

Conducting a Pre-Mortem

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The pre-mortem is a technique often used in the private sector to identify and mitigate key risks to major projects. A pre-mortem is conducted after the project plan is developed, but before it is launched. The facilitator informs participants who have been involved and/or briefed on the project plan that the project has been implemented... and that it has then failed spectacularly. The participants' job is to identify plausible reasons why abject failure may have occurred, assess which failure modes are at all likely, and suggest ways to modify the project and its implementation plan as appropriate.

Though the pre-mortem technique is straightforward and may seem simplistic, it has proved quite useful in the private sector. Research has shown that it is generally easier for people to develop plausible reasons for future events if they imagine that the event (in this case the failure) has already occurred. In addition, particularly if led by an effective facilitator, participants will feel not only free but incentivized to come up with insightful failure scenarios.¹

The pre-mortem is not well-known in the national security sector, but we have used it successfully on many occasions to identify and mitigate risks inherent in strategies, plans, and concepts. One of us (Miller) was introduced to the technique by LtGen. (ret.) Paul Van Riper when Miller was leading an external red team that reviewed joint concepts and strategies for OSD and the Joint Staff from 2002-2007; out of a couple dozen concept reviews, the red team (and more importantly the sponsors) never failed to learn something new from conducting a pre-mortem. We have also found conducting a pre-mortem very useful in assessing defense strategies (including those in QDRs as well as regional and functional strategies).

It is worth doing a quick pre-mortem on the idea of conducting a pre-mortem in the development of national security strategies and plans. Three potential pitfalls stand out. First, the results may be used inappropriately within government by internal opponents of the strategy or plan ("Mr. Secretary, this strategy is obviously flawed: we found a dozen major problems in no more than an hour"). Second, results or just the fact of a pre-mortem may leak to the press or Congress, resulting in a skewing of the issues, and potentially undermining support for the strategy. And third, some participants could intentionally or inadvertently use the process to water down the strategy or plan, or drag out the process in a futile effort to minimize all risk. In today's world, a very low-risk plan may also have little or no upside.

Because of these potential pitfalls of using the pre-mortem in government, we have done so quietly in a trusted group and without a written record.

¹ For more explanation and examples of the post-mortem's use in business, see Gary Klein, "Performing a Project Premortem," Harvard Business Review, September 2007. Available at <https://hbr.org/2007/09/performing-a-project-premortem>.