

## BOOK REVIEW

### **PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE: STRATEGIC PLANNING IN THE U.S. AIR FORCE** by Michael Barzelay and Colin Campbell

JOHN M. BRYSON  
*UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA*

*Preparing for the Future: Strategic Planning in the U.S. Air Force.* Michael Barzelay and Colin Campbell; Washington, D.C.; Brookings Institution Press, 2003, 274 pages

Let me start with the conclusion: Michael Barzelay and Colin Campbell have written an excellent book describing and analyzing how the U.S. Air Force went about preparing for the future in the 1990s and early 2000s. The book presents a theoretically informed and well-executed case study that explores how, when, where, why, and to what extent the preparing-for-the-future approach worked in the USAF. Because of the guiding theoretical framework and the care with which it was applied, the book also can be used to explore how other government agencies might reposition themselves in response to foreseeable changes in their future operating environments.

Leaders and managers considering the possibilities for changing their organizations and students of public strategic management would be well advised to read this book. As a result, they will understand more clearly how process, context, and participation influence the outcomes of efforts to define strategic intent in a governmental organization; how strategic visioning, long-range planning, budgeting, and implementation may be linked; how organizational and technological innovation may occur; and how smart practices analysis may be undertaken. In this latter regard, the authors build on Eugene Bardach's (1998, 36) notion that a smart practice consists of a "method of interacting with a situation that is intended to produce some result; ... [and] also involves taking advantage of some latent opportunity for creating value on the cheap."

The book has nine chapters: an introductory chapter; four chapters devoted to strategic visioning and strategic intent; three chapters devoted to continuing institutional issues (planning, resourcing, and governance), implementing strategic intent, and corrective visioning; and a final chapter on taking lessons to a wider audience.

The authors mainly analyze two separate episodes of strategic visioning in the USAF in the 1990s, along with their interconnections and aftermaths. The first round occurred in the mid-1990s under Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Ronald Fogelman. Then-Secretary of Defense Sheila Widnall played a minor role. The second round occurred in the late-1990s under Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Michael Ryan and Secretary of

**Direct all correspondence to:** John M. Bryson, Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, 301 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue S., Minneapolis, MN 55455. Email: jmbryson@hhh.umn.edu

Defense F. Whitten Peters. In both rounds the goal was to develop a sense of strategic intent, seen as “a committed interpretation, shared by the organization’s leaders, of how the organization’s capabilities should evolve so as to remain effective in performing future tasks” (96). The key challenge was to reposition the Air Force and its competencies and capabilities in response to changes in geopolitics, the theory of warfare, technology of many kinds, interservice rivalry, budgetary realities, and a variety of other factors. The first round highlighted the importance of space in addition to air as a medium for USAF work and also elevated the importance of the service as a war fighter in relation to the other services. The second round focused on resolving a number of difficulties that the first round left unanswered. Subsequent sections of the book provide detail on issues of translating strategic intent into organizational practices and ongoing operations, and on correcting the visions as the need for changes became apparent.

In addition to the case study approach, the authors rely on four major methodological tools. The first two are theoretical, while the second two are operational. The first theoretical tool is a functional hierarchy approach to articulating what preparing for the future is. Preparing for the future, assert the authors, consists of strategic planning and policy management, and implementation. Strategic planning and policy management, in turn, consist of strategic visioning (organizing participation, making sense of the future, conceiving strategic intent, agreeing on strategic intent, and declaring strategic intent); medium-term policy and expenditure planning; and strategic human resources and institutional planning. The second theoretical tool is the argument that process context features, process design features, and the quality of participation all affect outcomes in each functional area. Process context features are broadly the givens in the situation; specifically, the organizational constitution, organizational cultural bias, installed base of strategic thinking, and policy subsystem. The two operational tools consist of numerous detailed interviews and document analyses. The authors had the support of the Air Force throughout the research process, which may be a source of bias in the study, but no bias is apparent. Indeed, while the authors are typically diplomatic in their use of language, they are also quite critical of a number of features of the actual process.

The two episodes of strategic visioning allow for a comparative analysis. The functional hierarchy approach and attention to context, process, and participation provide the dimensions of the analysis. The authors argue that features common to both episodes are strong candidates for “essential characteristics of a strategic visioning process” (115-119). These elements include: (1) adherence to the principles of collective buy-in and backcasting (i.e., mapping back to the present from a future scenario, rather than forecasting the current situation into the future); (2) a knowledgeable chief executive; and (3) a culminating event in which key actors assemble for dialogue and decisions. Said differently, these features should probably be considered essential features of the smart practice of strategic visioning. These features may not be surprising, but on the other hand, they seem to be infrequently practiced, especially in large government organizations. Beyond that, the demonstrable success of the Air Force in its efforts to prepare for the future demonstrates that large (even huge) government agencies can, at least in some circumstances, use strategic management processes to powerful, positive, transforming effect.

Barzeley and Campbell's careful approach to analysis also allows them to make tentative generalizations to other government organizations in which similar causal features are present. A useful discussion, for example, centers on the notion of guided incrementalism, or incremental advances informed by a sense of strategic intent (144-153). In other words, a public organization can rarely implement its strategic intent across the board, but agreed strategic intent can help the organization position itself to take advantage of opportunities as they arise or to choose the right fork in the road when one appears.

In addition to the guiding theoretical framework, comparative approach, identification of smart practices, and serviceable generalizations to other government agencies, let me mention one other strength of the book: It is generally extremely well written. This is actually no mean accomplishment, given the volume of bureaucratese, acronyms, and technical jargon with which the authors had to cope in the Air Force-defense establishment environment.

Notwithstanding the book's many strengths, there is some room for improvement. First, the graphic representation of the preparing-for-the-future approach, which is presented in chapter IX, would have been more useful in chapter I. Without a clear visual anchor identifying the preparing-for-the-future approach to begin with, I found the chapters following the early ones on strategic visioning to be more like afterthoughts than integral to the approach. Second, the book needs a glossary. Notwithstanding the authors' heroic efforts, the proliferation of organizational entities and, to a lesser extent, actors, is occasionally hard to follow. Third, yet another simple change would be to include a graphic timeline, perhaps with separate tracks for different processes and projects, and graphic indications of how different tracks came together or did not, over time.

A fourth improvement would be rearranging and expanding the list of causal factors. Recall that Barzelay and Campbell use the categories of process context features, process design features, and the quality of participation as sources of causal explanations for outcomes. In fact, they actually use at least two other factors, but conflate them with their existing three categories. Separating out content features probably makes sense, because ideas mattered so much in this case. Additionally, creating a category called people (or stakeholders) seems wise, since individual people matter so much. Ideas get a lot of attention in the book, but where they fit conceptually is not clear. People also matter, typically as carriers, importers, or shapers of ideas, but where they fit conceptually also is unclear. The categories of ideas and people have proven important in other studies of innovation and organizational change (Van de Ven, Poole, and Angle 1989).

A fifth improvement would be harder to make. The authors use a very interesting, but also very uneven, set of citations. The authors make useful links to a number of important works in political science, public management, and, perhaps unusually for political scientists and public management scholars, business management. But their reference list is actually weak in terms of its connection to the broader literatures on public-sector strategic planning, strategic visioning in general, strategic decision making, organizational collaboration, and organizational design and change. As one example, the authors do not include the work of James Brian Quinn, whose classic 1980 book *Strategies for Change: Logical Incrementalism* clearly prefigures in a very

substantial way their concept of guided incrementalism. As another example, the authors do not cite the literature on scenario planning, as discussed, for example, by Kees Van der Heijden (1996). In addition, it is certainly surprising to find no references to articles in the *Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science*, or *Long Range Planning*, where a number of issues the authors address are discussed on a fairly regular basis. Since the scholarly abilities of Barzelay and Campbell are truly outstanding, these lacunae seem to be a function of the sociology of knowledge more than anything. One can only hope that the gaps between fields can be bridged more effectively in the future to the benefit of all concerned.

In sum, Barzelay and Campbell have produced a real winner. The book is very valuable. Anyone interested in public-sector strategic management would benefit from reading it, and the authors provide a powerful example of how to use carefully constructed case study research to advance the field.

### REFERENCES

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