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2011 Essay Contest Winner Announced

 chds.us/c/item/723

Homeland security professionals could learn valuable lessons from legendary French composer Claude Debussy and his flouting of rigid musical convention, argues the winning entry of the 2011 Naval Postgraduate School Center for Homeland Defense and Security essay contest.

Yee San Su, Ph.D., penned this year's winning entry with a paper titled "On the Challenge of Assessing National Preparedness." Su is a research analyst with CNA Safety and Security in Alexandria, Va. Su's essay was chosen from among 91 entries.

"I'm a firm believer in cross-fertilization of ideas and multi-disciplinary approaches to solving problems," Su said. "Given the mention of Debussy, I thought it would be an interesting exercise to see what would result if I compared two disciplines music and homeland security that, at first glance, appear to have nothing in common."

This year's essay question was: Claude Debussy said "Works of art make rules; rules do not make works of art." How might this idea be applied to how we approach homeland defense and security?

Su likens the musical convention of Debussy's day to the symphony of rules promulgated during the past decade in the name of national preparedness, namely the 2007 National Preparedness Guidelines and related documents, the Target Capabilities List and the National Priorities, National Planning Scenarios and the Universal Task List.

Su questions why such rules have been unable to "successfully construct a national preparedness framework." The rules are so byzantine that they render a useful assessment unfeasible. The result, much like musical composition, is that the human mind simplifies when faced with complexity, Su writes.

He then offers some tips for homeland security, based on lessons from Debussy:

- Do not change to indulge the audience. Debussy's unconventional composition may have frustrated some listeners, but was also lauded for its imagination. Likewise, homeland security planners would do well to avoid watering down preparedness assessments to make them more digestible and popular.
- Master the rules in order to break them. Despite his experimental musical reputation, Debussy was well-schooled in traditional composition. Homeland security professionals must display technical expertise, while also having flexibility with regulations, such as grant requirements.
- Allow content to define form. Target Capabilities should avoid resembling a "prescriptive checklist" and allow flexibility for states to meet requirements in their unique way.
- Assimilate and tinker. Just as Debussy employed different musical influences, an assessment framework should reflect needs of states, while DHS supports them with assessment resources and performance analysis.

The thrust of the essay's message is that an assessment approach is needed that accounts for the unique problems states face.

"A while back, one of my colleagues said something that's stuck with me," Su remarked about his essay. "He said that it's difficult to make people understand that not all data collected are appropriate for assessments. In a similar vein, when it comes to national preparedness assessment, we've focused a lot of attention on what states have, and not as much attention on why they have it."

The CHDS essay contest, now in its fourth year, is aimed at stimulating original thought on issues in Homeland Security and Homeland Defense.

"Dr. Su's essay masterfully suggests improvements to preparedness assessments and how they relate to the musical constructs of Debussy's day," CHDS Director Glen Woodbury said. "This is the kind of innovative thinking the contest was established to inspire."

The competition features a \$1,500 award for first place and a visit to the CHDS campus in Monterey, Calif. The winning and four top finalist essays will be considered for publication by Homeland Security Affairs, the online journal published by the CHDS.

Remaining 2011 finalists include:

- Michelle Shevin, Research Assistant, Naval Postgraduate School, "Narrative and Naiveté in National Security."
- David Riedman, Senior Consultant, Bethesda, Md., "Disjointed Abstracts: Picasso's Portrait of the Department of Homeland Security."
- Mary Gilchrist, retired, Solon, Iowa, "Conception and Reality: Configuring our Bioterrorism Response Strategies to Conform to the Latter."
- Aaron Godbey, Consultant, Fort Collins, Colo., "A Case for Psychological Profiling for Law Enforcement Organizations."
- Karen M. Wood, Research Analyst, Fredericksburg, Va., "The Art of Enterprise-Wide Coordination and Integration in Homeland Security Initiatives: Incorporating Other Perspectives in Program Design."

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