

When leaders say they want innovation, what they want is spiral development and predictable forward progress. They don't want disruptive innovation that upsets the status quo and puts jobs at risk.—Nick Sanders

That quote comes from [an article](#) we wrote more than two years ago, discussing the Department of Defense's bi-polar relationship with technical innovation and change. We've written several articles on the topic, and we've also made public presentations discussing why DoD's attempts to woo Silicon Valley firms were (in our view) doomed to fail.

It's not that we don't want innovation and change; it's just that we've become cynical by our experiences (and by stories we've read and heard) about how the entrenched DoD bureaucracy—aided and abetted by paid lobbyists—kills such innovation and change.

It's an old story: entrenched bureaucrats feel threatened by change. Entrenched contractors grown slow and indolent by operating within a monopsony with tough barriers to entry feel threatened by upstart tech companies that are nimbly and quickly moving forward. Technical competence meets politics-as-usual.

Politics-as-usual wins.

And yet we keep on trying, don't we?

In March 2016, then-SECDEF Ash Carter created the Defense Innovation Board “inviting as members 15 innovators from the private sector and academia to enhance the department's culture, organization and processes.” Six months later, the DIB dropped 11 recommendations on the DoD.

Defense Innovation Board: “Making an Impact”

Written by Nick Sanders

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After five meetings and several fact-finding trips, the DIB made 12 more recommendations for change, bringing the total number of recommendations to 23. From a [recent article](#), the DIB is discussing making four more recommendations.

DIB Director Eric Schmidt (Executive Director for Alphabet, the holding company of Google), is optimistic that the DIB’s recommendations are making an impact. Schmidt was quoted in the article as follows—

"I'm quite optimistic that this model is working ... I think it shows a hunger for change, an interest in new things and a modernization process that matters a great deal. And the secretary of defense and his staff have been incredibly supportive of this whole maneuver."

With all due respect to Mr. Schmidt, the measure of success will not be found in the recommendations made, but rather in the actions taken in response to those recommendations. If the actions lead to a quicker adoption of technical innovation and change, then that—and that alone—will define success. Simply making recommendations that go nowhere is an example of futility, not success.

Meanwhile, unnamed DoD officials are “reviewing” the DIB’s recommendations

So in eighteen months the DIB has made 23 recommendations that have generated zero action. Toyota designed and delivered the Prius in eighteen months. DoD can’t even action a recommendation in that time.

While perpetual optimism is a force multiplier, at some point that optimism becomes foolishness. Let us know when the DIB has crossed that line.