

**The politics of strategy:**

**Why government agencies conduct major strategic reviews**

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**Abstract:** In recent years, US policymakers have instituted quadrennial strategy reviews in several major policy areas. In this article, I examine why policymakers have initiated these large strategic reviews, and why a particular model for them has diffused from the US Defense Department to other government agencies. I find that policymakers have initiated the reviews principally to spur organizational change in agencies and influence the relationship between agencies and Congress, and that policymakers have replicated the Defense Department's review model because of that department's strong political support. My findings suggest more generally that formal strategy activities are often driven more by legislative-executive and bureaucratic politics than by a search for new strategic ideas. Commonalities between the diffusion of quadrennial reviews in the United States and the diffusion of other strategy and planning processes internationally underscore the broader applicability and significance of these findings.

**Key words:** Strategy, strategic planning, diffusion, government agencies, national security, policy process

## **Introduction**

Over the past two decades, major quadrennial strategy reviews by US federal government agencies have proliferated. This trend began in 1996, when the US Congress enacted legislation mandating that the secretary of defense conduct every four years a quadrennial defense review (QDR). Since then, Congress or the executive branch has mandated or initiated quadrennial reviews of intelligence, homeland security, diplomacy and development, and energy policy. As detailed below, policymakers have cited the QDR as the model for these other reviews.<sup>1</sup>

This diffusion of the Defense Department's (DOD's) strategic review model across large portions of the federal government is puzzling considering that most defense experts believe the quadrennial defense review has not made a major contribution to defense strategy (Gordon 2005; Gunzinger 2013, ii; Homolar 2011, 209-212; Snodgrass 2000). In 2010, an independent panel of 20 defense experts concluded that the QDR has been an ineffective strategic planning mechanism and even recommended discontinuing the review (Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel 2010). More specifically, the panel concluded that QDRs have not developed new long-term visions for defense strategy or proposals for significant changes to the military's

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force structure or allocation of resources, but rather have generated only “explanations and justifications, often with marginal changes, of established decisions and plans” (Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel 2010, iii, 97).

Defense experts have generally attributed these unimpressive results to the highly bureaucratic QDR process and the QDR legislation’s requirement that the QDR report be unclassified, which tend to generate lowest common denominator outcomes and rather anodyne report rhetoric (Center for Strategic and International Studies 2013; Gordon 2005; Snodgrass 200). Jim Thomas, a participant in several QDRs, has bluntly commented: “I can’t think of a worst way of making good strategy than a quadrennial defense review. Getting a couple of thousand people involved from across the bureaucracy, having lots of working groups, the coordination process, writing an unclassified document with lots of glossy pictures that you’re going to put out there and you’re going to pass off to your allies, as well as your enemies, as well as folks in your military and then industry, you’ve got too many audiences in play” (Center for Strategic and International Studies 2013). While a few scholars have found that QDRs have had some utility in providing an impetus for individual military services to do additional strategic planning and in facilitating incremental defense policy changes (Barzelay and Campbell 2003, 80-1, 100; Tama Forthcoming), most defense experts have clearly been dissatisfied with the QDR’s process and outcomes.

Given this widespread dissatisfaction, it is counterintuitive that policymakers have instituted similar strategic reviews in several other agencies in recent years. Why, then, have US policymakers established these major reviews, and why, more specifically, have they replicated DOD’s strategic review model in other agencies? These questions are worth examining both because the design of strategic reviews may influence whether the reviews generate significant

public policy changes, and because the conduct of reviews can entail substantial opportunity costs given the amount of time that government personnel spend on them. In one estimate, the Defense Department calculated that senior officials alone spent 6,500 person-hours on the 2006 QDR (US Senate 2006).

In this article, I seek to explain the establishment and replication of these major reviews, which have received little attention from other scholars. Conceptually, I integrate and build on insights about strategic planning and the diffusion of public policies and organizational practices from the disciplines of political science, public administration, management, and sociology. Empirically, I trace the drivers of the quadrennial review model's diffusion through brief case studies of the creation of the five reviews that have been established in the US government over the past two decades.<sup>1</sup> These case studies feature process tracing that draws on primary sources and 26 interviews that I conducted of experts and policymakers who are very knowledgeable about the origins of the reviews. More generally, my analysis aims to enhance understanding of the links between strategic planning processes and organizational outcomes in the public sector, which other scholars have identified as an area in need of more empirical research (Poister, Pitts, and Edwards 2010).

The article advances knowledge of the public policy process by identifying the goals that often lead policymakers to institute major strategic reviews, and by explaining how and why a strategy process can spread across government agencies. The article's core argument is that legislative and executive branch policymakers have created quadrennial reviews because they have seen these reviews as useful tools of political or organizational influence. More specifically, policymakers have established the reviews principally to advance organizational change in agencies, strengthen congressional and other external support for agencies, and facilitate

legislative oversight of agencies. These motivations are worth highlighting because they are not emphasized in the official mandates of quadrennial reviews, which typically center instead on the development of a strategy in a given policy area. I also find that a network of current and former defense policymakers has diffused the quadrennial review model from DOD to other agencies based on beliefs that it could help boost the integration, reputation, funding, or oversight of agencies possessing organizational deficiencies or weak political support. I further show – in the language of diffusion scholarship, which I discuss below – that the effort to replicate the quadrennial review model has been characterized by imitation, competition, and coercion more than by learning. My analysis also extends diffusion scholarship by offering one of the first assessments of the roles of both legislative and executive branches of government in the diffusion of a policy or practice (Shipan and Volden 2012, 793).

Toward the end of the article, I broaden the analysis through a brief consideration of other efforts by US agencies and other countries to replicate DOD and US strategy or planning activities. This analysis reveals important commonalities between the diffusion of these other processes and the spread of the quadrennial review model, suggesting that a variety of government strategy and planning practices are established and replicated for similar reasons, both within the US government and internationally.

### **Why would policymakers establish quadrennial reviews?**

In this section of the article, I draw on previous scholarship on strategic planning and diffusion in order to develop an argument and hypotheses about the creation and proliferation of government quadrennial reviews.

A range of scholarship has examined the value of formal, or highly structured, strategy activities. While some management scholars have argued that firms are often better served by

informal strategy processes, other management and public administration scholars have found that formal planning improves the performance of both firms and public agencies (Brews and Hunt 1999; Brews and Purohit 2007; Bryson 2011; Bryson, Crosby, and Bryson 2009; Hendrick 2003; Mintzberg 1994; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel 2009; Poister et al. 2013). Scholars have further found that structured planning can be particularly beneficial for public organizations that are large, have many stakeholders, or lack widely understood goals (Brews and Purohit 2007; Kissler et al. 1998; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel 2009; Wilson 1989, 156).

Importantly, though, the value of a formal review by a government agency is likely to depend on the objectives of policymakers in a given situation. In considering whether to develop policy informally or through a more structured process, policymakers face a trade-off between innovation and organizational buy-in. If policymakers seek the generation of innovative ideas, they may be best-served by an informal process. But if they seek to build bureaucratic support for policy or organizational changes, a formal process that allows for broad participation may be essential (Huntington 1961, 167-8). Indeed, studies of planning and reform efforts in the US Air Force and European Commission have found that leaders must engage affected personnel in order to win their support for policy or organizational changes, and that formal planning processes can facilitate such buy-in (Barzelay and Campbell 2003, 22-23; Barzelay and Jacobsen 2009, 322-327). More generally, scholars have found that the design of structured policymaking settings can help leaders exercise greater control over the policy process (Crosby and Bryson 2005, 401-426). A highly structured process may be particularly necessary to boost the integration or coordination of government agencies that are very large, complex, and fragmented.

Both lawmakers and agency leaders may see strategic reviews as valuable tools for advancing the integration or coordination of agencies, but these sets of policymakers also often

have different interests when it comes to such reviews. For agency leaders, a strategic review may serve as a useful vehicle for institutionalizing priorities and asserting greater control of agency units (Destler 1974, 205; Mintzberg 1994, 351-4). Indeed, scholars have found in other contexts that the assertion of greater political control of agencies is sometimes a key driver of executive branch reform initiatives (Kellough, Nigro, and Brewer 2010; Tama 2014). In addition, agency leaders may expect that a review will boost their agency's reputation and build support for their resource requests by signaling that the agency is well-run and following legitimate decision-making processes (Hult and Walcott 1990, 7-8, 67).

For lawmakers, on the other hand, a mandated strategic review is often attractive not only because a review might facilitate organizational change, but also because a strategy document can aid legislative oversight of the executive (Light 1997, 213). This potential oversight value of formal reviews can generate significant differences in the preferences of lawmakers and executive branch officials with regard to the design of strategic reviews, even when both sets of policymakers generally see such reviews as useful. While lawmakers will generally seek to mandate many specific requirements for reviews – in part since such requirements may boost a review's oversight value – executive branch officials will generally want to preserve as much flexibility as possible in the conduct of a review and will therefore resist potentially onerous and inconvenient congressional requirements. I therefore expect lawmakers and senior executive branch officials to disagree frequently over the design of quadrennial reviews, and further expect executive branch leaders sometimes to launch a review in order to preempt Congress from mandating one.

Previous scholarship on the diffusion of public policies and organizational practices further helps to explain why a strategic review model might spread from one agency to other

agencies. Leading scholars have defined policy diffusion as “one government’s policy choices being influenced by the choices of other governments” (Shipan and Volden 2012, 788). Political scientists have found that such diffusion is often driven by the desire of policymakers to imitate or compete with governments that are considered to be leaders or successful peers. For instance, US states and cities tend to replicate the policies of neighboring states or larger nearby cities, and countries tend to replicate the policies of nations that are viewed as successful or culturally comparable (Baybeck, Berry, and Siegel 2011; Berry and Berry 1990; Brooks 2005; Shipan and Volden 2008; Simmons and Elkins 2004; Walker 1969).

Public administration scholars and sociologists have generated similar findings about the diffusion of practices among public, private, and nonprofit organizations, finding that organizations often seek to generate legitimacy or improve their performance by replicating the practices of organizations that are considered to be leaders or peers (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Frumkin and Galaskiewicz 2004; Guler, Guillen, and Macpherson 2002; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Strang and Soule 1998). This behavior can result in institutional isomorphism, which refers to the adoption by organizations of similar institutional forms. Isomorphism can be a particularly appealing way to generate legitimacy for public agencies that have ambiguous goals, have difficulty measuring their performance, and face significant scrutiny (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Frumkin and Galaskiewicz 2004; Stazyk and Goerdel 2011).

With regard to strategic planning by government agencies, this scholarship implies that policymakers responsible for agencies that have weak political support or that lack clear goals or performance metrics might seek to replicate the planning activities of another agency that is prominent and highly regarded. In the United States, the Defense Department clearly falls in the latter category, as it is not only the largest US agency, but also is politically popular and highly

regarded by many policymakers. Pollsters have found that the American public views DOD more favorably than most other federal agencies (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2010). In addition, despite some searing published critiques of DOD management (Luttwak 1985; Ricks 2012), many government officials and other members of the Washington, DC policy community consider DOD generally to be relatively well-run. Former State Department official and congressional aide Charles Stevenson notes that “the Pentagon is generally recognized as having strong and effective management” (Stevenson 2006, 182). Along similar lines, former White House budget official Gordon Adams writes that “the Defense Department has maintained one of the most institutionalized and effective long-term strategic and resource planning processes in the government” (Adams 2007, 10). This paper’s case studies below provide further evidence of the high esteem in which some lawmakers and officials at other government agencies hold DOD’s strategic planning practices.

By contrast – to take a couple of examples of agencies that have recently instituted quadrennial reviews – the Department of Homeland Security is rather poorly regarded by the American public, and powerful US lawmakers routinely seek to cut the State Department’s budget sharply (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2010; Rogin 2012). In addition, the State Department’s goals and performance are hard to define and measure, and government auditors have frequently criticized the Department of Homeland Security’s management practices (Wilson 1989, 40; General Accountability Office 2011).

Previous scholarship on diffusion also indicates that, rather than systematically evaluating all options when making a decision, policymakers gravitate to options that are already known to them, such as options that are employed by nearby political jurisdictions or have become familiar to them through a professional network (Balla 2001; Poulsen 2014; Walker

1969; Weyland 2007). The same logic suggests that the QDR model should be replicated first among those agencies whose work is closely connected to DOD, and that policymakers who are personally familiar with the QDR should be the drivers of adopting the QDR model in other agencies.

These expectations might seem odd considering the QDR's poor reputation among defense experts. As the analysis below shows, however, many lawmakers and executive branch leaders have a positive perception of the review. This difference appears to exist because, whereas defense experts tend to assess the QDR based on its substantive contributions to defense strategy (or lack thereof), lawmakers and senior executive branch officials tend to focus on the review's political utility, while drawing inferences about the review's substantive effectiveness based on DOD's overall reputation for relatively sound management.

Put another way, the replication by policymakers of the QDR model even though the expert community considers the QDR to be ineffective suggests that policymakers are imitating DOD, rather than learning from DOD's actual experience with the QDR. Scholars of diffusion have found that policies and practices can diffuse based on several mechanisms, including learning, imitation, competition, and coercion (Boushey 2012; Shipan and Volden 2008; Solingen and Börzel 2014). Learning characterizes instances where policymakers adopt a policy or process because they learn that it has proven successful elsewhere, imitation characterizes instances where policymakers copy a policy or process because they see benefits in appearing to resemble another political actor, competition characterizes instances where policymakers adopt a policy or process in order to generate positive economic spillover effects, and coercion characterizes instances where powerful actors impose policies or processes on others (Berry and Baybeck 2005; Boushey 2012; Klingler-Vidra and Schleifer 2014; Shipan and Volden 2008).

We can infer that learning is occurring if successful policies or practices spread more quickly or completely than less successful ones (Shipan and Volden 2014; Volden, Ting, and Carpenter 2008). Given that many experts think the QDR has been ineffective, the creation of similar reviews in other agencies would appear to be inconsistent with a diffusion mechanism based on learning. If policymakers establishing new reviews have in fact replicated central elements of the QDR's mandate, while publicly citing and praising the QDR, this could further suggest that they are attempting to resemble DOD in order to bolster the reputation of other agencies.

Since an improved reputation, in turn, could help agencies garner more political support for their funding requests, agency leaders who seek to replicate the QDR may also be doing so based on a goal of competing more effectively for federal resources. The diffusion literature has highlighted economic competition among countries, states, and localities as a frequent driver of diffusion (Baybeck, Berry, and Siegel 2011; Simmons and Elkins 2004). Along similar lines, competition for funding might sometimes drive the diffusion of a policy or process across government agencies – based on an expectation that adoption of the policy or process will make a chief executive or legislature more likely to support agency funding requests. Finally, in cases where Congress mandates the conduct of a new quadrennial review, I expect that coercion is sometimes at work, in the sense that lawmakers are mandating specific requirements for the review, even though agency leaders would prefer to maintain more flexibility regarding the review's conduct. I therefore expect that imitation, competition, and coercion all characterize the quadrennial review model's diffusion more commonly than learning.

Summing up, the preceding argument generates the following hypotheses about the creation and diffusion of quadrennial reviews in the US government:

- H1) Lawmakers will see quadrennial reviews as useful devices for changing and overseeing agencies, while agency leaders will see them as useful tools for changing agencies and boosting agencies' political support and funding.
- H2) Lawmakers and agency leaders will routinely disagree over the design and mandates of quadrennial reviews, and agency leaders will sometimes launch a review to preempt lawmakers from ordering one.
- H3) Policymakers with defense policy backgrounds will drive the quadrennial review model's diffusion from DOD to other agencies, and will spread the model first to other national security agencies.
- H4) Policymakers creating new quadrennial reviews will praise the QDR and copy major elements of its design, rather than learning from DOD's experience with the QDR and attempting to improve on the QDR model.

### **The quadrennial review model's creation and diffusion**

In this section of the paper, I probe the validity of the preceding argument and hypotheses by tracing the spread of the quadrennial review model in the US government. My analysis takes the form of qualitative case studies featuring process tracing because process tracing is particularly well-suited to examining why and how the diffusion of a policy or practice occurs (Starke 2013). Moreover, the relatively small number of quadrennial reviews in the US government enables me to conduct process tracing of the full universe of cases. The case studies draw on a variety of primary sources, including legislative proposals, congressional hearing transcripts, and statements by government officials, as well as on interviews of 26 experts and current and former congressional and executive branch officials who were directly involved in a review's establishment or are otherwise very knowledgeable about the origins of a review.<sup>2</sup> After

the case studies, I summarize my findings and discuss the extent to which they support my argument and hypotheses.

### *The Quadrennial Defense Review*

In 1996, two members of the US Senate Armed Services Committee – Democrat Joseph Lieberman and Republican Dan Coats – spearheaded the creation of the quadrennial defense review. The legislation introduced by the senators, which was enacted into law in September 1996, mandates that the secretary of defense conduct every four years a QDR that includes a comprehensive examination of defense strategy, military force structure, modernization plans, infrastructure, and other defense programs and policies (US Senate 1996). The legislation also mandates an unclassified report to Congress on the results of the review, and requires this report, among other things, to describe US defense strategy and the assumptions that were used in the review.

Lieberman and Coats advanced this legislation to promote dramatic change in the Defense Department. The senators favored defense reform aimed at moving the military away from its Cold War force structure, requiring the military services to operate in a more integrated manner, and investing heavily in new military technologies. They were frustrated that DOD was not making these kinds of reforms and investments, and saw the QDR as a vehicle to push it to change. As Coats commented when he and Lieberman introduced the measure, “Senator Lieberman and I share the concern that the tendency to focus on immediate issues has distracted from the task of structuring the military to meet new operating environments, accommodate revolutionary changes in military technology and prepare for the possibility of entirely new kinds of threats and competitors” (*Congressional Record* 1996). In an interview, a former

congressional aide involved in the legislative effort added: “The [military] services were fighting to protect what they had without much realization that the world had changed.”<sup>3</sup>

Yet Lieberman and Coats knew that the QDR might not generate major change, and so they also included in the QDR legislation a provision establishing an independent panel with the responsibility of assessing the QDR. Fred Downey, Lieberman’s principal defense aide at the time, explained that Lieberman saw this panel as a way to prod DOD to make changes: “Senator Lieberman knew ... that there was a non-negligible possibility that the outcome [of the QDR] would be ‘Everything is fine and dandy. We’re doing just the right things.’ So written into the legislation was the idea of having the work graded by a Team B of independent experts not invested in the status quo.”<sup>4</sup> While DOD did not resist the QDR legislation as a whole, DOD officials opposed this independent panel requirement, arguing to congressional officials that it would be preferable to have an independent panel propose ideas to DOD during the QDR process, rather than having a panel “grade the QDR’s homework.”<sup>5</sup>

#### *The Quadrennial Intelligence Community Review*

Since the QDR’s establishment, Lieberman, Coats, and other policymakers with a background in defense policy have been principally responsible for spreading the quadrennial review model to other agencies. In 1998, Coats introduced an amendment that would require the director of central intelligence, in conjunction with the secretary of defense, to conduct a quadrennial intelligence review (US Senate 1998). Closely modeled on the QDR legislation, the amendment stated that the review must include a comprehensive examination of intelligence strategy, programs, and policies, including the intelligence community’s organization, modernization plans, infrastructure, and budget plan. The amendment also mirrored the QDR legislation in requiring the review to result in an unclassified report to Congress that describes

US intelligence strategy and the review's assumptions, among other elements, and in mandating the formation of an independent panel to assess the review.

As with the QDR legislation, Coats' principal motivation in introducing this amendment was to promote organizational change in the executive branch. A knowledgeable former congressional aide explained: "we saw exactly the same issues in intelligence as we saw previously in defense – an old architecture with lots of stovepipes – and there was no mechanism to do a cross-cutting assessment."<sup>6</sup> The amendment's provisions clearly reflected Coats' goal of fostering greater integration among intelligence agencies. For instance, the amendment mandated that the review assess whether or not current organizational divisions result in "unnecessary redundancy, significant waste, or mismanagement, and, if so, how such deficiencies could be eliminated."

Coats' idea faced resistance in the executive branch, however, which did not acknowledge that there existed a problem of insufficient integration, and the Senate Intelligence Committee's leadership chose not to challenge the executive branch on the issue.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, Coats' idea was only enacted as a nonbinding "sense of Congress" measure that called on the director of central intelligence and secretary of defense to complete jointly a comprehensive review of intelligence activities every four years, but did not require such a review.

Nevertheless, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet took the cue from Congress and conducted a classified quadrennial intelligence community review (QICR) in 2001. Tenet conducted this review principally to preempt the potential reintroduction in Congress of legislation that would set, from Tenet's perspective, onerous and unwanted requirements for a review.<sup>8</sup>

After Congress created in 2004 the new position of director of national intelligence (DNI), lawmakers again expressed support for the idea of a quadrennial intelligence review. A June 2005 report by the House Intelligence Committee argued that the director of national intelligence needed a systematic strategic planning process in order to integrate intelligence agencies, and recommended that the DNI conduct a quadrennial intelligence review, modeled on the QDR, for that purpose (US House of Representatives 2005d). Then-DNI John Negroponte sought to be responsive to this advice, and conducted the second and third quadrennial intelligence committee reviews in 2005 and 2009. (In 2013, DNI James Clapper chose not to conduct a fourth QICR.)

#### *The Quadrennial Homeland Security Review*

In 2005, the quadrennial review model began to spread from DOD and the intelligence community to other national security agencies, as lawmakers introduced the first proposals for quadrennial reviews of homeland security and foreign affairs. The first of these proposals concerned the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which had been established in 2002 through a merger of 22 pre-existing agencies and was struggling to build organizational cohesion (Balunis 2012; May, Jochim, and Sapotichne 2011). In congressional testimony early in 2005, James Carafano, a think tank expert and former military officer, argued that a quadrennial homeland security review (QHSR) would help integrate DHS, while creating an “audit trail” that Congress could use to assess whether the department was making progress (US House of Representatives 2005a).

Soon after Carafano’s testimony, Democratic Representative Harold Ford introduced the first bill mandating a QHSR (US House of Representatives 2005b). Although Ford did not serve on the Armed Services Committee, he had served on DOD’s Transformation Advisory Group,

which advised the secretary of defense on defense strategy. Ford said that his bill, which also called for the formation of an independent panel on quadrennial homeland security reviews, was “based largely on the kind of review already successfully used by the Department of Defense” (Ford 2005).

The QHSR idea gained legislative momentum in 2007, when it was advanced by Lieberman, who had become chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee – leading to the enactment of legislation mandating the QHSR that August. This legislation requires the secretary of homeland security to conduct, every four years, a comprehensive examination of homeland security strategy, programs, and policies, resulting in an unclassified report to Congress that, among other things, articulates a homeland security strategy and describes the assumptions used in the review (US Congress 2007).

In advocating for the legislation, Lieberman said that the QHSR would advance change in the Department of Homeland Security and assist congressional oversight of DHS, adding that the QHSR idea “is patterned after... [the] Quadrennial Defense Review, which I believe has played an important role in helping both the DOD realign its strategies and missions, but also Congress to respond to those strategies and missions” (US Senate 2007). Other senators expressed similar views during debate on the QHSR proposal. Democratic Senator Ken Salazar, who introduced the proposal with Lieberman, said the QDR had “helped shape Defense policy, military strategy, and resource allocation” (*Congressional Record* 2007).

In interviews, legislative aides elaborated on the congressional motivations in mandating the QHSR. Christian Beckner, who served as Lieberman’s principal aide on the issue, noted that Lieberman thought the legislative requirements for the QHSR would extract information from DHS that would help Congress understand better the department’s strengths and weaknesses.<sup>9</sup>

Another congressional aide involved in the legislation said, “We thought it was a good idea because we had a good deal of concern about the department’s ability to integrate its many components... The idea was that working on a long-term strategic plan akin to what DOD does would help them in their transformation.”<sup>10</sup> A government homeland security analyst added that admiration of the Defense Department contributed to the congressional support for mandating the QHSR: “[Lawmakers] have wanted to imitate DOD based on an adulation of DOD. There’s an attitude of ‘They did it at DOD, so we need to do it.’”<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, most senior DHS officials were unenthusiastic about a congressionally mandated QHSR. While some DHS officials thought a structured review could help the secretary of homeland security advance department-wide initiatives, the department leadership resisted a legislative mandate that would dictate what must be covered in a review.<sup>12</sup> In response to this resistance, lawmakers modified the legislation prior to its enactment to make some of its elements less prescriptive. For instance, Ford’s initial bill included an independent panel requirement and replicated another provision of the QDR legislation in requiring DHS to identify the budget plan needed to implement the department’s strategy at a “low-to-moderate level of risk,” but the enacted legislation did not include these requirements.

#### *The Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review*

The first congressional proposal for a quadrennial review of diplomacy or development policy surfaced in 2005, when Republican Representative Mac Thornberry – a member of the Armed Services Committee – introduced a bill that would require the secretary of state to conduct a quadrennial foreign affairs review (US House of Representatives 2005c). In an interview, Thornberry explained that he saw the proposal as a way to prod the State Department (State) to transform itself: “[State] had outdated communication systems and an outdated way of

doing things. They weren't looking at how the world was changing, where we needed a diplomatic presence and where we didn't. As one of the instruments of national power, it seemed to me we needed to give them a kick in the pants to take a bigger look."<sup>13</sup> Thornberry's bill required a comprehensive examination of diplomatic and foreign assistance strategy, structure, programs, and budget plans, resulting in the articulation to Congress of an unclassified foreign affairs strategy, and followed the QDR model in establishing an independent panel to assess the review.

The idea of a foreign affairs review did not gain traction, however, until the start of the Obama administration in 2009, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton decided to launch a quadrennial diplomacy and development review (QDDR). Clinton established the review because she thought it would help improve the State Department's performance, give State more clout in interagency decision-making, and garner it more resources from Congress. Upon launching the quadrennial diplomacy and development review, Clinton said State needed the review "to accelerate transitions from old ideas and outmoded programs," and added:

I served for six years on the Armed Services Committee in the Senate. And it became very clear to me that the QDR process... was an important tool for the Defense Department not only to exercise the discipline necessary to make the hard decisions to set forth the priorities, but provided a framework that was a very convincing one to those in the Congress, that there was a plan, people knew where they were headed, and they have the priorities requested aligned with the budget, and therefore, people were often very convinced that it made good sense to do whatever the Defense Department requested. Well, I want to make the same case for diplomacy and development (US Department of State 2009b).

In interviews, State Department officials identified the same motivations, while also pointing to a goal of strengthening State's clout at the interagency level. One official said Clinton saw the QDDR as a "way to lift the State Department and USAID [the US Agency for International Development] to a better-funded leadership role in international affairs," and as a "vehicle for justifying a budget and the need to modernize."<sup>14</sup> Another official said Clinton created the review because "she saw an imbalance between DOD and State, and saw that in order to be a more effective partner for DOD, we had to look at how we were organized."<sup>15</sup>

In addition, Clinton saw a formal review as a means to overcome likely internal resistance to organizational changes. Many officials at the US Agency for International Development worried that Clinton sought to assert greater control over the agency, which reported to the secretary of state but possessed substantial autonomy.<sup>16</sup> Clinton tried to mitigate that concern by making the USAID administrator a co-leader of the QDDR.

Clinton's launch of the QDDR also reflected competition with Congress. As she was considering initiating a review, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman, a Democrat, included a provision mandating a quadrennial review of diplomacy and development in a bill that he introduced (US House of Representatives 2009). Like the QDR legislation and Thornberry's bill, Berman's bill set out various requirements for the review, including requirements that the resulting unclassified report to Congress describe the review's assumptions and that an independent panel be created to assess the review.

A State Department legislative affairs official indicated to congressional aides that the department opposed Berman's quadrennial review proposal, and objected in particular to the independent panel provision.<sup>17</sup> After Berman's bill was approved by the House of Representatives in June 2009, State Department officials moved quickly to initiate the QDDR

and thereby preempt the legislation. When the QDDR was launched in July, State Policy Planning Director Anne-Marie Slaughter, who directed the review, noted, “Part of what we wanted to do was to do [a QDDR] before we found ourselves under a mandate” (US Department of State 2009a).

In addition, competition between State Department and White House officials over control of development policy influenced the QDDR’s launch. State moved quickly to begin the QDDR when it got word that the White House was planning to start a separate review of global development policy.<sup>18</sup> The latter review concerned some senior State Department officials because Gayle Smith, the White House official responsible for development policy, favored making USAID more independent of State. For Clinton and her advisors, launching the QDDR was in part a way to get out in front of the White House review and assert State’s interagency leadership on foreign aid policy making.<sup>19</sup>

#### *The Quadrennial Energy Review*

Since the QDDR’s establishment in 2009, the quadrennial review model has begun to spread beyond the major national security agencies, but the only other quadrennial review that has been instituted concerns a policy area – energy – that is often linked to national security.

The first public proposal for a quadrennial energy review (QER) was issued by a White House advisory council in 2010. The President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology called for creating an energy review “analogous to the Quadrennial Defense Review,” in order to establish a more “coordinated government-wide Federal energy policy” (President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology 2010, v).

The following year, Democratic Senator Mark Pryor, who had served on the Armed Services Committee, introduced legislation mandating the conduct of a quadrennial energy

review, which would include a comprehensive review of national energy policies, resulting in a report to Congress on the government's energy policy objectives and plans (US Senate 2011b). The first two goals outlined in Pryor's legislation are to "establish integrated, Government wide national energy objectives," and to "coordinate actions across Federal agencies." A congressional aide involved in the issue noted, "A lot of federal agencies have their finger in the energy pie. A [quadrennial review] would force them to try to think collaboratively."<sup>20</sup> The aide also highlighted the review's potential oversight value: "[The] Armed Services [Committee] uses the QDR to inform congressional thinking about defense programs. The QER would serve a similar purpose for committees with jurisdiction over parts of the energy budget." In his own comments on his bill, Pryor noted that his proposal, which required the review to result in an unclassified report to Congress, was "modeled after the highly regarded Quadrennial Defense Review" (US Senate 2011a). However, Pryor's proposal conformed less closely to the QDR model than did the other legislative proposals for new quadrennial reviews, as it did not require the report to describe the review's assumptions or require the formation of an independent panel to assess the review.

Pryor's legislation has not been enacted, but in June 2013, President Obama announced that he was initiating a QER, to be led by the White House's Domestic Policy Council and Office of Science and Technology Policy (Executive Office of the President 2013). While the administration has not issued detailed public guidance for the review, an administration official said in an interview that a key goal of the review is to establish a "crosscutting and integrated" approach to energy policy across the government.<sup>21</sup> The White House may also have launched the review in part to preempt Congress from mandating a review that would give the White

House less control over it, as Pryor's legislation gives a greater role to the secretary of energy in leading the review and directs that the review cover many specific topics.

### *Summary of case studies*

Taken together, these five case studies provide substantial support for my argument and hypotheses. Consistent with H1, I found that each of the five quadrennial reviews was established in part to promote organizational change in the executive branch. In addition, lawmakers saw the homeland security and energy reviews as aids to legislative oversight, while the secretary of state saw the diplomacy and development review as a way to boost the State Department's political support and funding. I also found, consistent with H2, that lawmakers and executive branch officials disagreed regarding the design of each of the five reviews, and that executive branch leaders launched the intelligence community and development and diplomacy reviews in part to preempt Congress from mandating reviews with unwanted requirements. I further found, consistent with H3, that current and former members of the congressional armed services committees played a central role in the creation of each of the four reviews modeled on the QDR, and that these policymakers spread the model first to other national security agencies (the intelligence community, Department of Homeland Security, and State Department).

The story regarding H4 is more complex, as I found substantial but not uniform support for it. As I hypothesized, I found that in each of the four cases of reviews proposed since the creation of the QDR, policymakers proposing the new review praised the QDR, referred to the QDR as the model for the review, and copied key elements of the QDR's design. Regarding specific design elements, legislative proposals for each of these four reviews followed the QDR model in mandating the conduct, every four years, of a comprehensive examination of a large issue area, resulting in an unclassified report to Congress that articulates the government's

strategy in that issue area and describes the other results of the review. Notably, these mandates appear conducive to the key problems that critics of the QDR have identified in the QDR process: the requirement for a comprehensive examination of a large issue area leads naturally to the creation of a large bureaucratic process, and the requirement for an unclassified report can make it still harder for report authors to move beyond the status quo or lowest common denominator outcomes given the incentive to try to satisfy many public audiences. Replication of these provisions therefore suggests that lawmakers have not tried to improve on the QDR model based on the common criticisms of that model.

In addition, legislative proposals for all of the reviews except for the energy review followed the QDR model in requiring a statement of the review's assumptions and the formation of an independent panel to assess the review. Given that the energy review proposal was the most recent of the legislative proposals, its greater deviation from the QDR model could indicate that lawmakers are growing less wedded to the specifics of the QDR model as time goes on, but it would be premature to draw a firm conclusion on that from a single case.

Executive branch policymakers, for their part, have also cited the QDR as a model for new quadrennial reviews, but have sought to maintain control of the design of reviews and resisted the more onerous and politically risky elements of the QDR model. My expectation that policymakers would copy the QDR's design when proposing new reviews is therefore supported much more strongly with regard to lawmakers than with regard to executive branch officials.

Tables 1 and 2 summarize most of my key findings about the creation and design of quadrennial reviews in tabular form.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

[Insert Table 2 about here]

### **Other diffusing strategy and planning practices**

While I focus in this article on the establishment and spread of the quadrennial review model in the US government, a brief consideration of other instances where Defense Department or US interagency strategy or planning processes have diffused to other agencies or governments reveals some similar patterns, suggesting that my argument and findings have broader applicability and relevance. Just as the quadrennial review model has been spread within the US government by policymakers with defense backgrounds, US strategy and planning processes have diffused overseas primarily to governments that possess close security ties to the United States. Additionally, the drivers of diffusion appear to have commonalities across these cases, with policymakers sometimes replicating the practices of a leading agency or government to boost the integration or reputation of their own agency or government, or to strengthen external backing for that agency or government.

For instance, in 2008, the legislature of Taiwan – which has received extensive military aid from the United States and seeks more such aid – mandated the conduct of a QDR. An analysis of this QDR concluded that Taiwanese policymakers initiated it in part to bolster US support for Taiwan by demonstrating that Taiwan was committed to needed military reform (Famularo 2009). Richard Bush, a leading Taiwan expert, added in an interview: “The Taiwanese defense establishment was stovepiped. The QDR was seen as a way to create leverage for more jointness.... Taiwanese also saw this as the modern thing to do. They thought, ‘If the US is doing a QDR, it must be the standard we should aspire to.’”<sup>22</sup>

Other DOD strategy and planning practices have also diffused to other agencies and countries. In 1961, US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara instituted a formal planning, programming, and budgeting (PPB) system at DOD. McNamara instituted PPB, which required the systematic evaluation of options for weapons programs, both to make the department more efficient and to reduce the military services' power (Schelling 1968). In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson ordered all other federal agencies to adopt the system, but in 1971, President Richard Nixon terminated it outside DOD (West 2011). In recent years, however, some US agencies – including the Department of Homeland Security and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence – have again sought to replicate DOD's PPB model. This recent diffusion of the model has been driven not only by a quest for greater efficiency, but also by a desire to establish more integrated management of fragmented agencies and to build political support for those agencies (West 2011, 2, 52-73).<sup>23</sup>

The PPB model has diffused internationally too. Starting in the mid-1960s, many US allies and partners, including Australia, Canada, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, instituted planning, programming, and budgeting systems in their own governments – a set of decisions that a leading scholar of resource management attributed to “the demonstration and ripple effect of the United States” (Premchand 1983, 336). More recently, versions of PPB have been adopted by many Central and Eastern European governments that sought membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and by some developing countries that possess close security ties to the United States (Defense Resource Management Study Program 2010). Defense officials and experts familiar with these efforts noted that many countries seek to replicate DOD practices not only to improve how their militaries operate, but also to give domestic and foreign audiences an impression that their military is well-run.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, similar patterns are evident in the international diffusion of US interagency strategy processes. For instance, many US allies now produce interagency security strategy documents akin to the US National Security Strategy (NSS) report, which has been issued by US presidents since 1987. In 2003, the European Union released its first broad security strategy, and more recently Australia, Canada, Japan, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom issued their first government-wide security strategies (European Union 2003; Government of Australia 2013; Government of Canada 2004; Government of Japan 2013; Government of the Netherlands 2007; Government of the United Kingdom 2008). In at least two of these cases, the US national security strategy reports appear to have directly influenced the decision to produce the strategy: a British national security official said the U.K. strategy document was “stimulated by the US example of national security strategy development,” and the Japanese media reported that the US NSS served as the model for the Japanese NSS (*Asahi Shimbun* 2013; Stolberg 2012, 55).

At least some of these patterns, moreover, do not appear to be limited to the area of national security policy making. In pharmaceutical regulation – another policy domain in which the United States has been viewed as a global leader – other governments have modeled their regulatory agencies after the US Food and Drug Administration (Carpenter 2010). Further research is needed to chart more systematically and explain the diffusion of a range of public policy processes and organizational practices within and among governments.

## **Conclusion**

My principal goals in this article have been to explain why US policymakers have recently established several major strategic reviews and why they have sought to replicate the Defense Department’s model for such reviews in other agencies. I showed that US lawmakers have created these reviews to facilitate congressional oversight and advance the integration and

transformation of agencies, while senior executive branch officials have seen these reviews both as tools to promote organizational change and as vehicles for boosting the political standing of agencies. In addition, lawmakers and executive branch officials have often disagreed over the design of these reviews, as executive branch officials have generally sought to preserve their freedom of action and, in some cases, have acted preemptively to initiate a review before lawmakers set onerous requirements for one. These findings suggest more generally that formal strategy activities are often driven more by legislative-executive and bureaucratic politics than by a desire for new strategic ideas.

I also showed that policymakers with a background in defense policy have sought to replicate the quadrennial review model outside DOD, mainly because they thought that the replication of DOD practices would strengthen or build support for an agency that they oversee or lead. These findings extend previous scholarship on diffusion, which has focused on the spread of policies and practices among governments, by showing that the desire to imitate a leader and compete for resources can also drive diffusion across agencies within a single government. My finding that policymakers have imitated DOD, rather than learning from the QDR, has a practical implication too: when a policy spreads based on mimicry rather than learning, the outcome is less likely to be positive from a normative standpoint (Shipan and Volden 2012, 790-1). This suggests that the reviews that have been established based on the QDR model are unlikely to be very successful in terms of improving public policy making.

Brief consideration of the diffusion across agencies and countries of a few other strategy and planning practices, such as national security strategy reports and planning, programming, and budgeting systems, further revealed that the proliferation of quadrennial reviews is just one instance of a broader phenomenon. While more research is needed to evaluate this broader

pattern, it seems that, in a variety of contexts and countries, policymakers sometimes replicate the policy processes of a leading agency or government in order to influence external perceptions of their own agency or government. Given these expected political benefits of adopting the practices of highly regarded or prominent institutions, it is likely that such practices will continue to spread to agencies and governments seeking to bolster their reputations or political support – regardless of whether the practices are proven to be effective. Such continued diffusion would appear to be akin to the domestic and international diffusion over several decades of public sector pay-for-performance systems, even though scholars have found that such systems usually do not work well (Bowman 2010; Ingraham 1993; Perry, Engbers, and Jun 2009).

At the same time, scholars should not prematurely write off quadrennial reviews and other formal strategy processes as exercises that cannot have any public policy benefits. The leaders of government agencies must generally focus so heavily on navigating their agencies' external environment that they can devote little time to internal management (Wilson 1989, 32). Given this huge constraint, quadrennial reviews and other structured strategy activities at least have the potential to provide a mechanism for harried government leaders to exert some influence over their agencies' operations. Indeed, recent research indicates that while bureaucratic inertia prevents quadrennial reviews from generating major changes to government strategies or operations, these reviews do often help agency leaders advance incremental policy or organizational changes, and they sometimes aid congressional oversight (Tama Forthcoming). More research is needed to determine whether the reviews also have any influence on agency reputations or funding. For now, it appears that, on the whole, both the critics and advocates of quadrennial reviews are partly right – these strategy exercises are not transformational, but they

can give policymakers a useful vehicle for inching massive government agencies in new directions.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to an official of the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) for help in generating this list of quadrennial reviews by executive branch agencies.

<sup>2</sup> I requested interviews with 36 such people, 26 of whom agreed to be interviewed. Twenty-one of the interviews were conducted in person; five were conducted by phone. Some interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis to protect an individual's identity.

<sup>3</sup> Interview, July 2013. (I conducted all of the interviews cited in this article. Only the month is provided for not-for-attribution interviews to further protect individuals' identities.)

<sup>4</sup> Interview, 10 June 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Interview of Michèle Flournoy, 24 July 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, July 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Interview of congressional intelligence aide, July 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Interview of former intelligence community official, June 2013; interview of congressional intelligence aide, July 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Interview, 20 February 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, February 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, March 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Interview of Stewart Baker, former DHS Assistant Secretary for Policy, 22 May 2013; interview of former congressional homeland security aide, November 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, 1 August 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Interview, May 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, July 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Interview of Connie Veillette, former Senate Foreign Relations Committee Senior Professional Staff Member, 24 May 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Interview of former congressional foreign policy aide, May 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Interview of government foreign policy official, March 2013.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*; interview of former congressional foreign policy aide, May 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Interview, July 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Interview, October 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Interview, 2 October 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Interview of DHS official, June 2013; interview of congressional intelligence aide, July 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Interview of Kathleen Hicks, former Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, 15 October 2013; interview of DOD official, June 2013; interview of defense resource management expert, August 2013.

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Table 1. Key findings regarding the creation of US quadrennial reviews

Review name	Year first proposed by policymaker	Who established review?	Congressional motivations for proposing review	Executive branch motivations for initiating review	Did first policymaker to propose review have defense background?	Did policymaker cite QDR as model?
Quadrennial Defense Review	1996	Congress	Organizational change	N/A	Yes	N/A
Quadrennial Intelligence Community Review	1998	Executive	Organizational change	Preempting legislation	Yes	Yes
Quadrennial Homeland Security Review	2005	Congress	Organizational change, oversight	N/A	Yes	Yes
Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review	2005	Executive	Organizational change	Organizational change; increasing funding and clout; preempting legislation	Yes	Yes
Quadrennial Energy Review	2011	Executive	Organizational change, oversight	Organizational change; preempting legislation?	Yes	Yes

Source: Author

Table 2: Key features of legislative proposals for US quadrennial reviews

Review name	Core mandate of initial legislative proposal	Did proposal require unclassified report to Congress on review results?	Did proposal require statement of review's assumptions?	Did proposal require independent panel assessment?	Did Congress and executive disagree over review design?
Quadrennial Defense Review	Comprehensive examination of defense strategy, force structure, modernization plans, infrastructure, and other defense programs and policies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Quadrennial Intelligence Community Review	Comprehensive review of intelligence strategy, organization, modernization plans, infrastructure, budget plan, and other intelligence programs and policies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Quadrennial Homeland Security Review	Comprehensive examination of homeland security strategy, force structure, resources, threat assessment, infrastructure, budget plan, and other homeland security programs and policies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review	Comprehensive examination of diplomatic strategy and structure, foreign assistance programs, budget plans, personnel decisions, and public diplomacy plans	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Quadrennial Energy Review	Comprehensive review of energy programs and technologies	Yes	No	No	Yes

Source: Author