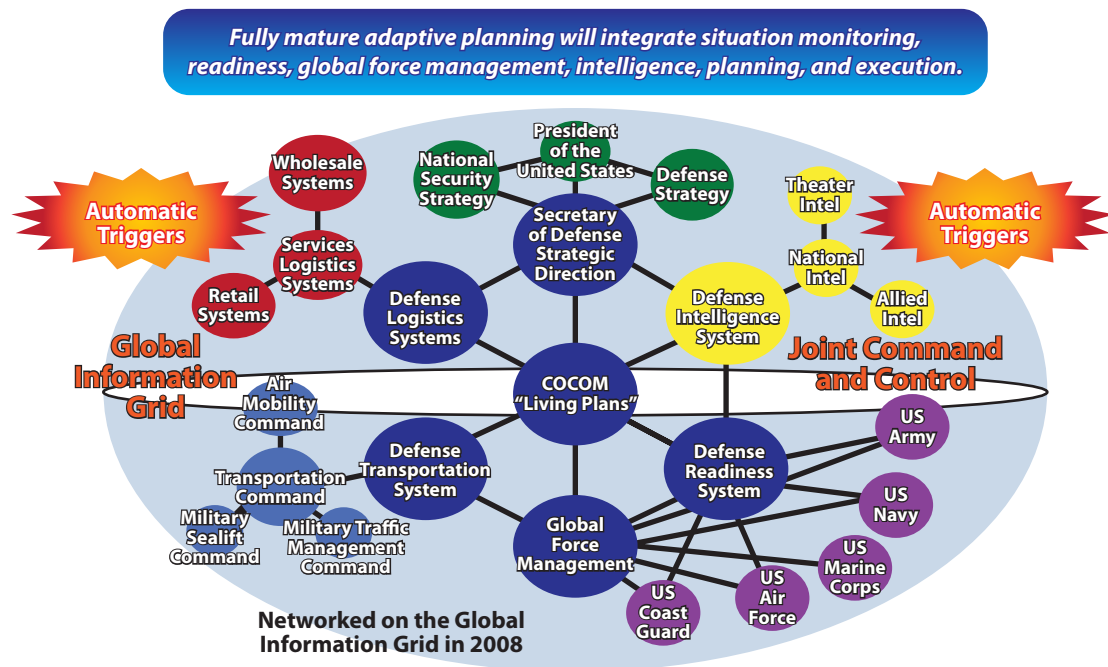


Figure 2. The dream that never was: Vision for mature adaptive planning. (Adapted from Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Adaptive Planning Roadmap 2005* [Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 13 December 2005], 12.)

View from the Ground Floor

As a joint “Jedi in training” at the Joint Advanced Warfighting School in 2005, I watched the emergence of AP with great interest. The basic idea of revolutionizing the joint operation planning process by using technology and process improvements seemed ideal, especially since I would soon serve as a strategic planner at US Pacific Command, tackling some of the nation’s toughest planning issues. However, despite this interest, it was disconcerting to see that the content of the revolution seemed to concentrate solely on process, not purpose.

All of AP’s tools emphasized increasing the speed of the same basic planning process. Instead of realizing that the primary shortfalls of the existing process stemmed from a lack of strategic thought, all efforts sought to make the existing system work faster and provide more options. Rather than fundamentally questioning the entire process, developers assumed that it was correct and simply needed fine tuning. AP intended to optimize the presentation, writing, coordination, and sourcing of the massive plans but failed to address the most fundamental aspect of plan credibility—critical and creative thought.

The military’s penchant for process and its fixation with planning did not allow questioning of the most fundamental assumptions about the chosen method for generating and delivering sovereign options. No one could challenge the presupposition that the vaunted military decision-making process would always deliver. In the end, the very community that prides itself on the ceaseless examination of planning assumptions failed to critically examine the one assumption that could have saved the concept.

The Fall of Adaptive Planning

One can trace evidence of the downfall of AP back to the P3T changes designed to fuel the transformation. First, in the realm of personnel, developers acknowledged that AP “may overload planning staffs” with work initially and “will require far more experienced planners” when it

matures.⁸ However, a “comprehensive human resource strategy [would address] shortfalls in the selection, education, training, professional development, and personnel management of Joint contingency planners.”⁹ Unfortunately, the “care and feeding” of the military planning community has not changed, and the overload of planning staffs became the only fulfilled promise of AP. Since 2005 the production of formally trained planners has not increased. In fact, the decision to make the sole joint planner training institution (the Joint Advanced Warfighting School) only a senior developmental education school instead of a dual junior-senior school saw an actual decrease in the effective number of trained planners produced each year by the DOD.

The products realm promised to expedite planning by using better and timelier guidance to “generate plans with multiple branches and sequels . . . and alternate base plan[s].”¹⁰ Although this realm improved slightly with the emergence of the documents *Guidance for the Employment of the Force* and *Guidance for the Development of the Force* to replace the *Contingency Planning Guidance*, they made no changes to the basic approach to planning that the DOD has executed for decades. Massive, annex-laden plans continued to grow at the COCOMs while entire war plans devolved into single PowerPoint slides for discussions in Washington. In the end, the menu-of-options concept proved elusive.

Of all these areas, the technology realm generated the greatest disappointment, realizing only a fraction of the original grand design. AP promised to create “collaborative, . . . web-based planning technology and tools with easily accessible, linked databases.”¹¹ Instead, most of the tools intended to foster collaboration and reduce planners’ burdens never materialized, and one of the proven sourcing tools—Collaborative Force-Building Analysis, Sustainment, and Transportation (CFAST)—terminated prematurely in 2009.

The final realm, process—ripe for improvement—should have experienced the most drastic change but produced only lackluster results. Formalization of in-progress reviews (IPR) between combatant commanders and the secretary of defense has enhanced the flow and fre-

quency of plan reviews, but the 45-minute discussions of major strategic concepts rarely brought about the advertised revolution in strategic guidance. No significant changes have occurred in plan development or review processes, leaving the bulk of thought and effort to a small group of planners on the COCOM staff. The promise of reducing the planning timeline from 24 months to “days” with the new process never materialized (fig. 3). Indeed, the initial mandate of cutting the process in half—from a two-year development cycle down to one year—did not survive implementation and became significantly less stringent.

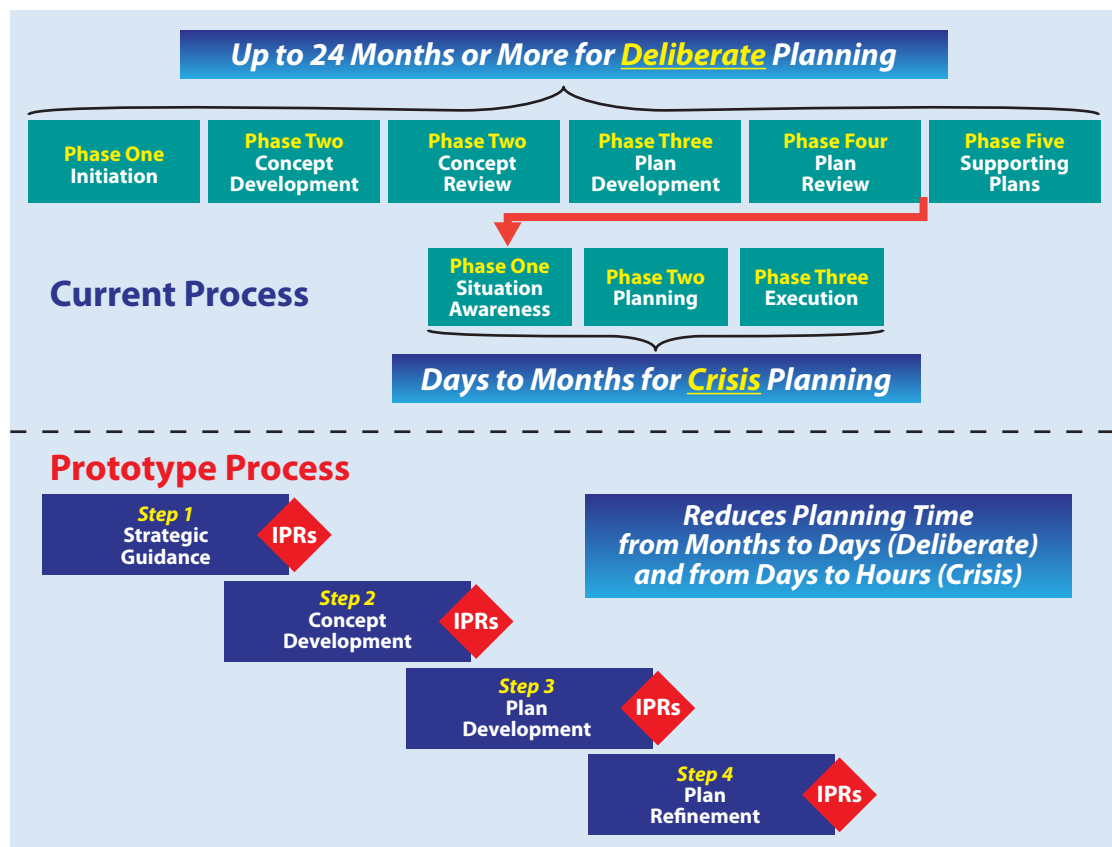


Figure 3. Comparison of adaptive planning process with current process.

(Adapted from Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Adaptive Planning Roadmap 2005* [Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 13 December 2005], 19.)

Based on this review, even by the most generous standards, the AP revolution has failed. It did so because the complexity and duration of the strategic planning process resist simplification sufficient to accommodate the radical demands of agility and flexibility without significant restructuring. To attain the desired outcomes, we must initiate a fundamental shift from sole reliance on a complex planning process to dependence on strategic thinking and planning in a more agile framework.

Strategic Planning versus Strategic Thinking

For too long, US military circles have assumed that strategic planning and strategic thinking were synonymous. This premise, combined with the military's penchant for bureaucratic process, has led to placing the preponderance of intellectual effort on the planning process. Consequently, planners have endlessly pursued deeper and deeper mission analysis, intelligence preparation of the battlespace, and excursions into effects-based operations in order to fine-tune the development, selection, and refinement of the course of action (COA). Even now as the planning community slowly embraces the latest fad of design, it still fails to understand that strategic planning and strategic thinking are two distinct activities.

Strategic planning, a process-based activity, focuses on analysis, logic, and procedures while strategic thinking, an idea-based cognitive activity, emphasizes synthesis, creativity, intuition, and innovation.¹² Strategic planning translates strategy into actionable content. Strategic thinking generates insight into the present and foresight regarding the future.¹³ It fuels the start of the strategic planning process but often becomes overwhelmed by concentrating on the next step in the process or by making PowerPoint slides for the next IPR. As T. Irene Sanders points out, "Most strategic planning models are still too complicated and take too long; they are too confusing, too inflexible, and too disconnected from the dynamics of the real world context they are designed to navigate. . . . Strategic thinking is often abbreviated or overlooked completely."¹⁴

The military has long held that “it’s not the plan, it’s the planning.” Though typically employed to caveat the less-than-perfect results of the planning process, this quip actually points to the core issue that purposeful thought about the issues is more important than the process or products. According to Jeanne Liedtka, “The ability of a strategic planning process to deliver on its promise rests upon the quality of the questions it asks, rather than the answers it demands.”¹⁵ Strategic thinking keeps leaders in receive mode throughout the process, allowing concepts to emerge and adaptation to occur along the way instead of relying on the false expectation that everything is figured out in advance or will happen according to the planner’s timeline.

Credible, Living Plans . . . with Options!

AP transformation had the objective of creating credible, living plans that provide multiple options to senior leaders. As someone who has been intimately involved in the planning process, I know that this outcome is possible only through a flexible, responsive framework and the exercise of sustained critical thought. Only practiced strategic thought can provide the agility and creativity required to keep pace with emerging threats while developing the menu of options necessary to counter them.

A great challenge occurs in the mesh of timelines between strategic thought, which operates continuously and on a scale of minutes and seconds, and strategic planning, which operates sequentially and on a scale of months and years. Members of the planning community resist continuous strategic thought because they cannot afford to keep the “good-idea window” open since doing so prevents completion of that step and delays movement to the next steps in the process. The inertia of the planning process creates a natural resistance to embracing strategic thinking apart from its role at specific junctions in the process.

The predictive nature of planning represents another significant hurdle for strategic planning as it pursues the adaptive goal. Strategic

planning is plagued by what Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel call “the fallacy of predetermination.” They write that “to engage in strategic planning, an organization must be able to predict the course of its environment, to control it, or simply to assume its stability.” Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel also observe that, effectively, “the world has to hold still while the planning process unfolds” and then unfold in the manner forecast.¹⁶ Since this scenario remains highly unlikely, these characteristics seriously undermine the credibility, adaptability, and currency or “living” nature of the plans.

A final set of barriers in the current system comes from underlying structures that comprise the strategic planning framework. The DOD continues to use the Cold War-era Joint Operation Planning and Execution System (JOPES) to prescribe the format of its contingency plans. This colossal structure, described in Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Manual 3122.01, *Joint Operation Planning and Execution System (JOPES)*, vol. 1, *Planning Policies and Procedures*, 14 July 2000, prescribes nightmarish detail that leads to massive planning documents in excess of 1,000 pages. Added to this already unwieldy beast is an entire family of plans that cascades down from the COCOM through service components to the unit level and across to supporting commands such as US Transportation Command or US Strategic Command. These plans can easily top tens of thousands of pages, and the sum total of this strategic planning effort is about as agile as Mount Rushmore. Serious change in this domain would require a direct confrontation with the “JOPEster” tribe who vigorously defends the system as the only part of planning that works, failing to realize that JOPES is part of the anchor that prevents institutional progress.

If military leaders truly wish to reach their goal of having current, credible, and multiple options for confronting the threats that America faces, it is time to stop trying to breathe agility into the rigid planning process. Instead, they must generate agility and creativity by making strategic thinking our primary strategic discipline.

Thinking Ahead

The way ahead demands a return to the proper relationship between strategic thinking and strategic planning. Both are vital to the continued preeminence of the US military, but if we wish to reach the original objectives of AP, we must turn our attention from strategic planning to strategic thinking. This transition will neither occur overnight nor prove easy because it will assail some of the long-standing cultural norms and processes of the armed forces. However, the alternative is to continue using our outdated processes and live with products that fail to meet the needs of the president and secretary of defense.

Although this article does not presume to address all of the aspects of the proposed transition, five actions present themselves for consideration:

1. *Develop and strengthen strategic thinking skills.* As a discipline, strategic thinking requires training and practice, as does strategic planning; therefore, we should direct developmental efforts toward accession sources and professional military education forums. At a minimum, specific training should include scanning (assess where we are), visioning (determine where we want to go), reframing (look at things differently), making common sense (translate what we “know”), and systems thinking (discern interrelationships and complexity).¹⁷
2. *Expand the community.* Unlike the relatively closed elite community of strategic planning, the new strategic thinking culture should widen its aperture. We will retain a select cadre of formally trained planners, but we can significantly expand participation in strategic thinking to include more perspectives and creativity. Training and participation in the discipline of strategic thinking offer benefits that go well beyond its strategic planning applications.
3. *Break the mold.* Although still useful for static topics, the JOPES construct has outlived its utility for addressing the dynamic planning environment. We should eliminate the JOPES framework and replace it with streamlined requirements that allow creativity

and innovation to deliver options in the most appropriate and expeditious format. In these days of remotely piloted aircraft and satellite communications, we cannot allow our nation's premier planners to waste countless hours formatting planning documents in Microsoft Word. Because the real measure of quality for a strategic plan lies in its content, not its format, we need to adopt a new method for capturing and presenting strategic thinking and planning that reflects these priorities and our technological status.

4. *Change the process.* The current deliberate planning process needs modification to reduce time and wasted effort. The most useful aspect of the process occurs during mission analysis and COA development, when most of the strategic thought occurs. Refocusing the process at this point can provide greater coverage to multiple potential futures since it does not force the selection of a single COA and saves significant time and resources. To offset this change, COCOMs should institute regular crisis action planning reviews of their concepts since these processes bring the plans into execution. These reviews will shape refinements or changes of the strategic concepts.
5. *"Red-team" the review.* We must restore credibility to the plan-review process by completely overhauling the current administrative joint planning and execution community (JPEC) review and installing a "red team" review. Although good in concept, the JPEC often amounts to little more than a haphazard collection of action officers across the DOD who possess neither the skills nor motivation to effectively supply the intended review. Instead, COCOM planners receive several hundred comments from the JPEC pointing out misspelled words on page 17 instead of substantive comments on the operational design or logistical concept of operations. Socializing plans with the planning community will continue to have value, but it is time to stop treating this as a validation process. The red team, comprised of objective, experienced strategic planners and thinkers, would critically review the underlying

logic, creativity, and feasibility of the strategic concept while enhancing consistency in plan development.

Conclusion

The objectives of the AP transformation effort are even more relevant today than they were when the program began, but we stand little chance of reaching them without significantly changing our approach. Even at this writing, the AP executive committee showed the dismal future of AP by terminating development of the “son of CFAST” suite of planning tools and reducing IPRs for COCOM plans because they were overwhelming senior leaders’ calendars. Meanwhile, our COCOMs continue to struggle with insufficient numbers of trained planners, outdated planning tools, and an ever-increasing number of complex plans to maintain. We must acknowledge that the AP revolution has failed and shift our direction. As the dominant military intellectual discipline, strategic planning has served the DOD well, but it is not suited to stand alone as the primary strategic mechanism because it lacks the agility and creativity to deal with the pace and diversity of today’s threat environment. By emphasizing the development and employment of strategic thinking and moving away from the sluggish, constraining aspects of our planning structures, we can create current, credible options for addressing America’s security challenges. ★

Notes

1. Henry Mintzberg, Bruce Ahlstrand, and Joseph Lampel, *Strategy Safari: A Guided Tour through the Wilds of Strategic Management* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 49.
2. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Adaptive Planning Roadmap 2005* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 13 December 2005).
3. Briefing, Andrew Hoffman, Joint Forces Staff College, subject: Adaptive Planning, February 2006.
4. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Adaptive Planning Roadmap 2005*, 2.
5. *Ibid.*, v.
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7. Ibid., 8.
8. Ibid., 23.
9. Ibid., 24.
10. Ibid., 22.
11. Ibid., 24.
12. Fiona Graetz, "Strategic Thinking versus Strategic Planning: Towards Understanding the Complementarities," *Management Decision* 40, no. 5/6 (2002): 457.
13. T. Irene Sanders, *Strategic Thinking and the New Science: Planning in the Midst of Chaos, Complexity, and Change* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 10.
14. Ibid., 137.
15. Jeanne Liedtka, "Linking Strategic Thinking with Strategic Planning," *Strategy and Leadership* 26, no. 4 (October 1998): 34.
16. Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel, *Strategy Safari*, 66–67, 68.
17. Richard L. Hughes, and Katherine Colarelli Beatty, *Becoming a Strategic Leader: Your Role in Your Organization's Enduring Success* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 44.



Lt Col John F. Price Jr., USAF

Lieutenant Colonel Price (USFA; MS, National Defense University; MA, George Washington University; MA, Regent University) serves on the Joint Staff, the Pentagon, Washington, DC. Previously, he served as a National Defense Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a C-17 squadron commander, and a strategic planner at Headquarters US Pacific Command. A graduate of Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College, Joint Advanced Warfighting School, and Air War College, as well as an Air Force Fellow for Senior Developmental Education, Lieutenant Colonel Price is completing a doctorate in strategic leadership at Regent University.

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