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Introduction

Presidential vision and operational command often fail when authority is fragmented. In 2009, President Obama sought to close Guantanamo Bay through executive order. In 2002, CAPT Boone worked to bring order to a rapidly evolving detention mission. One case operated at the strategic level, the other at the operational and tactical level, but both were undermined by systems resistant to coordinated direction. This essay analyzes how bureaucratic resistance, congressional defiance, and interagency dysfunction prevented closure of Guantanamo under Obama, and how Boone's central leadership challenge was restoring unity of command in joint detention operations. Both cases illustrate how structural barriers, rather than individual shortcomings, can determine national security outcomes.

Case Study 1: Closing American Detainee Facilities at Guantanamo Bay

President Obama's executive order to close Guantanamo Bay failed because presidential authority alone could not overcome fragmented interagency processes, legislative restrictions, and entrenched bureaucratic interests.

First, the interagency process lacked empowered leadership and coherent authority. The White House designated Counsel Greg Craig to manage closure planning, but he had no formal control over the Departments of Defense, Justice, or Homeland Security, nor the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Each pursued its own risk assessments and timelines. As the case study notes, “Craig could not ‘crack skulls’ to keep interagency process on schedule” (Gvosdev, Blankshain, & Cooper, 2020, p. 404). This reflects the challenge described in Session 2.12, where Gvosdev and Cloud (2012) explain that interagency coordination often depends on personalities rather than institutional processes (p. 12).

Second, Congress acted to restrict closure options. In April 2009, it prohibited transferring detainees to the United States, eliminating the administration’s primary means of shuttering the facility. Public support for closure eroded further when relocation within the U.S. was raised as a possibility (Gvosdev et al., 2020, p. 404). This legislative move not only limited the administration’s operational choices, it also signaled to foreign partners and adversaries that the President’s stated objectives could be overridden by domestic political opposition, reducing the credibility of U.S. commitments abroad. As Serafino and Ekmektsioglou (2018) observe, Congress can shape or block executive initiatives through appropriations and statutory measures (pp. 152–154). The administration chose not to contest these restrictions, with Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel considering the issue a poor use of political capital (Gvosdev et al., 2020, p. 404).

Third, bureaucratic resistance slowed implementation. The Department of Defense had built extensive infrastructure and procedures for detention operations. “The Pentagon had set up an entire infrastructure ... and was not confident that other parts of the US government ... could perform the same missions” (Gvosdev et al., 2020, p. 402). Schake (2018) notes that cabinet

departments “jealously guard their prerogatives,” complicating interagency cooperation and undermining central direction (p. 124).

Some might contend that timing and political capital were the true obstacles. However, as Howell (2003) explains, presidential directives do not ensure compliance; their effectiveness depends on the executive’s ability to influence subordinate agencies and overcome institutional resistance (pp. 15–17). Without enforcement mechanisms, even high-profile orders risk remaining symbolic.

In closing, Obama’s inability to close Guantanamo was rooted in an interagency system without centralized authority, a Congress willing to impose binding constraints, and departments determined to preserve their operational control. Vision, in this case, was insufficient without leverage to compel coordinated execution.

Case Study 2: The Least Worst Place

As dual-hatted Commander of Naval Station Guantanamo Bay and Deputy Commander of Joint Task Force (JTF) 160, CAPT Boone’s most pressing challenge was the breakdown of unity of command. The absence of a single coordinating authority fractured mission alignment, created unclear reporting chains, and increased ethical and reputational risks.

JTF-160, Joint Detention Operations Group (JDOG), and JTF-170 each operated under different priorities. JDOG applied military police doctrine emphasizing control and containment. JTF-170 focused on rapid intelligence exploitation. Boone’s naval staff managed infrastructure, logistics, and base services for a population that included both detainees and families. The result, as Buehn and Shimkus (2023) note, was “confusing priorities and reporting chains” that unity of command could have prevented (p. 6).

These divergent approaches generated operational friction. JDOG's practice of transporting detainees strapped to "wheeled litters" rather than allowing them to walk was one Boone considered excessive (Buehn & Shimkus, 2023, p. 9). Blankshain, drawing from Owens and edited by Pratt (2023), explains that overlapping authorities without clear boundaries create conditions for strain in civil-military relations (pp. 1–6).

To address this gap, a joint integration cell reporting directly to the dual-hatted command would be established. This body would synchronize intent across all task forces, enforce a unified battle rhythm, and ensure that operations supported rather than conflicted with each other. Existing chains of command would remain, but their efforts would be coordinated toward a common operational picture.

But clarity of command solves only half the problem. A second vulnerability was the potential for reputational damage. Faulkner (2023) demonstrates how graphic imagery has influenced U.S. foreign policy decisions, citing Somalia's impact on later reluctance to intervene in Rwanda. In a detention environment already under international scrutiny, failing to control the narrative risks allowing isolated incidents to define the mission in the public mind, eroding coalition support and complicating broader U.S. diplomatic objectives. To mitigate such risks, a media and messaging control team within the integration cell would coordinate with the public affairs office, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and State Department liaisons. This coordination would not suppress information but would align external communications to preserve legitimacy.

In summary, Boone's priority was structural integration. Effective detention operations in a joint environment require clear command relationships and coherent messaging. Without these, even routine actions risk undermining operational and strategic objectives.

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