

DECISIVE POINT

The USAWC Press Podcast Companion Series

Podcast Transcript

Dr. Jeff McManus

“Operating Successfully Within the Bureaucracy Domain of Warfare: Part One”

In this episode of Decisive Point, Dr. Jeff McManus, an expert in strategic studies, explores his compelling argument for recognizing bureaucracy as a sixth domain of warfare. The conversation highlights how this perspective can reshape the interactions of military officers and policymakers within the intricate bureaucratic landscape. McManus articulates key fundamentals for adeptly navigating this realm, emphasizing the complex nature of politics, the impact of individual personalities, and the unique pressures faced in policymaking. He discusses the importance of nonpartisanship, trust, and resilience. McManus’s insights challenge the view of bureaucracy as simply an obstacle, positioning it instead as an essential battleground for strategy and success.

Read the article here: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol54/iss2/11/>

E-mail usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.parameters@army.mil to give feedback on this podcast or the genesis article.

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Episode Transcript

Stephanie Crider (Host)

You’re listening to Decisive Point.

The views and opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Department of the Army, the US Army War College, or any other agency of the US government.

Joining me today is Dr. Jeff McManus, author of “[Operating Successfully Within the Bureaucracy Domain of Warfare: Part One](#),” which you can find in the [Summer 2024 issue of Parameters](#).

McManus is an assistant professor of strategic studies in the Department of Distance Education at the US Army War College.

Welcome to Decisive Point, Jeff.

Jeff McManus

Thank you, Stephanie. Great to be here.

Host

You argued in your article that policymakers in the defense community should approach bureaucracy as a sixth domain of warfare. Please explain your position.

McManus

My experience over time has been that many military officers fight the bureaucracy—that they hate it. But they do understand the concept of a warfighting domain, with the domain being a medium through which they have to maneuver and operate, or even control, to achieve an objective. So, by bringing that perspective, I think it’s something that they can understand because a bureaucracy also has physical aspects. It has people, organizations, products, and it has functional aspects like processes and procedures. And, by coming at it as a domain, I think it helps lower some of the resistance and helps them be more successful.

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Dr. Jeff McManus

“Operating Successfully Within the Bureaucracy Domain of Warfare: Part One”

Host

Your article addresses the first three of 10 fundamentals that policy professionals should develop to navigate the bureaucratic domain and address the balance in the complexities of policy-making process for the overall benefit of US national security. Let’s walk through them.

Politics. What do we need to know?

McManus

First, our form of government under our constitution, it’s grounded upon diverse separation of powers, which means that there’s always an inherent struggle that’s going on between individuals, between parties, between organizations, between ideologies.

But, unfortunately, over time, it’s turned into bloodsport. It is very, very contentious. And so, to stay effective, policy professionals, whether military or career civilians, really need to stay and focus on being nonpartisan, unbiased, and very objective. That enables us to operate within this political environment without being political. That includes understanding when our politicians—and when our senior leaders who are appointed—when they say things that may not necessarily translate with how they are operating. We call that a “say-do” gap. That’s an inherent part of the political process. It’s not deceit. It’s just part of this process. And, being able to operate within that wisely is something that is very important for that political domain.

Host

What roles do personalities play in policy making?

McManus

Personalities are key. They’re huge. Individuals’ personalities are key to who they are—how they operate. I would say that when you look at your senior leaders, there are four aspects that are really important to understand. First is a difference between ego, which is unhealthy, and a very healthy self-confidence. And, you want to be self-confident without being arrogant and overly egotistical. Second are the networks, our personalities, that these things really matter. And, so, being able to navigate between a leader’s own networks and your own, leveraging their good connections, and very carefully navigating any sort of bad relationships that they might have with their peers. Third—trust. It’s the coin of the realm, and if your seniors can’t trust you, then you won’t be in the room when they’re making decisions and being able to influence or advise them. And finally, with personalities, vengeance and vendettas, unfortunately, are all too real. People carry baggage with relationships from the past, and you really need to watch out for those—not only yourself, but particularly with your seniors.

Host

What about pressure? How does pressure impact policy making?

McManus

You’re always under a lot of pressure and stress in the policy-making world because all of the simple questions have already been answered. All the simple decisions have already been made. So, you’re constantly dealing with big issues of huge consequence. Lives are literally at stake in this environment. It’s always a fast-paced tempo. I heard a quote just today that Washington typically operates on a 72-hour product cycle. You’re lucky if you have 72 hours to make a decision that has huge ramifications. And that brings with it inherent pressure. And, finally, the pressure is amplified because you always have to coordinate. No matter how tight the deadline is, everything always has to be staffed—and there’s never enough time to do it right. And, so, learning how to deal with that pressure is very, very important.

Host

So that covers the three from part one. I’d like to know before we go, if you have any concluding thoughts, though, that you would like to share.

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McManus

We just talked about the first three, and what makes these first three different than the other seven is these, I say, are externally imposed. These are things that are inherent in the environment. You have no control over politics, you have no control over the senior leaders that are placed above you, and you have no control on the deadlines and the pressure. The second thing that we’ll talk about next time is the other seven, which I think are more internally influenced—things that you can influence (that you can control), skills that you can strengthen that will round out your role as a policy professional. And, my purpose of talking about these 10 things is to strengthen an ability to maintain trust and access to your seniors; to be able to provide solid, objective advice, give realistic options; and, most importantly, being able to speak truth to power in a way that they will appreciate and will be well received.

Host

I actually have another question, if you’ll entertain it.

McManus

Sure.

Host

I’ve always considered bureaucracy a necessary evil. Have you ever met anybody who just really enjoys it?

McManus

Having spent 35, 36 years working as a civil servant and 20+ years working in the bureaucracy, I actually have come to the point where I consider myself a bona fide bureaucrat. And, I actually do enjoy its perspective on why we have a bureaucracy. It is part and parcel of our constitutional system, not just the separation between the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branches, but we have internal checks and balances as well. And we’ll talk a little bit more about that in the next session because I go into principles that talk about really what is the role of the bureaucrat in this environment.

Host

That was not the answer I was expecting. It was great. What a pleasure having you on the podcast. Thank you so much.

McManus

Yeah, thanks, Stephanie.

Host

Listeners, you can read the article at press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters. Look for volume 54, issue 2. For more Army War College podcasts, check out [Conversations on Strategy](#), [SSI Live](#), [CLSC Dialogues](#), and [A Better Peace](#).

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