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Play On: Supporting Decision-Makers by Sustaining Wargaming

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“At 5 a.m. (EST) on September 29 a Soviet attack submarine destroys a U.S. Benjamin Franklin-class Poseidon missile submarine. ... U.S. nuclear forces are placed at readiness level DefCon II, one step below a wartime state. ... At 7 a.m. Warsaw Pact forces cross the West German border at Hof, Fulda, and Lauenburg south of Hamburg. ... The U.S. Seventh Army is driven back more than fifty kilometers, losing 20 percent of its forces and one third of its vehicles. The President gives authority for the release of tactical nuclear weapons.”

– Scenario from a 1984 NATO-Warsaw Pact wargame conducted at Harvard

Across the Department of Defense, the use of wargaming to address difficult problems has been revived. Over the past year, DOD has called on wargaming [to explore and develop innovative strategies and technologies](#) in a variety of areas against a variety of opponents. It has identified some key challenges in both [Europe](#) and the [Pacific](#). Fundamentally, wargames allow commanders and decision-makers to think through complex problems well before the shooting starts, when the most dangerous threat is a cup of coffee being spilled on the map rather than an incoming artillery barrage.

The revitalization of wargaming over the past year was no accident, and continued future emphasis on wargaming within the department is not a given. Driven by the [personal interest](#) of Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work, wargaming has proven valuable because the leadership has insisted that decision-makers make the time, space, and effort to take advantage of what it offers. But as everyone knows, this is an [election year](#), and with an election comes change. While the next leadership cohort will bring its own knowledge and expertise, they may not intuitively understand what wargaming has to offer.

For those who believe that wargaming is a useful and important tool in defense decision-making, we should think about how to best communicate its benefits to this next group of leaders. While those who see value in wargaming might hold different views of [the various roles of wargaming](#), we likely agree that [it matters](#), meaning that it can help DOD better accomplish its mission while minimizing the costs in lives, money, and time. To this end, there are three reasons why a senior DOD official should be interested in wargaming and willing to commit his or her precious time to the endeavor: It helps leaders make decisions, it reduces the number of “unknown unknowns,” and it can overcome stovepiping.

First, *wargaming can help leaders make decisions*. The ultimate responsibility of leaders is to [make decisions](#), and for any decision that reaches the level of the secretary or deputy secretary, “difficult” is a given. Wargaming provides a sound basis from which to examine the strengths and weaknesses of various [options presented to a leader](#) because it is an iterative process that involves thinking opponents and that forces people to look at impacts and outcomes rather than just inputs. Wargames are one of the few methods that allow participants to truly analyze a problem holistically — for a leader responsible for the entire defense establishment, possessing a complete picture matters. Wargaming allows leaders to understand trade-offs, recognize consequences, and fully explore the decision space.

Second, *wargaming can reduce the “unknown unknowns.”* The best part about a Powerpoint brief is that everything seems to go exactly to plan; the worst part about a Powerpoint brief is that everything seems to go exactly as planned. The problem with this is that we are not forced, nor given the opportunity, to consider the unexpected — all of the obstacles, hurdles, and traps that [seem to come out of nowhere](#). By contrast, these unknowns quickly make themselves evident when facing a thinking opponent in a wargame.

Third, *wargaming can overcome stovepiping*. One of the most difficult challenges of managing an organization the size of DOD is that people do not always talk to each other. This is rarely intentional; rather, it is an inconvenient and sometimes dangerous effect of the procedures and techniques developed to work within an extremely complex system. Yet at the top, leaders have to know how things work across the entire system and what kind of trade-offs must be made. Additionally, it is in working across boundaries that biases, blind spots, and incorrect assumptions become apparent. Wargaming becomes a forcing function to drive people out of their comfort zone and see things from the other side of the table.

However, no tool is perfect, and it is imperative for wargamers to ensure that Pentagon leadership understands [its weaknesses as well as its strengths](#). *While wargaming is an important tool it is not the only tool*. For wargaming to be truly effective in analyzing concepts, capabilities, or courses of action, it should be [embedded in a larger methodology](#) in an iterative fashion. Additionally, *leaders should play the game, not the outcome*. There is no greater failure in wargaming than [using it to prove a pre-determined conclusion](#); instead of an opportunity for creativity and innovation, it becomes another paper drill. Finally, *it's okay to lose*. Wargaming is about learning and analysis, not about a performance rating. If there has to be an assessment, it should be based on how a person thinks through, responds to, and incorporates the lessons learned into other activities and concepts. A “zero failure” approach to wargaming is a sure way to make wargaming a zero-value activity. Overall, wargaming has much to add to problem-solving, but it must be used appropriately for the question being asked and with an understanding of its limitations.

For next year's change at the top of the Pentagon, it is the responsibility of those who see value in wargaming to ensure that it is not resigned to a couple of paragraphs in someone's transition book. The new leadership will be overwhelmed in the beginning of their tenure, but important things cannot be left to their own. Good ideas, no matter how good, still [require people to make them happen](#).

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