

# Using Strategic Foresight: Insights from Commander Eric Popiel, Evergreen Program Manager, U.S. Coast Guard

By Michael J. Keegan




Strategic foresight is not futuristic forecasting. Foresight is about being able to perceive the significance and nature of events before they happen. It's about having the imagination to be prepared for what may come,

regardless of which scenario occurs—it is a mindset, not a process. It's about going beyond the tyranny of the present and preparing the best you can for the uncertainty of the future.

Efforts to create strategic foresight capacity in the U.S. federal government have come in fits and starts over the past four decades. But in recent years, there has been some progress at the agency level, largely at the behest of political and career leaders who appreciate the value of foresight as part of their decision-making processes.

How does the U.S. Coast Guard use strategic foresight to inform decision making? What is the Evergreen process? How is the federal community sharing strategic foresight best practices? CDR Eric Popiel, Evergreen Program Manager, U.S. Coast Guard joined me on *The Business of Government Hour* to share his insights on these topics and more. The following is an edited excerpt of our discussion, complemented by additional research. The thoughts and opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the U.S. Coast Guard.


## What can you tell us about the U.S. Coast Guard's Office of Emerging Policy?


 **Eric Popiel:** The office was formed to look at emerging and future issues and challenges around the globe that have the potential to impact the Coast Guard's mission set and operating environment. The office is the primary point of

contact for all long-term Coast Guard strategic thinking and the development of future strategies. It functions a bit like an internal think tank, addressing high-level strategic challenges and projects generally assigned by the Deputy Commandant for Operations or the Commandant of the Coast Guard.

For example, we are currently working on the Coast Guard Force Planning Construct and formulating some ideas and strategies on the future of the Maritime Transportation System in addition to our work on the future of the Arctic. In terms of supporting the Coast Guard's multi-mission roles, the Office of Emerging Policy provides recommendations and helps to identify future challenges and opportunities. We are not necessarily the subject matter experts on every topic or mission, but we have an extensive network of individuals, both in headquarters and at field units, that contribute to research and product development.

## How does the Evergreen Program facilitate the U.S. Coast Guard's use of strategic foresight? What's your role in making this happen?

 **Eric Popiel:** The Evergreen's mission is to establish a strategically agile Coast Guard prepared to manage a complex and fast-changing environment. Our mission is to position the Coast Guard to navigate challenges and harness opportunities by developing the foresight mindset in our workforce, teaching people how to practice disciplined foresight and identifying those long-term trends that will impact the Coast Guard in the future. The critical piece to all of this is that we must inform the key decision-makers and best inform the policy-makers. Identifying strategic challenges early and linking them to future capability gaps which can be linked to budget will help the Coast Guard get ahead of the curve and position the service advantageously. I think



“Our mission is to position the Coast Guard to navigate challenges and harness opportunities by developing the foresight mindset in our workforce, teaching people how to practice disciplined foresight and identifying those long-term trends that will impact the Coast Guard in the future.”





“While [strategic foresight] is still a grass-roots movement [in the federal government], I really think it is beginning to attract the attention of higher level leadership in many organizations. I’m optimistic that we can continue to make a difference and institutionalize foresight within the federal government.”

building a workforce that thinks strategically will help the Coast Guard as a whole be less reactionary and more strategic.

Currently, I am the Evergreen Program Manager, the officer assigned to lead the Coast Guard’s Strategic Foresight Initiative. In addition to managing that program, I also have a number of other training and facilitation opportunities, including teaching a foresight module to the Senior Enlisted Leadership Course in New London, Connecticut.

**What are the top three challenges that you face in your position and how have you sought to address them?**



**Eric Popiel:** Running a program like Evergreen comes with some unique challenges. The number one challenge is that foresight is one of those disciplines that not everyone understands; certainly few realize the value it can add to a large organization. Convincing people that the pursuit of long-term strategic goals is worthwhile can be daunting and at times frustrating. I find that addressing this problem is tackled through networking and relationship building. Nothing beats a face-to-face meeting when trying to explain what your program can do and how it can impact the organization. Senior leadership buy-in has also been helpful in addressing this challenge. The past two reports that Evergreen has produced were both signed and promulgated by the Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard, and I expect our upcoming Arctic report to be signed by him as well.

A second challenge has been linking the high-level strategic ideas the Evergreen produces to actual budget initiatives. From what I can gather, this is not a challenge unique to Evergreen, but one faced by many different foresight programs. I’ve studied our process and reached out to our requirements and capabilities directorates and brought them on board with what we are trying to do. I’ve explained how we can use their established processes to link the Evergreen outputs to requirements and eventual budget initiatives. I recently had a very productive meeting with our 7 shop

and explained our goals. They were incredibly receptive to our approach and we’ve forged a great relationship with them. I expect our two offices to be working closely together for the foreseeable future.

Finally, I’m challenged by not having enough time to do everything that I’d like to do throughout the day. Staying on top of foresight trends, researching current events, conducting environmental scans, in addition to other projects takes some time management. I’m also asked by a variety of government agencies to give presentations and assist with their foresight efforts. Juggling all of this can be a challenge but it’s a good challenge to have. When I came to D.C. four years ago, I assumed that every agency had a long-term plan for success and a foresight program similar to Evergreen. I’ve come to find out that this isn’t the case, although I’m incredibly enthused and happy that many agencies are integrating foresight into their planning processes. I’m optimistic that in the coming years, the discipline of foresight will be even more embedded in the mindset of federal employees and it will hopefully become “institutionalized.”

**What are the characteristics of an effective leader? And who has inspired you?**




**Eric Popiel:** You have to be a people person, someone who isn’t afraid to take risks, and someone who is always willing to go the extra mile to ensure those he or she leads are taken care of and have the ability to flourish and grow. You have to make a connection with those you are leading and be willing to help out—think of others above yourself. We throw around the term “servant-leader” and I think that is more important than ever. We should always be willing to go the extra mile; your career will take care of itself if you are a selfless leader.

I remember a gunner’s mate chief on one of my first boats pulling me aside and explaining to me that the Coast Guard will be a great career but that it’s still an organization. When you are ready to retire, your family and those people that


you've impacted will be the legacy you leave. They will invite you over for Christmas dinner; the Coast Guard will not. If you don't take care of the people around you or forge relationships, you may have a stunning career but you'll be lonely when it's all over. Put people first and never pass up an opportunity to help someone in need.

My inspiration comes from a variety of different sources. First and foremost is my faith, but I also look at some of the people that I've had the pleasure of serving with throughout my career. The XO at my previous unit, Don Taylor, was a man who always let you make a mistake but helped you learn for it. Retired Admiral John Currier, my CO at Air Station Miami, always had our back as junior pilots and understood how important it was for us to be mentored and learn our craft. One of my good friends, Frank Flood, is one of the most selfless people I know—constantly looking out for others; always ready with a word of encouragement.

### **How does the Evergreen process assist leadership to think “over the horizon” and manage uncertainty and ambiguity in plausible operational environment?**


 **Eric Popiel:** The future is unpredictable and unknowable and therefore uncertain. Evergreen can expose senior leaders to different futures and allow them to grapple with the challenges that these scenarios present. It helps them to remove themselves from the “tyranny of the present” and operate in a world outside their typical environment. Thinking about a future ten, twenty, or even thirty years out is by definition over the horizon. I think it exposes them to uncertainty and helps them to formulate answers to some of the “what if” problems these scenarios present. This thought process alone is helpful and expands their aperture to not just include what is happening, but what could happen. I also think that exploring future worlds is fun and an exciting experience for those leaders who aren't into hard science fiction or alternative realities.

### **How does engaging in strategic foresight scenario planning help avoiding the “Most Likely Future” trap?**

 **Eric Popiel:** The most likely future in many circles is typically the one where you have an unlimited budget, all the authority you desire, and no major problems or challenges to adversely impact your organization. Unfortunately, this is never the reality, and playing in such a scenario is counterproductive.

Scenario-based planning helps avoid this because it presents workshop participants with a range of options. Typically, these options have elements that are challenging and may be hard for participants to grapple with. In other words, while we are not producing a dystopian future, we are certainly producing something a lot less utopian than people may like. Multiple scenarios force people to confront their fears, open their eyes to possibilities they may not have considered and live in a reality that isn't comfortable or ideal. It also forces an organization to look across multiple operating environments and plan for strategies that are successful across a range of these scenarios. This is inherently better than formulating a plan for a future you “think” will happen but in all likelihood will not.

### **How have your efforts with Evergreen informed and shaped the Coast Guard's Arctic strategy?**

 **Eric Popiel:** We have a project focused on identifying future capability gaps for the Arctic Domain. In terms of formulating the strategy, I think you would have to go back to 1998 when Evergreen identified the concept of Maritime Domain Awareness as the beginning of looking at the Arctic Domain. Fast forward a few years to 2009 and Evergreen identified a need for the Coast Guard to have greater Polar mission capacity.

The Coast Guard has been going to the poles long before Evergreen existed, but I think that identifying the region as a strategic imperative based on long-term trends was critical to ensuring the Coast Guard wrote an Arctic Strategy. I'd like to think that the Evergreen process had something to do with that.

We are currently working on a study of the Arctic looking at long-term capability gaps. We are crafting planning scenarios that will not only aid in our current work, but form the basis for the scenario-based planning process that is employed in a few years when it becomes time to refresh the Arctic Strategy. We'll also be assisting U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) when it comes time for them to refresh their Arctic Strategy in a few years' time.

### Cybersecurity is more important than ever. How have you used Evergreen to inform and shape the Coast Guard's cybersecurity strategy?



**Eric Popiel:** The Evergreen Program identified the cyber domain as a strategic imperative and helped prompt senior leadership to convene a task force to write the cyber strategy. In 2014, Evergreen was able to look another ten years into the future and identify some key success factors that would help the Coast Guard thrive in the cyber domain. Evergreen also looked at the current strategy and the implementation plan and mapped these new strategic needs to ensure alignment with current efforts. Where there was alignment, we noted it, and where there were new ideas to pursue, we passed them on to the appropriate team. As with the Arctic, we're looking forward to working with CG Cyber in the next few years to renew, refresh, and update the strategy as necessary.

### What is the Federal Foresight Community of Interest?



**Eric Popiel:** The FFCOI was a group formed about three years ago with the purpose of bringing together foresight practitioners across the federal government to share best practices and showcase different foresight methodologies, and apply lessons learned. I'm currently honored to serve as the co-chair of the group along with Mr. Joe Moore from the VA. The community is thriving and has outreach to well over thirty different agencies. We meet on a quarterly basis and try to fill the agenda with thought-provoking speakers, presentations of foresight success stories, and reports on new projects currently underway. It is a tremendous opportunity to network with other like-minded individuals and learn from the best foresight practitioners in the federal government. I have learned a lot from my colleagues and they have helped out Evergreen in many ways.

I always reach back to the community when I'm looking for external workshop participants or just need some advice on methodology. We're all trying to make a difference in the federal government, and it's exciting to see foresight programs take root in different agencies. While this is still a grass-roots movement, I really think it is beginning to attract the attention of higher level leadership in many organizations. I'm optimistic that we can continue to make a difference and institutionalize foresight within the federal government. ■

To learn more about the U.S. Coast Guard's Evergreen Program, go to [uscg.mil](http://uscg.mil).



To hear *The Business of Government Hour* interview with CDR Eric Popiel, go to the Center's website at [www.businessofgovernment.org](http://www.businessofgovernment.org).



To download the show as a podcast on your computer or MP3 player, from the Center's website at [www.businessofgovernment.org](http://www.businessofgovernment.org), right click on an audio segment, select Save Target As, and save the file.



To read the full transcript of *The Business of Government Hour* interview with CDR Eric Popiel, visit the Center's website at [www.businessofgovernment.org](http://www.businessofgovernment.org).