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ABSTRACT (MAXIMUM 200 WORDS) The reconstruction and capacity-building operations that the United States military and civilian agencies face are and will continue to be increasingly complex, requiring a more integrated approach. In recent conflicts, reconstruction and capacity-building were hindered by a lack of overarching strategic guidance, interagency dysfunction, unclear lines of command and responsibility, under-resourced civilian agency partners, and strategic myopia with regard to the critical tasks of Provincial Reconstruction Teams. The model of Provincial Reconstructions Teams serves as a cautionary tale for future war planners. To improve the effectiveness of reconstruction and capacity-building in complex future operating environments, the United States must improve interagency cooperation and coordination and must be willing to break with certain assumptions regarding reconstruction activities in COIN operations.					
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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

***STRATEGIC FAILURE: IMPACTS AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM
PROVINCIAL RECONSTRUCTION TEAMS
IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN***

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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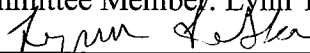
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Preface

My initial interest in this subject matter came because of my posting to Iraq in 2014. As my plane touched down in Baghdad in June 2014, it was immediately clear to me that things were not going smoothly in Iraq. Before flying on to the Green Zone, I had heard rumors of a potential attack on the airport from insurgent-controlled Fallujah. I asked myself, “Wasn’t this the Fallujah where so much American blood and treasure was lost--considered sacred ground to U.S. Marines, like Khe Sanh in Vietnam?” Less than a week after I arrived at the embassy, Mosul fell to Daesh. More questions swam in my mind: “Wasn’t this the Mosul where the first Provincial Reconstruction Team in Iraq had begun work nine years ago? What happened? And what about the billions upon billions of dollars spent on reconstruction and capacity-building by Provincial Reconstruction Teams?” I started thinking about the implications of this clear strategic failure of our capacity-building mission in Iraq, as well as Afghanistan, which, like Iraq, was imploding before our eyes.

Being at Command and Staff College has allowed me the opportunity to explore these questions in depth, an opportunity for which I am grateful. I hope the lessons drawn in this paper will be of use to future war planners. Errors in strategic thinking in all aspects of war come at the cost of civilian, service member, and allied lives. I sincerely hope that the people who need to read this essay do, and our senior leaders take note and implement the needed changes. Many thanks to my mentor, Dr. Edward Erickson, for the steady guidance and encouragement through the writing process.

Introduction

Following the commencement of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan in 2001, the first Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) was established in Gardez in 2003, composed of military civil affairs units and civilian agency representatives, under military control.¹ In essence, PRTs were interagency teams tasked with leveraging civilian expertise and military manpower, security assets, and resources to increase local governments' capacity to deliver essential services (and thereby stabilize the country for transition to local control). The concept was predicated upon the U.S. government's assumption that a transition to peaceful democracy could be expedited by increasing local government capacity while warfighting operations were still taking place and thus while security was not yet established. Support initially ran very high as key military and civilian leaders hoped the PRT model would lead to a quick transition. Other PRTs were enthusiastically established in Afghanistan, and the concept was then expanded to Iraq, with the first PRT in Iraq established in Mosul in 2005, this time under civilian control by the U.S. Department of State.²

At the peak of their activities in 2010, there were 27 PRTs active in Afghanistan³ and 21 PRTs in Iraq.⁴ The last PRT in Iraq was disbanded in 2011, following the withdrawal of U.S. forces, and the last PRT in Afghanistan was disbanded in 2014.⁵ Looking back from a vantage point of eleven years of observable experience, despite superficial success in achieving direct goals, PRTs--which were active both in national capitols as well as in rural areas--left both countries without affecting a stable transition (i.e., effective control of territory by the national government), and democracy and rule of law remain increasingly distant (if at all realistically extant) goals for both countries. These circumstances raise questions about the nature of PRTs and the work they did, and whether they serve as a cautionary tale or a model for future U.S.

engagement in conflict/war zones, both of which are questions this paper will seek to answer before offering recommendations.

After discussing the origins of PRTs, as well as their mission, strategic purpose, composition, and projects, this paper will examine the following specific factors that contributed to the failure of the PRT mission: 1) the decision to begin nation-building operations while fighting a war at the same time, 2) the decision to deal with national government-appointed officials rather than real leaders of communities, 3) the composition of PRTs and their interagency struggles, and 4) the lack of overarching strategic guidance for PRTs' capacity-building mission. This paper seeks to answer the question, "Do PRTs serve as a cautionary tale or a model for future U.S. engagement in conflict/war zones?" The paper advances the idea that PRTs are no model for interagency cooperation on a battlefield. They are, to the contrary, a cautionary tale to be avoided in the future. Moreover, this paper offers recommendations that address the above specific factors that contributed to PRTs' strategic failure, recommendations that may be of use to future war planners.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams

The extant literature reviewed by this study covers official government publications-- including special inspector general reports and doctrinal guidance for PRTs--testimonials of PRT leaders and members, and academic and journalistic reporting from 2003 to 2016. The character of the extant literature regarding the strategic impact of PRT activities generally ranges from cautious observation to outright caustic criticism. In the aftermath of recent negative developments in Iraq and Afghanistan, examples of PRTs' early champions defending the record of PRTs' capacity-building and reconstruction activities are difficult to find. Even before the

recent spikes of violence and instability in both countries, positive statements regarding PRTs appeared to be largely aspirational or limited to emphasis on tactical achievements--either absent of strategic context or presented as *prima facie* evidence of positive strategic impact (for example, emphasis on numbers of schools built, numbers of girls educated, etc.).

The Origins of PRTs

The PRT concept was born when then President George W. Bush called for a “Marshall Plan for Afghanistan” in a speech in early 2002.⁶ The Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of State (DOS), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) were tasked with delivering on the call, taking into account the negative experiences of the first military civil affairs units that had hit the ground shortly after Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) began: U.S. Army civil affairs teams-Afghanistan (CAT-As) and Coalition Humanitarian Liaison Cells (CHLCs).⁷ Those units had reported back to Washington with sobering news: they were unable to function outside of the immediate Kabul capital region and thus were unable to affect positive change. Something different was therefore needed, and further, it needed to be in-line with “the interagency,” as well as capable of reaching into far-flung, Taliban-controlled areas.

The Pentagon, DOS, and USAID funneled initial thoughts to U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) in Tampa, which turned the raw concepts into what it called “Joint Regional Teams” (JRTs): roughly 80-man-strong and composed of military civil affairs units with embedded interagency partners (primarily DOS and USAID), capable of deploying to austere locations and leveraging broad interagency development, diplomatic, and reconstruction capabilities.⁸ Interim president of the Afghan Transitional Authority, Hamid Karzai, however,

objected to the name “Joint Regional Team” because it implied that these U.S. teams would be supporting regions rather than the central government. He changed the name to “Provincial Reconstruction Team.”⁹ With almost no training for either civilian or military components, and with only vague mission statements in hand, PRTs hit the ground running; from concept to deployment--Bush gave his “Marshall Plan” speech in April 2002, and the first PRT deployed to Gardez, Afghanistan in January 2003--in less than seven months.

Mission Statement and Nominal Strategic Purpose of PRTs

NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Handbook (4th Edition) states, “Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) will assist The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to extend its authority, in order to facilitate the development of a stable and secure environment in the identified area of operations (AO), and enable Security Sector Reform (SSR) and reconstruction efforts.”¹⁰ It further states, “The PRT is an important component of the counter-insurgency campaign. As such, a PRT’s measure of success is not how many development projects it completes, but how all of its activities fully support the end-state goal of improved stability and capable Afghan governance.”¹¹

In the words of counterinsurgency expert and former U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, the mission of PRTs was “to show the people that the government can indeed provide ‘essential services.’”¹² From this NATO document, we can clearly see how the strategic impact of PRTs was intended to be measured: not in numbers of schools built or numbers of girls educated, but rather by the extent to which the activities of PRTs actually improved the government’s ability to rule. In other words, PRTs had a strategic, overarching mission, at least

on paper, from the beginning. Three years after the last PRT closed, we are now in a position to assess how well they did from a strategic perspective.

The Taliban has made incredible gains in Afghanistan following the 2014 transition to a “training and advising” mission there, and now controls some 30% of Afghanistan’s territory (and threatens the remaining 70%).¹³ Governing institutions in Iraq remain similarly weak and largely corrupt, facing endemic poverty and the threat of Daesh, which controls a large portion of Iraqi territory.¹⁴ The capacity of Afghanistan and Iraq’s central governments to control their territories and influence large swaths of their populations remains extremely limited and, in many cases, non-existent. The task of this paper is therefore to find out *why* PRTs appear to have strategically failed and whether or not they are a viable model for future civilian-military cooperation in battle zones.

Funding, Composition, and Projects

Over six years, the U.S. government allocated some \$52 billion for Iraq reconstruction.¹⁵ It allocated almost double that amount (\$102 billion) for Afghanistan reconstruction.¹⁶ In both countries, various security forces received the lion’s share of the reconstruction funding (more than half in both cases). The remaining amounts, approximately \$25 billion in Iraq and \$50 billion in Afghanistan, fell under various authorities. The U.S. military controlled the vast majority of funding sources for PRT projects; the Commanders’ Emergency Response Fund (CERP) was a major funder of PRT projects in both countries. In Iraq, the CERP controlled some \$4.12 billion.¹⁷ This was bolstered by country-specific funds, such as DoD’s \$20.86 billion Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund.¹⁸ USAID also came with deep pockets, and what it lacked in staffing, it made up for in funding--though far less than DoD--and obligated some \$17

billion in Afghanistan for “governance and development” portfolio projects alone.¹⁹ From 2002 until the last PRT closed in 2014, USAID spent nearly \$1 billion on education-related projects in Afghanistan, mostly via PRTs.²⁰ Much of the above-listed funding was spent by PRTs, but it is currently impossible to know exactly what proportion of the above authorities’ funds was spent directly by PRTs on official PRT projects.

Though DOS did not bring large amounts of money nor staff to the table, it did play a prominent role in the composition of PRTs. In Afghanistan, a DOS official (normally a Foreign Service Officer at the rank of FS-01 [approximate military O-6 equivalent]) served as Political Advisor (POLAD) or civilian deputy to the military commander--usually a Lieutenant Colonel--in a PRT composed of some 80 staff members, mostly military (two U.S. Army civil affairs teams and a U.S. National Guard platoon).²¹ At least one representative was also present from USAID and other agencies (the U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], Department of Justice, etc.). In Iraq, DOS played a more prominent role, with a Foreign Service Officer leading each PRT, assisted by a military deputy, a combat engineer, a civil affairs officer, and a representative from the brigade combat team providing security to the PRT, as well as representatives from USAID and other civilian agencies.²² PRTs in Iraq were much smaller than those in Afghanistan, sometimes with as few as six core members, with security provided by military units in the region, augmented by contractors.

Regarding projects undertaken by PRTs, it is difficult to categorize them and impossible to list them. PRTs completed most of their projects via contractors and did not keep good records, and there is, in fact, no comprehensive list of individual PRT projects, transitions and composition, or the current state of projects initiated. In a 2014 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report, USAID and DOS admitted that they were unable to

track the past or current state or progress of projects they had started (mostly due to the deteriorating security situation and resurgence of the Taliban).²³ We only know for sure how many PRTs there were, when they were active, and when they closed. However, projects undertaken by PRTs were eclectic and fell broadly under the “development” umbrella. The fact that “development” is hard to define and means something different to different people is reflected in the nature of the projects on record as having been attempted or completed by PRTs; PRTs undertook everything from translating classic American children’s literature into Pashto to building multi-million dollar chicken processing factories, and everything in between. Upon reading this paper to conclusion, it may be clearer why there are no detailed records of PRT projects. However, as will be shown in the numerous examples provided below, although USAID and DOS claim to be unable to track the progress or current state of projects undertaken by PRTs, we know that many (and perhaps most or even all) PRT projects failed to get off the ground after the first stages, failed shortly after nominal completion, or were never fully completed.

Analysis of PRT Strategic Failure

The task of this paper is to examine *why* PRTs strategically failed and whether or not they are a viable model for future civilian-military cooperation in battle zones. The below sections contain analysis of specific factors that contributed to the failure of PRTs.

Nation-building while Fighting a War at the Same Time

Perhaps the most significant reason why PRTs failed was the fact that they were operating in a war zone. They were not rebuilding what was destroyed during the fighting;

rather, they were attempting to rebuild *while* the fighting was happening. This created frustrations for PRT staff, not to mention the Iraqi civilians who had to navigate the dangerous quagmire of well-meaning but often ill-equipped PRT staffers, U.S. and central Afghan government military commanders, and various insurgent groups, all active on the ground, and all with their own perspectives and goals.

For example, in 2009, civil affairs staff on PRT Paktika in Afghanistan complained that ongoing fighting with the not-yet-defeated Taliban was having a disastrous effect on their projects. While they were attempting to improve communications in rural Afghanistan by establishing cell phone networks, the Taliban was exploiting the existing security vacuum by threatening cell phone tower operators and forcing them to shut down service after 1800 each night.²⁴ This had a two-fold effect: 1) it thwarted the mission of providing communication technology to Afghan civilians, and 2), it sent the message that the Taliban, not the government, was actually in control. In other words, by exploiting an opportunity to show that they retained control over even the most basic services, the active Taliban insurgency undermined the goal of the PRT to increase the government's influence and control in the region.

From April to June of 2008, a PRT in Khost, Afghanistan conducted a benchmark survey of local villages in eleven of the thirteen provincial districts of Khost regarding villagers' opinions about the progress of U.S.-funded projects and the performance of the local branch of the Afghan central government.²⁵ The survey was conducted by the PRT Information Officer in order to provide commanders with a benchmark of current conditions to evaluate whether PRT activities were having the intended effect. The responses the PRT received were not encouraging; one response encapsulated the frustrations of ordinary Afghans regarding the attempts by the PRT to conduct reconstruction and capacity-building projects in the middle of a

war zone: “What good is a school when we live under threat each day? The government does not take security seriously. At least under the Taliban, we had security.”²⁶ Well-meaning though the PRTs’ educational programs were, their strategic goal of increasing the government’s capacity (and thus its legitimacy) was undermined by the ongoing fighting. In fact, as implicated in the above respondent’s statement, it actually reinforced some villagers’ *positive* views of the capacity and legitimacy of the Taliban, to the detriment of central authorities.

Dealing with the Wrong People: Ignoring Real Leaders of Communities

The above-mentioned survey was conducted by U.S Navy Lieutenant Robert “Jake” Bebber, who served on PRT Khost as the Information Operations Officer in 2008. After his time spent on a PRT in Khost, he wrote,

Nearly all local nationals believe that, without Coalition presence, the government would collapse. Therefore, the Coalition becomes an enabler of corruption by supporting the government. Local villagers’ knowledge of who their district sub-governor was remained poor, and most villagers reported having never even seen a representative of the Afghan government (national or local) visit.²⁷

Lieutenant Bebber’s observations track with those of U.S. Army Colonel Mike Fenzel, who was Commander of Task Force Eagle in Paktika Province, Afghanistan from 2007-2008 and who wrote,

Currently, provincial governors appoint district governors, often favored friends and acquaintances, not men of the people or even of the local tribes. The vast majority of provincial council members do not live in the provinces they represent. For this reason, provincial councilmen are almost entirely irrelevant to their constituencies.²⁸

The stated mission of PRTs was to “assist The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to extend its authority,” and yet from these examples, it appears that the government of Afghanistan was a part of the problem. That is to say, the provision of “essential services” so needed to establish a

peaceful transition, as described by Nagl previously, was in fact undermined by the very central government that PRTs were obligated to support.

But were there other power structures the PRTs could have worked with? In fact, legitimate authority in Afghanistan, like in Iraq (and much of the developing world, for that matter), stems from tribal leaders. Even under the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, respectively, Afghan and Iraqi societies largely ran along tribal lines, an arrangement which was at times tacitly- and at times openly-embraced by the “central” authorities. Colonel Fenzel went on to say that “establishing security in this war-torn land is achievable only if we focus our efforts and resources at the district level, where the subtribes are culturally dominant.”²⁹

This begs the question of why PRTs did not work with local tribal leaders in Afghanistan or Iraq. In her book on reconstruction and development, *Peaceland*, Severine Autesserre explains that modern power structures, such as the United Nations and the United States of America, insist on dealing with central authorities.³⁰ Autesserre wrote that our modern, bureaucratic western model operates from a false assumption that elites represent populations. Further, she notes that “protocol demands it”; in other words, a diplomat can deliver a demarche to a Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, but would be placed in an awkward situation if the local power structure did not recognize a central authority. Further, Autesserre claimed that western elites simply prefer to deal with urban elites in the developing world, who may speak English and have some understanding of western education and values, whether those elites truly understand and represent the will of local communities or not.³¹ But in Afghanistan and Iraq, there was an added dimension: decision-makers in Washington were not simply bound by the traditions and assumptions described by Autesserre; in fact, the entire stated mission of

Washington was to prop up the central governments, to the detriment of long-standing tribal lines of authority, creating an unresolvable paradox for PRT leaders.

Composition: Too Few, Too Far, and Interagency Struggles

Even DOS and USAID were often not on same page, never mind the chasm between civilian and military members of PRTs. Former Foreign Service Officer and PRT team leader in Besmaya and Baghdad in Iraq Peter Van Buren describes in his book, *We Meant Well*, his struggles to coordinate with the USAID element of his own PRT.³² Describing his attempts to implement a USAID-funded project to teach good-governance classes to local Iraqi officials, he wrote, “The USAID representative would not tell me what he was working on. He would report to his boss, who would write a summary for my boss, who often remembered to forward it to me. We did not play well together.”³³

Regarding the military-civilian chasm, Van Buren, nominally the leader of his PRT, had to reconcile with the fact that the vast majority of funding, and all of the security, for his PRT came from the military. Since his PRT was located on a Forward Operating Base (FOB), it was also subject to FOB rules and regulations. This meant that the FOB’s commanding colonel could sometimes hamstring or even undermine the PRT mission.

Besides cultural differences, Van Buren described several incidents where a FOB commander’s interests ran directly counter to those of the PRT. In one incident, a long-term project he and his diplomatic colleagues were working on with local Iraqi officials--in which they were attempting to convince the Iraqi local government to take responsibility for removing growing trash piles around the FOB--was derailed when the FOB commander suddenly and unexpectedly ordered that U.S. funds be spent to collect the trash immediately.³⁴ Fearing that

improvised explosive devices (IEDs) could be emplaced in the growing trash piles around the FOB, the commander was unsympathetic to the broader goal of transition when faced with the immediate threat of IEDs to his soldiers. In another example, Van Buren describes how a PRT spent \$200,000 on a medical gas cylinder factory, only to have the produced cylinders prevented from continuing to market by a U.S. Army commander, who feared the cylinders could be used to manufacture bombs.³⁵ A 2013 Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) report noted that DoD, DOS, and USAID “sometimes coordinated but rarely integrated their operations: ‘stovepiping’ is the apt descriptor ... there were few effective mechanisms for unifying their diverse efforts.”³⁶

In addition to crossed wires and interagency dysfunction, PRTs faced the further composition problem of their small numbers when contrasted with the vast AOs for which they were nominally responsible, as well as their restricted movement due to security concerns. Van Buren observed that the “physical reality, that we lived imprisoned on military bases, meant that we had the most cursory relationships with Iraqis and were always seen as fat-walleted aliens descending from armored spaceships.”³⁷ He noted that a PRT in Rasheed, Iraq was responsible for a population the size of Detroit. Fenzel observed separately that “nearly all reconstruction teams are geographically separated from the rural sections of their assigned province, and they do not possess the capability to venture far beyond the population centers.”³⁸ A 2008 RAND study on the counterinsurgency (COIN) effort in Afghanistan found that PRTs were often not active where they were most needed, namely in the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan, noting that “the irony in this situation is that rural areas, which were most at risk from the Taliban and where unhappiness with the slow pace of change was greatest among the population,

received little assistance.”³⁹ The study noted that the PRTs’ absence from those areas was due to security concerns.

Lack of Overarching Strategy

Beyond the problems of composition, refusing to work through tribal leaders, or nation-building in a war zone, many of the issues faced by PRTs stemmed from the “original sin” of the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan: the assumption that those countries could be turned into fully-functioning and thriving democratic partners on the cheap, with far fewer boots on the ground and fewer resources expended than many experts had recommended, given the proposed scale of operations (although the United States did eventually send larger forces and did eventually spend astronomical sums in both countries). In fact, upon reflection, one might deduce that all of the above problems were at least exacerbated in some way by the security vacuum created when the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, respectively, were overthrown without first ensuring security in the immediate post-conflict environment. The strategic lack of vision that guided the first part of the war persisted into the middle of the war (as for the end of the war, it is not clear if that state has ever been articulated in a meaningful way).

U.S. Army General Tommy Franks, the architect of the operational concept for the campaign in Afghanistan, had argued for a “small footprint” after combat operations had ended, envisioning no more than 10,000 combat troops to remain in Afghanistan.⁴⁰ A similar mindset guided policy-makers before the campaign in Iraq. Suggestions that a large force would be needed to stabilize Iraq in the aftermath of combat operations were shut down by war planners.⁴¹ The scene was therefore set for the security vacuum PRTs would encounter in both countries. U.S. decision-makers had the idea of stabilizing the country with few troops and minimal

resources, and were not committed to full-on nation-building even as the first PRT was established in 2003. The decision to attempt nation-building without a significant force to ensure security was a failure at the strategic level, both in terms of vision and in terms of coordinating the myriad activities of the U.S. government in Afghanistan (kinetic, special operations, psychological operations, reconstruction, security assistance and training, goodwill, etc.), which doomed PRTs from the outset.

The failure to foresee the issues that would be caused by a “small footprint” strategy pales in comparison, however, to the failure to develop an overarching strategy for capacity-building itself. As mentioned above, PRTs deployed with little or no training and no playbook or list of tasks to accomplish. Instead, specific projects came piecemeal to PRTs, sometimes ordered by military commanders, sometimes concocted by policy-makers on-high in Washington, and sometimes tasked by leadership at the embassy, none of whom had a solid grasp of the actual needs of Afghan and Iraqi civilians on the ground.⁴² The latest “flavor of the day” policy directive or hot-button political topic in Washington or Baghdad would set policy for a PRT, only to be discarded and replaced with the next month’s flavor with little notice.⁴³ If good ideas were few and far between, however, cash was plentiful, and billions of dollars were thereby funneled to PRTs to implement ideas, leading to results that were oftentimes concurrently blackly comical, borderline-immorally wasteful, and inhumanely tragic.

In his seminal, sobering, and irreverent account of his experience as a PRT leader in Iraq (irreverent to the point that the Department of State attempted to fire him after publication), Van Buren minced no words in his description of implementation of PRT projects.⁴⁴ He described example after example of wasteful, oblivious “Pollyannaism” or willful, near-corrupt, photo-op-chasing cynicism depending on one’s perspective: the \$90,000 the U.S. government paid to

translate classic American literature into Pashto books that no library in Afghanistan wanted, that it then had to give away to an Iraqi high school principal, who only agreed to accept the books on the condition that the PRT deliver them for free, tried to sell the books on the black market and--having failed to offload the books for profit--simply dumped them behind his school;⁴⁵ the above-mentioned \$200,000 the PRT spent on a medical gas factory that produced gas cylinders, which the U.S. Army then refused to allow past checkpoints because terrorists favored the cylinders to make bombs, thus ensuring the closure of the factory.⁴⁶

Or the \$7,000 spent on a Baghdad Yellow Pages which no Iraqi wanted and no business wanted its name associated with, but for which the PRT eventually found 250 businesses willing to be listed, and for which the PRT paid a contractor \$7 per book to give them away because security had deteriorated to the point that the PRT itself could not distribute them (not to mention that there are virtually no landlines in Baghdad); the nearly \$3 million the PRT spent on a chicken processing plant in a country that did not have chicken feed for commercial farms, and which could not compete economically with cheaper imported chicken or even the fresh chicken most Iraqis ate already, and which therefore only slaughtered chickens in the presence of visiting delegations from the embassy;⁴⁷ the “empowering women” projects that bordered on farce: ordered to support women’s NGOs and provided with substantial funding they were commanded to spend on a short deadline, PRT leaders and military commanders simply plucked illiterate women from surrounding villages, “promoted” them to NGO leaders, and then hosted conferences of such women in hotel ballrooms, where they mostly sang and danced--to the tune of millions upon millions of dollars.⁴⁸

This is a small set of the seemingly countless, detailed examples provided in Van Buren’s memoir. But lest Van Buren be called an agitator (a charge that has been levied at him), Van

Buren is not alone in his examples of the perplexing wastefulness and futility of misguided PRT projects. A *Wall Street Journal* article from 2013 described a university in eastern Afghanistan, Nangarhar University--rebuilt and funded with USAID's \$1 billion Afghan education fund and largely supported by USAID and the local PRT, with a monthly operating budget of \$360,000--that is most notable for producing radical, anti-American Islamists.⁴⁹ The 2013 *WSJ* article highlighted the role of Nangarhar University students in leading 2013 protests in Kabul against the implementation of laws which criminalized violence against women.⁵⁰ The school has been an annual blip on western audiences' radars ever since. It made the news in 2014 over concerns regarding the "Talibanization" of its students,⁵¹ and then again in 2015 for a pro-Islamic State (Daesh) rally held at the school.⁵² A Voice of America reporter quoted a student at the 2015 rally shouting, "We are tired of democracy. We want an Islamic caliphate. We want a fair caliphate and an Islamic system."⁵³

Returning to the example of Lieutenant Bebber's PRT information operation survey in Khost, Afghanistan, there is no irony in Lieutenant Bebber's description of a combat-ready PRT arriving in small villages in rural Khost, in full battle regalia, weapons on display (for reasons obvious to readers of this paper, but less so for villagers), and asking, in essence, if villagers felt the PRT and the U.S.-supported forces and government were doing a good job. Lieutenant Bebber described in detail the planning that went into the survey, including painstaking consideration of the methodology and the types of questions to ask. But all to what purpose? This one small example may serve as a metaphor for the entire concept of the PRT--the best of intentions, carried out by dedicated and talented people, but which was doomed to fail because it happened in a vacuum without perspective and without a strategic, overarching purpose: a mission for the mission's sake because it was decreed so. Van Buren woefully observed,

The Embassy, isolated in the Green Zone, was obsessive in insisting on its ability to shape events in Iraq through our project work. It tasked the PRTs with broad goals, or [lines of effort] LOEs ... such as “building a civil society,” as if we were playing a freakishly long version of The Sims. The ePRT then had to make up local projects to show efforts were being made in each Line of Effort.⁵⁴

These examples can give the impression that these projects were happening in a vacuum where the conditions for success were simply not present. Rather than stop and reevaluate, the PRTs trudged along, completing their narrow missions, spending enormous resources along the way and ignoring signs that what they were doing was not useful. One can hardly blame them; under enormous pressure to perform miracles and to spend unfathomable sums of money as quickly as possible, they did their best to at least show an effort.

In the PRTs’ mission of winning the reconstruction and development battle, like the mission of defeating the enemy in Afghanistan and Iraq, there is a tangible lack of a commanding architect’s input and vision over a project. Instead, one has an armada of craftsmen, each very skilled in his own right, but one is told to build a door and one is told to put a door frame in. Each is very competent at his task and sets about doing it to his best ability with all his skill. But neither has a plan or sketch of the final product, nor an idea of what the customer really wants. Should the door be on the north side? On the south? The result can only be disaster and wasted money and talent, absent sheer luck, which the metaphorical customers in Washington and the metaphorical carpenters in the field in Afghanistan and Iraq did not have.

Recommendations

Having addressed the major shortcomings and processes which contributed to the strategic failure of PRTs in the preceding paragraphs, this paper presents five recommendations which address the shortcomings. Firstly, the United States should not nation-build in a war zone,

per se. This study suggests that the United States must resolve to win the fighting quickly with overwhelming force. Then, the United States must move to rebuild while holding territory but not before some form of stable peace has been achieved.

Secondly, the United States must understand and be willing to work with real power structures (tribal and religious leaders, for example) and not centrally-appointed “governors” of a power structure that is utterly alien to the local culture. If the United States insists on strengthening the capacity of a local government that is itself a part of a central government, neither of which has legitimacy in the eyes of the local population--and the legitimacy of which is very much uncertain and under constant threat--it stacks the cards against itself, as it did with the missions of PRTs in Afghanistan and Iraq. Those societies are tribal and not central. When they were centrally-led, it was not by a democratic central government, but rather by brutal tyrants who suppressed tribal tendencies, much like Tito’s Yugoslavia. Democracies exacerbate tribalism, as each tribe will vote for its own interests. This problem can be rectified if all parties see an interest in federation and develop trust over long periods of time, as happened in Switzerland.⁵⁵ However, a “Swiss” system⁵⁶ cannot be imposed by a third party, especially one that does not show full commitment to the experiment, both in terms of political capital and actual capital it is willing to expend.

Thirdly, whatever replaces PRTs in the future must resolve interagency confusion and command uncertainty by clearly outlining mutual LOEs that leverage both DoD’s strengths (resources, security assets, manpower, “big stick” diplomacy) and DOS’ strengths (cultural knowledge, negotiation, proximity to policy, long-term “post boom” perspective, “carrot” diplomacy), as well as the strengths of all other partners (USAID, USDA, Justice, etc.). Additionally, assets for reconstruction, development, and capacity-building must be made less

DoD-centric to leverage the competencies and skillsets of experts in development and foreign affairs agencies. The overwhelming power held by military commanders in Afghanistan and Iraq with regard to PRT activities often ran at cross purposes with nominal PRT goals, including strategic goals ostensibly of a higher order than those of the FOB commanders who ignored them. This will present a significant challenge, as major components of capacity-building operations, most notably security and engineering, could not--and should not--be transferred to civilian agencies. The military will continue to play a major role in any future capacity-building missions in war zones, but military commanders on the ground should not necessarily be determining the scope or direction of capacity-building operations.

Fourthly, all this must happen under an overarching “architect’s hand” of policy coordination at a level above any department. Which means priorities for actors on the ground working on capacity-building cannot be hashed out in real time by FOB commanders, squabbling DC insiders, ambassadors and geographic combatant commanders (GCCs), or shadowy “Wizard of Oz” figures behind curtains in offices of the Pentagon and Foggy Bottom, each intent on setting their own policy agendas that might clash with reality on the ground. Overarching, grand strategic vision and guidance are key and must be constantly revisited and validated and disseminated with power and authority, to be followed by resources and delegation of taskings. Although this recommendation is not actionable at the operational level, it is nevertheless critical to the success of any interagency capacity-building mission in future conflict zones.

Fifthly, experts in local culture and history, combined with actors on the ground, must be empowered to work with locals to identify real needs and concerns and be resourced flexibly to provide for those needs and concerns. Massive budgets with strings attached for pork-barrel like projects lead to wasted money; disillusionment on the part of actors on the ground, local

civilians, and observers; and can contribute to corruption locally. Further, it is commendable to promote hot-button issues such as “women’s empowerment,” even in Iraq, as Van Buren notes. But it must be done in the appropriate context and with sensitivity for local culture and needs. Circumstances on the ground can shift rapidly, and so delegating more responsibility to those on the ground with regard to capacity-building priorities could help to avoid some of the above-mentioned failures of projects to produce results.

Conclusion

PRTs are no model for interagency cooperation on a battlefield. They are, to the contrary, a cautionary tale to be avoided in the future--but with a few caveats. For one, “the interagency” is here to stay and ever-expanding, and that is probably a good thing. Even the PRTs’ harshest critic, Peter Van Buren, did not take umbrage at the concept of DoD-DOS cooperation on the battlefield, *per se*. But it must take a different shape. Similarly, task force commander Colonel Fenzel did not criticize the value of capacity-building at the local level in Afghanistan and Iraq; to the contrary, he said, “Developing governance capacity at the district level is a low-level affair, but hugely important.”⁵⁷ The objections raised by those quoted in this paper with first-hand experience with PRTs center not on the concept, but on the execution and the model.

In other words, forging a new path forward for interagency cooperation in war zones will require political capital and will. Difficult as that may sound, it may mean the difference between success and failure in future COIN-heavy operations, which the United States’ next conflicts are likely to be.

NOTES

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2. Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Learning From Iraq: A Final Report from the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction*, (Washington, DC, March, 2014), 42.
3. U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan and United States Plan for Sustaining the Afghanistan National Security Forces*, (Washington, DC, April 2010), 56.
4. Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Learning From Iraq: A Final Report from the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction*, 44.
5. Kenneth Katzman, *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, CRS Report for Congress RL30588, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 12, 2017), 36, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf>.
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8. Ibid.
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16. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*. (Washington, DC, January 30, 2014), 66.
17. Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Learning From Iraq: A Final Report from the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction*, 38.
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25. Thomas Johnson and Barry Zellen, eds., *Culture, Conflict, and Counterinsurgency*, 202.
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27. Ibid., 208.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 177.
30. Severine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Practices of International Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 124.
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32. Peter Van Buren, *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2011. Kindle Edition), 58.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 59.
35. Ibid., 211.
36. Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Learning From Iraq: A Final Report from the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction*, 37.
37. Van Buren, *We Meant Well*, 248.
38. Thomas Johnson and Barry Zellen, eds., *Culture, Conflict, and Counterinsurgency*, 187.
39. Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008. ProQuest ebrary), xiii.
40. Ibid., 90.
41. Eric Schmitt, "Threats and Responses: Military Spending; Pentagon Contradicts General on Iraq Occupation Force's Size," *NYTimes online*, Feb 28, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/28/us/threats-responses-military-spending-pentagon-contradicts-general-iraq-occupation.html>.
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43. Ibid., 49.
44. Peter Van Buren, "How Not to Reconstruct Iraq, Afghanistan -- or America," *huffingtonpost.com*, Aug 16, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-van-buren/iraq-reconstruction_b_1789502.html.
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46. Ibid., 211.
47. Ibid., 140-142.
48. Ibid., 131.
49. Hodge, "U.S. Funds Buy no Love at Afghan College," *Wall Street Journal (Online)*.
50. Ibid.

51. Ahmad H. Farhan, "A Threat to Higher Education in Afghanistan is the 'Talibanization' of Nangarhar University," *khaama.com*, Dec 26, 2014, <http://www.khaama.com/a-threat-to-higher-education-in-afghanistan-is-the-talibanization-of-nangarhar-university-8888>.

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53. Farhan, "A Threat to Higher Education in Afghanistan is the 'Talibanization' of Nangarhar University," *khaama.com*.

54. Van Buren, *We Meant Well*, 48.

55. Thomas Johnson and Barry Zellen, eds., *Culture, Conflict, and Counterinsurgency*, 64.

56. Switzerland is a federal state with four principal ethnic groups (German-speaking, French-speaking, Italian-speaking, and Romansch-speaking), noted for strong regional and ethnic affiliation. All four languages are official languages of the state. Despite strong communal and ethnic ties, Swiss citizens choose to live under a federal system as a unified country, albeit with strong regional and local government structures. Although there have been instances of violence in the past, Swiss multiethnic confederacy has existed in some form since the Middle Ages, and has continuously developed since then to its current, stable form.

57. Thomas Johnson and Barry Zellen, eds., *Culture, Conflict, and Counterinsurgency*, 178.

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