

# Getting out of Our Tactical Comfort Zone

## Leveraging the Joint Planning Process to Prepare Airmen for Joint Duty

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I wasn't thrilled when I received my initial assignment notification to US Central Command (CENTCOM) Strategy, Plans, and Policy (J5) after graduating from National Defense University. Like many of us, I wasn't looking forward to staff work, much less in the infamous “SADCOM” headquarters. Three years later, I'm here to confess that my time in the CENTCOM J5 was one of the most defining assignments in my professional career. My time at CENTCOM J5 presented the opportunity to plan and negotiate operations at the international level and to make an impact well beyond that which I could make in an operational assignment. Simply put, my time on the CENTCOM staff made me a better officer and senior leader. In many ways, the skills and habits I learned as an Airman helped prepare me for joint staff work, but I believe there are several things we can do better to prepare officers for joint staff duty. What follows are three lessons that I took from my time on the CENTCOM J5 planning staff. After each lesson learned, I will identify some opportunities to better prepare Airmen to serve on a joint staff. I will also identify some competitive advantages that Airmen bring to any joint staff position.

First, good staff officers (not just those on planning staffs) use the Joint Planning Process to plan and communicate. The joint planning process (JPP) works. It gives us a model to organize and communicate our thoughts. It is a proven framework that provides a step-by-step approach to problem solving. One of the greatest strengths of the JPP is that it begins by defining the desired end state. It requires the planner to first identify a discernible, achievable, and measurable end state, and then build objectives and tasks to meet that desired end state. If we don't align our tasks and objectives with the end state, we may find ourselves executing tactical operations flawlessly without ever achieving our operational or strategic goals while creating unnecessary risks for our Airmen and aircraft. Just as important, the JPP works because it is the commonly understood joint operational language.

Combatant commanders understand operational design and are fluent in terms like *assumptions*, *risks*, *limitations*, and *tasks*. Similar to USAF operational brevity codewords, planning terminology has very nuanced meaning—every term means something and has implications and relationships with other planning terms. If staff officers don't speak this language, their words too often fall on deaf ears.

By increasing our emphasis on the JPP and thereby teaching Airmen to speak the planning language fluently, we can build and prepare better joint staff officers. As it stands, the JPP is a bit of an afterthought in the Air Force—although it is taught at different levels of professional military education, we don't apply it to daily Air Force operations. In contrast, other services apply it to everything they do, from logistics to operations; Army, Marine, and Naval officers grow up using the JPP. Frankly, emphasizing the joint planning process in the Air Force isn't an education problem; it's an application problem. The most effective way to build better joint planners is to use the JPP in regular, everyday Air Force operations. If we planned our daily operations using the JPP model, including flying operations, we would grow better joint officers from the ground up.

Second, good joint staff officers get out of their tactical comfort zone and build vast networks of subject matter experts. No good joint staff officer works alone. Instead, he or she builds a team of professionals throughout the enterprise with whom he or she shares ideas, checks for redundancies and accuracy, and gains buy-in before formal staffing. An operational planning team lead does not need to be a subject matter expert in any single domain or system. In fact, it is often best if the lead planner isn't a tactical subject matter expert at all but instead is an expert at facilitating and organizing information in accordance with the JPP. Often, if the lead planner is a tactical subject matter expert, he or she becomes naturally predisposed to focusing too much on his or her system, platform, or domain as a solution, instead of exploring several courses of action to achieve an end state. If staff officers aren't able to get out of their tactical comfort zones and instead are too reliant on their own system or domain, their proposals and projects will often fail to gain traction in the joint community.

The natural tendency to focus on tactics is perhaps the greatest challenge for an Airman on a joint staff, and one of the most important paradigm shifts we can make if we want to build better joint qualified officers. Airmen, by our very nature, are subject matter experts in our highly technical systems and platforms—we are born and raised to be tactical. For this reason, we tend to gravitate to staff positions in Operations Directorates (J3) where we can remain in our tactical comfort zone, and we steer away from planning positions that don't necessarily require or leverage our technical subject matter expertise. This gravitational pull toward operations, in turn, causes senior Air Force leaders and the Air Force

personnel system to prioritize J3 (operations) assignments over J5 (strategy and planning) assignments. If we placed greater emphasis on joint staff planning assignments (J5) as well as on the schools that prepare officers to become joint planners, we would grow better joint officers, and the Air Force would be better represented on joint staffs.

The third lesson I learned on the CENTCOM staff was that on a joint staff, product is king, and the written word (not PowerPoint) is gold. Good ideas are not easily communicated using PowerPoint; they are best constructed and communicated using sentences formed around a logical argument. The written word stands alone, and it doesn't require a briefer or an explanation. It can certainly be supported by charts, graphs, or images, but the product itself must be whole, complete, comprehensive, and, most importantly, produced. Written products can take many forms—white papers, talking papers, night orders, or fragmentary orders, to name a few. But what is important is that an idea is presented, supported, and communicated in a way that can be easily understood and shared throughout a distributed enterprise. Good ideas poorly communicated are like hundred-dollar bills stuffed in a mattress—they don't grow in value, and you can't spend them.

As Airmen, we grow up planning on whiteboards and maps, and we tend to present our plans using PowerPoint slides. From my personal experience, I can't remember a single instance of writing a paper as a company grade officer (CGO) (other than for Squadron Officer School), and I hadn't heard of a night order or fragmentary order until I was a lieutenant colonel at CENTCOM. While PowerPoint may be effective for flying exercises like Red Flag, it doesn't effectively communicate to higher headquarters, the Joint Staff, the DOD, or other government departments or agencies. Moreover, because most Air Force officers don't generally practice writing as a CGO, we don't develop good writing habit patterns, and we continue to default to PowerPoint instead of the written word to communicate. By placing greater emphasis on the written word at all levels of the Air Force, we can better prepare our officers for joint staff duty.

Although there are several steps we can do better to prepare Airmen for joint assignments, I found that Airmen bring a unique set of skills to a joint staff that gives them a distinct competitive advantage. Through experience in planning, briefing, and executing flying operations, particularly during large exercises like Red Flag, we learn the fundamental organizational and briefing skills that are critical to organizational leadership. Skills like task delegation, information management, and public speaking are foundational requirements for success on a joint staff, and these skills are chiseled into Airmen in any career field. Our challenge is simply parlaying these foundational skills into processes and products that are relevant on a joint staff.

*Coleman*

After leaving CENTCOM in the summer of 2019, I took command of the 609th Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC). This transition is fortuitous as I am now in a position to oversee the execution of many of the plans I helped write while at CENTCOM. I also have the opportunity to impress upon our CAOC planners the value of the joint planning process, the imperative of getting out of our tactical comfort zones, and the superiority of communication using the written word instead of PowerPoint. Using these tools, the CAOC is writing plans that communicate well at the combatant command level and are approved for execution, thereby turning words into ordnance. And along the way, we are building and preparing future joint staff officers. ✪

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