http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2012.679475

URL: [http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR388.pdf](http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR388.pdf)

Review by Kenneth Weisbrode, Bilkent University

Writing the history of policy planning presents a basic, two-part challenge: most plans are not implemented, or at least not fully as designed; and the act of planning is prospective. Any history of it not only must be imaginary to some degree but also must write diachronically against the thinking of its subject.

It is also often the case that planning appears on the margins of historical accounts, not least because few governments are organized to operate with the mid- or long-term future in mind. Their time and attention are limited. Their sensitivity to leaks and controversies is high—public opinion easily misconstrues planning with plotting. Bureaucrats and politicians tend to be reactive, not proactive. Planning for many is as much about policy rationalization as prescription. Planning staffs—at least outside the military—are often filled by academics, speechwriters, technical experts and analysts. The real action, it is said, is elsewhere.

However, planning, as Dwight Eisenhower liked to paraphrase the elder von Moltke, is essential even if plans themselves become worthless. It is fortunate—perhaps ironic—that planning efforts tend to produce so much paper. Here at least the historian has little excuse for neglect.

Wartime planning is an especially fruitful topic because it is so complex. It frames war aims and strategies, reflects their evolution at particular moments and anticipates how they will shape the peace.

Planning during the Second World War was extensive. It had to contend with the limitations of American neutrality laws and the power of isolationist opinion. Setting
right the failures—including the planning failures—of the previous post-war period was in the minds of many people at this time. Much has been written about Bretton Woods, the UN, etc., but there are few studies of the wider planning effort, which began as far back as late 1939.

J. Simon Rofe’s article gives a thoughtful, solid and useful introduction to its history and legacy. It also suggests, in its discussion of the short-lived attempt at Anglo-American coordination, a direction for further research, namely a comparative, transnational one. So far as I know, nobody apart from Volker Prött of the European University Institute, who is in the final stages of his examination of the American, British and French planning committees during the First World War, has done such a study. Most postwar histories begin near the end of the wars or just after the peace treaties are signed. A full study of the planning during both wars that transcends and intersects geographical and chronological boundaries would be welcome.

Rofe sets a narrower but nevertheless difficult task in recovering the significance of the State Department’s Advisory Committee on Problems of Foreign Relations (ACPFR). The United States still was officially neutral. Not only did the planners imagine a range of future ‘world orders,’ they also had to contend with the possibility that Germany might win the war and with the fact that the United States had not formally chosen a side or a precise set of conditions for direct intervention. Thus right at the outset the group confronted a simple and fundamental liability: it had no clear terms of reference.

Rofe’s principal claim is that, this liability notwithstanding, the work of ACPFR illustrates well the official American mind during the critical six months before it was disbanded in the summer of 1940. It helped to clarify thinking at the highest levels about the stakes for the United States and the future of collective security. It helped to place a priority on Western Hemisphere defense; and it helped to lay the conceptual foundation for subsequent planning efforts, namely those of its successor, the Advisory Committee on Postwar Foreign Policy.

The question remains: did any of it really matter? I concur with Rofe’s judgment in the affirmative, although less for what the group did than for what it was and who its members were. Influence is almost impossible to prove in most cases. The analyst who traces the symbolic language in documents making their way from the various planning committees and subcommittees to operational decisions is challenged to show any specific and exclusive causation. Anyone trying to prove that this or that person or group influenced President Franklin Roosevelt or those in his inner circle in any specific way is bound to be speculative and, ultimately, disappointed. With Roosevelt in particular, the search for definite motives and influences has long been seen as a lost cause. Few American leaders are more mysterious.

Nevertheless, if one gets to know the members of the ACPFR, one is treated to a preview, albeit in microcosm, of the personalities and bureaucratic logic that would come to dominate a significant part of U.S. foreign policymaking over the next few decades. It may
have set a precedent. The best known planning efforts of the early Cold War, for example—those resulting in NSC 68 and NSC 162/2—both had an important inner agenda, namely to manipulate bureaucrats into reaching an apparent consensus in opposition to prevailing policy.

The Committee’s chairman was Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles. Welles was much closer personally to the President than his nominal boss, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, and appears, in Rofe’s account, to have been free to organize the work of the Committee however he wished. Here Rofe is his most authoritative, having written a fine book about Welles’ 1940 mission to Europe, and clearly in command of the relevant sources. To suggest that the ACPFR, like the Atlantic Charter, was Welles’ “baby” (259) is probably correct. Or it is necessary, but not sufficient. Welles was driven out of office by a personal scandal a mere three years later. Yet the planning effort resumed with many of the same people and remained, to some extent, true to the same parameters.

The Vice Chairman was the seasoned diplomat Hugh Wilson, who joined two other Europeanists, Jay Pierrepont Moffat and James Clement Dunn, on the Committee. These men ran the bureaucracy to a large degree—especially Dunn, who went on to oversee a later phase of planning and place his bureaucratic fief, European Affairs, at the center of the departmental pantheon, where it would remain more or less until the 1980s. It is interesting in this respect to note that the Committee had only one Asia-hand, Stanley Hornbeck, and Rofe has described no work about Asia. Other members included so-called functionalists: the New Deal polymath Adolf Berle; the legal advisor Green Hackworth; the underappreciated trouble shooter Norman Davis; and the economic mastermind, Leo Pasvolsky. Each member would have represented a certain constituency. Pasvolsky, for example, was clearly Hull’s man. His presence there and the Committee’s extensive attention to economic matters, especially international trade—the favorite topic of the Secretary—were almost certainly meant to buy Hull’s support.

Rofe has written that “it is perhaps remarkable that at the time of the ACPFR there is little personal animosity or amity...” (276, n.25) Remarkable indeed. Several members of the Committee—notably Berle, Breckinridge Long, Henry Grady and R. Walton Moore—were said to be barely on speaking terms with Welles, or with one another. Others like the economic adviser and later historian, Herbert Feis, the diplomat George Messersmith and, to some extent, Wilson, were respected but basically bureaucratic loners, and complained regularly about colleagues. Anybody familiar with the State Department during this period knows how magnificently dysfunctional it was. To appreciate the value of this Committee, therefore, is to realize just how anomalous a thing it was at the time and the precedent it may have set for functionality borne of necessity. That it managed to stay intact while debating some of the most difficult questions facing the country must be worth a mention in the history books.

Roosevelt once revealed that his “problem is to get the American people to think of conceivable consequences without scaring the American people into thinking that they
are going to be dragged into this war....” (257) Rofe has quoted this line to show that the ACPF served as a kind of psychological bridge which may or may not have been meant as a foil: for the President, for the State Department and, indirectly, for the country. If the characterization is correct, the Committee also serves as a bridge for historians. Anyone trying to understand the vocation and multiple orientations of U.S. foreign policy in the postwar period—regionalism and universalism; free trade and protection; collective and ‘national’ security; interventionism and ‘insulationism’; European integration and decolonization—and the reasons why, somehow, the nation still managed to thrive in so dangerous a world, would do well to examine the planning documents of 1939-40 and the contingent thinking of the men who authored them. They imagined just about all of it.

Kenneth Weisbrode teaches history at Bilkent University and is the author of The Atlantic Century (Da Capo, 2009).

Copyright © 2013 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.
H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.