

# WebMemo



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## Why a Federal Interagency History Office Is Needed

*James Jay Carafano, Ph.D.*

Carved on the National Archives are some of the most important words in Washington—"The past is prologue." This phrase succinctly states the intent behind the laws requiring that the U.S. government record and interpret its history. Such laws are in place not only to illuminate the past but also to provide insights and observations to inform future decision making.

It is generally recognized today that whole-of-government or interagency operations (where more than one agency or authority combines their efforts to address difficult and complex challenges) are essential to successful governance. Yet this is the one federal activity that has no official history. Establishing a corps of interagency professionals, as well as the doctrine and policies necessary to implement whole-of-government solutions, requires a professional historical foundation. Therefore, the U.S. Congress should establish by law a national historian of the U.S. government and a federal interagency office. This office should work independently of any single federal agency and be charged with writing the official history of interagency operations as well as producing cutting-edge analysis and case studies that inform the thinking and development of a corps of interagency professionals.

**Scholars and Scribes.** Many federal agencies from the Department of State to the Pentagon to the CIA and the National Park Service maintain history offices, many of which are established by statute. Offices are funded out of the agency's annual appropriation. Federal historians are government employees, though in some cases private

historians write official histories under contract to the agency historians.

History offices and each agency's official historian are often charged with a range of duties. In addition to writing the official history of the organization and annual historical summaries, many undertake case studies to inform ongoing policy questions or answer queries on historical matters from Congress and government officials.

Federal historians also provide a foundation for academic historians and public policy analysts who use the historical materials they develop as a starting point and guide for their research. For example, the State Department's Office of the Historian collects, edits, and produces the *Foreign Relations of the United States*. This series of volumes, begun in 1861 and continued to this day, publishes the official documents that explain major foreign policy initiatives by the United States. The volumes have been used as a primary source by countless historians and other scholars.

**Enter the Interagency.** No federal activity requires a more solid grounding in its history than operations that involve multiple agencies, thereby requiring them to work together in a coordinated fashion. The capacity of agencies to act together has become a core competence of government. Today,

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however, few individuals in government have all the skills needed to create national enterprise solutions to national problems.

The White House's after-action report on the national response to Hurricane Katrina, for example, highlighted the shortfalls in the government's ability to manage large-scale interagency homeland security operations. Numerous studies have documented similar problems in managing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. In order to avoid the pitfalls that have hobbled many past interagency operations, the professionals leading interagency efforts must have three essential skills:

1. Familiarity with a number of diverse disciplines (such as health care, law enforcement, immigration, and trade) and practice in interagency operations, working with different government agencies, the private sector, and international partners;
2. Competence in crisis action and long-term strategic planning; and
3. A sound understanding of federalism, the free-market economy, constitutional rights, domestic government, and international relations.

Indeed, without this foundation of professional skill, running interagency operations always becomes a futile exercise—like herding cats.

**How History Helps.** One key instrument for facilitating integrated action is a shared body of common knowledge and practices, common experiences, and trust and confidence among practitioners. History is a key component of building common knowledge and is America's laboratory for developing critical-thinking skills and understanding the complexities of public policymaking. It is also the foundation of any sound professional education and development program.

For example, the military achieved improved cooperation between the armed forces by creating a joint professional development program that included activities involving more than one military service and requirements for joint education, joint assignments, and joint accreditation.

Developing a body of interagency history is will create a foundation upon which to establish the

interagency process—just as military history is central to building joint military professionalism. Official histories of U.S. interagency operations would a rich breath and depth of insight into understanding the opportunities and obstacles in whole-of-government operations. For example, consider what the following studies would demonstrate:

- The U.S. government's response to the pandemic of 1918 would show that federal polices actually hastened the spread of the disease. Those considering how to respond to a swine or bird flu pandemic could learn a lot about what not to do.
- The great Alaska "Easter" earthquake of 1964 demonstrates the right way for Washington to lead in post-catastrophic disaster recovery.
- Civil-military operations in Vietnam would be useful for policymakers grappling with reconstruction and stabilization in Iraq and Afghanistan.

There is, however, no federal office charged with specifically writing the official interagency history of the U.S. government, capturing lessons learned, and providing the foundation for professional education and academic research.

**Taking Action.** Congress should take the lead in addressing this critical issue by:

- Establishing by statute a federal office of interagency history and providing annual appropriations for its operations;
- Establishing a position of federal interagency historian with a term of not less than 10 years;
- Requiring the federal interagency historian to report annually to Congress on the state of federal history and records management programs and their impact on preserving and writing interagency history;
- Creating the office of interagency history under the White House, with the historian having broad authority and discretion in establishing a research agenda; and
- Requiring the office of the historian to collocate with appropriate federal research or academic institutions, such as the National Archives, to facilitate access and interchange with federal historians and the broader academic community.

In Washington, the urgent always crowds out the important. When it comes to the establishment of a federal interagency history office, however, Congress must make an exception. Fostering the practice of interagency history will never rise to the level of vital national issue. It will only be in the aftermath of some great future disaster that Members will stand up and cry out, “This all could have been avoided if we had just studied our history.” Avoiding

the history that should not happen can be done only by studying the past—and that will not happen unless Congress acts.

—James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., is Assistant Director of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies and Senior Research Fellow for National Security and Homeland Security in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation.