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# TESTIMONY

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## A Comparative Evaluation of United Nations Peacekeeping

JAMES DOBBINS

CT-284

June 2007

Testimony presented before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs,  
Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight on  
June 13, 2007

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**Statement of James Dobbins<sup>1</sup>  
The RAND Corporation**

***A Comparative Evaluation of United Nations Peacekeeping<sup>2</sup>***

**Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight  
United States House of Representatives**

**June 13, 2007**

Mr. Chairman, I understand that the purpose of these hearings is to consider the importance the United States should attach to United Nations peacekeeping and nation building activities. In my testimony, I will compare United Nations performance in this area to that of other international organizations, to ad hoc multinational coalitions, and to that of the United States itself. In doing so, I will draw upon personal experience, having had the opportunity to oversee five successive nation building operations for the Clinton and Bush Administrations. Since leaving government in 2002 to join the RAND Corporation, I have continued to study the subject, co-authoring three volumes, the first of which examined eight American led nation building operations, the second eight UN led operations, while the third provided a guide for the management of future such missions.<sup>3</sup>

I will conclude with just a few words on the Oil for Food scandal, which has done so much to color American opinion of the United Nations over the past several years.

**Choosing the Right Institutional Framework**

Modern nation building requires a mix of military and civilian capacity, and of national, multinational and international participation. It therefore necessitates trade offs between unity of command and broad burden sharing. Both are desirable, but each can be achieved only at some expense to the other. For dangerous, highly demanding operations in which forced entry and

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

<sup>2</sup> This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT284>.

<sup>3</sup> *America's Role In Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq*, Dobbins et al, RAND 2003, *The UN's Role In Nation-Building: From the Congo to Iraq*, Dobbins et al, RAND 2005, *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building*, Dobbins et al, RAND 2007.

conventional combat are likely to be necessary, the desire for unity of command normally prevails and nationally led coalitions of the willing are the preferred instrument. For sustained long-term commitments in reasonably secure environments considerations of burden sharing are more likely to predominate, leading to a more prominent role for international institutions. This mix can shift over time. A number of missions have begun with a nationally led entry phase, followed by an internationally led consolidation and transformation phase.

Many international institutions have the capacity to contribute to nation building operations, but only a few are structured to deploy military forces. These include the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the European Union, and the African Union (AU). The UN has the widest experience. NATO has the most powerful forces. The European Union has the widest panoply of civil capabilities. The African Union possesses none of these advantages.

Among international organizations, the United Nations has the most widely accepted legitimacy and the greatest formal authority. Its actions, by definition, enjoy international sanction. Alone among organizations, it can compel its member governments to fund such operations, even requiring contributions from those opposed to the intervention in question. The United Nations has the most straightforward decision making apparatus, and the most unified command and control arrangements. The UN Security Council is smaller than the equivalent NATO, EU, or AU bodies. It takes all decisions by qualified majority; only five of its members have the capacity to block decisions unilaterally. Once the Security Council determines the purpose of a mission and decides to launch it, further operational decisions are largely left to the Secretary General and his staff, at least until the next Security Council review, generally six months hence. In UN operations, the civilian and military chains of command are unified and integrated, with unequivocal civilian primacy and a clear line of authority from the UN Secretary General through his local civilian representative to the local force commander.

The UN is a comparatively efficient and cost effective force provider. In its specialized agencies, it possesses a broad panoply of civil as well as military capabilities needed for to nation-building. All UN-led operations, of which up to two dozen are routinely underway at any one time, are planned, controlled, and sustained by a few hundred military and civilian staffers at UN headquarters in New York. Most UN troops come from Third World countries whose costs per deployed soldier are a small fraction of any Western army. As of this writing, the United Nation deploys over 80,000 soldiers and police in nineteen different countries for a cost of some \$5 billion per year. This makes the United Nations the second largest provider of expeditionary forces in the world, after the United States but ahead of NATO, the EU or the AU. The UN spends

in one year on all nineteen of these missions about what it costs the United States for one month's operation in Iraq.

Needless to say, the UN also has its limitations. While the UN Security Council is more compact than its NATO and EU counterparts, it is regionally and ideologically more diverse, and subject to blocking in the face of strong East-West or North-South differences, as proved to be the case with Kosovo in 1999. On the other hand, the Kosovo operation was the sole occasion, since 1989, where NATO or the EU were agreed upon an intervention but the UN Security Council was not. Since 1989 the UN Security Council has agreed to launch more than forty operations, while the NATO Council has agreed to three and the EU Council a similar number. In 2002, the United States and the United Kingdom actually calculated that they had a better hope of securing UN support for their invasion of Iraq than they did of gaining endorsement from either NATO or the European Union.

The broad latitude enjoyed by the UN Secretary General and his local representatives in the operational control of blue helmeted operations facilitates unity of command, but serves to limit the willingness of some nations to contribute. NATO and the EU procedures offer troop-contributing members much greater day-to-day influence over the use of their contingents than do those of the UN. Western governments accordingly favor these institutions for peace enforcement missions, where the level of risk to their units is high.

Similarly, the austere nature of UN headquarters staffing for peacekeeping operations keeps costs down, but limits the organization's capacity to plan and support large or highly complex missions. As a practical matter, the United Nations' capacity to mount and sustain expeditionary forces tops out at about 20,000 soldiers, or a reinforced division. These forces always require permissive entry. The United Nations does not do invasions, although it has frequently authorized others to conduct them.

NATO, by contrast, is capable of deploying powerful forces in large numbers, and of using them to force entry where necessary. But NATO has no capacity for to implement civilian operations; it depends upon the United Nations and other institutions or nations to perform all the non-military functions essential to the success of any nation building operation. NATO decisions are by consensus; consequently, all members have a veto. Whereas the UN Security Council normally makes one decision respecting any particular operation every six months, and leaves the Secretary General relatively unconstrained to carry out that mandate during the intervals, the NATO Council's oversight is more continuous, its decision-making more incremental. Member governments consequently have a greater voice in operational matters, and the NATO civilian

and military staffs correspondingly less. This level of control makes governments more ready to commit troops to NATO for high-risk operations than to the United Nations. It also ensures that the resultant forces are often employed conservatively. National caveats limiting the types of missions to which any one member's troops may be assigned are a fact of life in all coalition operations, but have lately proved even more pervasive in NATO than UN operations. NATO troops are much better equipped than most of those devoted to UN operations, and correspondingly more expensive. The resultant wealth of staff resources ensures that NATO operations are more professionally planned and sustained, but the proportion of headquarters personnel to fielded capacity is quite high and correspondingly more costly.

EU decision-making in the security and defense sector is also by consensus. The European Union has a leaner military and political/military staff than NATO, in part because it can call upon NATO, if it chooses, for planning and other staff functions. The EU, like the UN, but unlike NATO, can draw upon a wide array of civilian assets essential to any nation building operation. Like NATO, EU soldiers, are much more expensive than their UN equivalents. EU decision making mechanisms, like those of NATO, offer troop contributing governments more scope for micro-managing military operations on a day-to-day basis than do the UN's.

Half or more of all nation-building operations take place in sub-Saharan Africa. Several African organizations, most recently the African Union, have organized peacekeeping missions. No AU member country has the capacity to conduct large-scale expeditionary operations. The African Union's efforts therefore tend to be even more dependent upon U.S. and European support than those of the United Nations. In consequence, the United States and its European allies may end up paying a larger share of the bill for AU than UN operations despite their lack of membership in the former organization. While AU interventions may be more acceptable to the host countries concerned than ones headed by the UN, NATO or the EU, this is probably for the wrong reason, the receiving government opting for the weaker presence.

### **The U.S. and UN Ways of Nation Building**

Over the years the United States and the United Nations have developed distinctive styles of nation building derived from their very different natures and capabilities. The United Nations is an international organization entirely dependent upon its members for the wherewithal to conduct nation building. The United States is the world's only superpower, commanding abundant resources of its own, and access to those of many other nations and institutions.

UN operations have almost always been undermanned and under resourced. This is not because UN managers believe smaller is better, although some do, but because member states are rarely willing to commit the manpower or the money any prudent military commander would desire. As a result, small, weak UN forces are routinely deployed into what they hope, on the basis of best-case assumptions, will prove to be post-conflict situations. Where such assumptions prove ill founded, UN forces have had to be reinforced, withdrawn, or, in extreme cases, rescued.

Throughout the 1990s the United States adopted the opposite approach to sizing its nation-building deployments, basing its plans on worst case assumptions and relying upon an overwhelming force to quickly establish a stable environment and deter resistance from forming. In Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo, U.S.-led coalitions intervened in numbers and with capabilities that discouraged even the thought of resistance. In Somalia, this American force was too quickly drawn down. The resultant casualties reinforced the American determination to establish and retain a substantial overmatch in any future nation building operation.

In the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks, American tolerance of military casualties significantly increased. In sizing its stabilization operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the new American leadership abandoned the strategy of overwhelming preponderance (sometimes labeled the Powell doctrine after former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell) in favor of the “small footprint” or “low profile” force posture that had previously characterized UN operations.

In both cases these smaller American-led forces proved unable to establish a secure environment. In both cases the original U.S. force levels have had to be significantly increased, but in neither instance has this sufficed to establish adequate levels of public security.

It would appear that the low profile, small footprint approach to nation building is much better suited to UN-style peacekeeping than to U.S.-style peace enforcement. The United Nations has an ability to compensate, to some degree at least, for its “hard” power deficit with “soft” power attributes of international legitimacy and local impartiality. The United States does not have such advantages in situations where America itself is a party to the conflict being terminated, or where the United States has acted without an international mandate. Military reversals also have greater consequences for the United States than the United Nations. To the extent that the United Nations’ influence depends more upon the moral than the physical, more upon its legitimacy than its combat prowess, military rebuffs do not fatally undermine its credibility. To the extent that America leans more on “hard” rather than “soft” power to achieve its objectives, military reverses strike at the very heart of its potential influence. These considerations, along with recent

experience, suggest that the United States would be well advised to resume super sizing its nation building missions, and leave the small footprint approach to the United Nations.

The United Nations and the United States tend to enunciate their nation building objectives very differently. UN mandates are highly negotiated, densely bureaucratic documents. UN spokespersons tend toward understatement in expressing their goals. Restraint of this sort is more difficult for American officials, who must build Congressional and public support for costly and sometimes dangerous missions in distant and unfamiliar places. As a result, American nation-building rhetoric tends toward the grandiloquent. The United States often becomes the victim of its own rhetoric, when its higher standards are not met.

UN-led nation building missions tend to be smaller than American, to take place in less demanding circumstances, to be more frequent and therefore more numerous, to define their objectives more circumspectly and, at least among the missions studied, and to enjoy a higher success rate than American-led efforts. By contrast, American led nation building has taken place in more demanding circumstances, has required larger forces and more robust mandates, has received more economic support, has espoused more ambitious objectives, and, at least among the missions studied, has fallen short of those objectives more often than has the United Nations.

In the first volume of our RAND study of nation building we looked at eight American led cases, and rated four of them as successful, the criteria being whether the society in question was currently peaceful and democratic. Germany, Japan, Bosnia and Kosovo rated as successes. Somalia, Haiti, Afghanistan and Iraq were rated not successful, or at least not yet. In the second volume we looked at eight U.N. led cases, and determined that seven were currently peaceful, and six democratic. These cases included the Congo, which was neither, Cambodia, which was peaceful but not democratic, and Namibia, Mozambique, El Salvador, East Timor, Eastern Slavonia, and Sierra Leone, which were rated as peaceful and more democratic than not.

There are three explanations for the better UN success rate. One is that a different selection of cases would produce a different result. Second is that the U.S. cases were intrinsically the more difficult. Third is that the United Nations has done a better job of learning from its mistakes than has the United States over the past fifteen years.

Throughout the 1990s the United States got steadily better at nation building. The Haitian operation was better managed than Somalia, Bosnia better than Haiti, and Kosovo better than Bosnia. The U.S. learning curve was not sustained into the current decade. The American Administration that took office in 2001 initially disdained nation building as an unsuitable activity

for U.S. forces. When compelled to engage in such missions, first in Afghanistan and then Iraq, the Administration sought to break with the strategies and institutional responses that had been honed throughout the 1990s to deal with these challenges.

In contrast, the United Nations has largely avoided the institutional discontinuities that have marred U.S. performance. The former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, was Undersecretary General for Peacekeeping and head of the UN peacekeeping operation in Bosnia throughout the first half of the 1990s, when UN nation building began to burgeon. He was chosen for the top post by the United States and other member governments largely on the basis of his demonstrated skills in managing the United Nations' peacekeeping portfolio. Some of his closest associates from that period moved up with him to the UN front office while others remained in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. As a result, UN nation building missions have been run over the past 15 years by an increasingly experienced cadre of international civil servants. Similarly in the field, many peacekeeping operations are headed and staffed by veterans of earlier operations.

The United States, in contrast, tends to staff each new operation as if it were its first, and is destined to be its last. Service in such missions has never been regarded as career enhancing for American military or Foreign Service officers.

### **Is Nation Building Cost Effective?**

In addition to the horrendous human costs, war inflicts extraordinary economic costs on societies. On average, one study suggests, civil wars reduce prospective economic output by 2.2 percent per year for the duration of the conflict. However, once peace is restored, economic activity resumes and in most cases, the economies grow. Studies that look at the cost and effectiveness of various policy options to reduce the incidence and duration of civil wars find the post-conflict military intervention to be highly cost-effective, in fact, the most cost-effective policy examined.<sup>4</sup>

Rand studies support that conclusion. The UN success rate among missions studied, seven out of eight societies left peaceful, six out of eight left democratic, substantiates the view that nation building can be an effective means of terminating conflicts, assuring against their reoccurrence, and promoting democracy.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "The Challenge of Reducing the Global Incidence of Civil War," Centre for the Study of African Economies, Department of Economics, Oxford University, "Copenhagen Challenge Paper," April 23, 2004.

The sharp overall decline in deaths from armed conflict around the world over the past decade also points to the efficacy of nation building. During the 1990s deaths from armed conflict were averaging over 200,000 per year. In 2003, the last year for which figures exist, this number had come down to 27,000, a fivefold decrease in deaths from civil and international conflict. In fact, despite the daily dosage of horrific violence displayed in Iraq and Afghanistan, the world has not become a more violent place within the past decade, rather the reverse. Rather remarkably, this decline in the number of wars, and the number of casualties from such wars has continued to go down since 2003, despite the numbers killed in Iraq, Afghanistan and Darfur, largely due to successful UN peacekeeping in sub Saharan Africa, where casualty rates have gone down even more dramatically over the past four years than they have gone up in those three conflicts.<sup>5</sup>

The cost of UN nation building tends to look quite modest when compared to the cost of larger and more demanding U.S.-led operations. At present the United States is spending some \$4.5 billion per month to support its military operations in Iraq. This is about the same as the United Nations will spends to run all 18 peacekeeping of its current peacekeeping missions for a year. This is not to suggest that the United Nations could perform the U.S. mission in Iraq more cheaply, or perform it at all, but simply to underline that there are 18 other places where the United States will probably not have to intervene because UN troops are doing so at a tiny fraction of the cost of U.S. operations elsewhere.

### **Continuing Deficiencies**

Even when successful, UN nation building only goes so far to fix the underlying problems of the societies it is seeking to rebuild. Such missions can be divided into three distinct phases: first, the initial stabilization of a war torn society; second, the recreation of local institutions for governance; and third, the strengthening of those institutions to the point where rapid economic growth and sustained social development can take place. Experience over the past fifteen years suggests that the United Nations has achieved a fair mastery of the techniques needed to successfully complete the first two of those tasks. Success with the third has largely eluded the United Nations, as it has the international development community as whole.

Despite the United Nations' significant achievements in the field of nation building, the organization continues to exhibit weaknesses that decades of experience have yet to overcome. Most UN missions are undermanned and under-funded. UN-led military forces are often sized and deployed on the basis of unrealistic best-case assumptions. Troop quality is uneven, and has

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<sup>5</sup> Human Security Center, University of British Colombia, *Human Security Report 2005: War and Peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* and the *Human Security Report, 2006*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005 and 2006.

even gotten worse as many rich Western nations have followed U.S. practice and become less willing to commit their armed forces to UN operations. Police and civil personnel are always of mixed competence. All components of the mission arrive late; police and civil administrators arrive even more slowly than soldiers.

These same weaknesses have been exhibited most recently in the U.S.-led operation in Iraq. There it was an American-led stabilization force that was deployed on the basis of unrealistic, best case assumptions and American troops that arrived in inadequate numbers and had to be progressively reinforced as new, unanticipated challenges emerged. There it was the quality of a U.S.-led coalition's military contingents that proved distinctly variable, as has been their willingness to take orders, risks, and casualties. There it was that American civil administrators were late to arrive, of mixed competence, and never available in adequate numbers. These weaknesses thus appear endemic to nation building, rather than unique to the United Nations.

## **Conclusions**

Nation building is tough work. Difficulties encountered by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq put earlier UN failings in some perspective. UN-led nation building operations have been smaller, cheaper and, at least among the sixteen operations covered on our RAND studies, more successful than American. On the other hand, American-led operations have taken place in more demanding circumstances. Several, indeed, came in the wake of failed UN efforts, as occurred in Somalia, Haiti and Bosnia. Experience demonstrates that neither the United States nor the United Nations is yet fully equipped for these tasks, and both have much to learn. The most serious limitation on the UN's capacity for nation building, overall budget aside, is the increasing reluctance of First World governments, heavily influenced by the negative American example, to commit their forces to UN operations. It is important, nevertheless to recognize that despite these shortcomings UN and U.S.-led nation building efforts have saved millions of lives and freed many societies from war and oppression.

Assuming adequate consensus among Security Council members on the purpose for any intervention, the United Nations provides the most suitable institutional framework for most nation building missions, one with a comparatively low cost structure, a comparatively high success rate and the greatest degree of international legitimacy. Other possible options are likely to be either more expensive, e.g., U.S., European Union or NATO-led coalitions, or less capable, e.g., the African Union, the Organization of American States, or ASEAN. The more expensive options are best suited to missions that require forced entry or employ more than 20,000 men, which so far has been the effective upper limit for UN operations. The less capable options are suited to

missions where there is a regional but not a global consensus for action, or where the United States simply does not care enough to foot 25 percent of the bill.

Although the U.S. and UN styles of nation building are distinguishable, they are also highly interdependent. It is a rare operation in which both are not involved. Both UN and U.S. nation-building efforts presently stand at near historic highs. Demand for UN-led peacekeeping operations nevertheless far exceeds the available supply, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. American armed forces, the world's most powerful, also find themselves badly overstretched by the demands of such missions. A decade ago, in the wake of UN and U.S. setbacks in Somalia and Bosnia, nation building became a term of opprobrium leading a significant segment of American opinion to reject the whole concept. Ten years on, nation building appears ever more clearly as a responsibility that neither the United Nations nor the United States can escape. The United States and the United Nations bring different capabilities to the process. Neither is likely to succeed without the other. Both have much to learn not just from their own experience, but from the other's. It is hoped that this study and its predecessor will help both to do so.

### **The Oil for Food Scandal**

I shall conclude with just a few words on the Oil for Food scandal, which has done so much to color American opinion of the UN in recent years. Outrage over the diversion of UN-supervised Oil for Food money in Iraq seems to have missed three critically important points. First, no American funds were lost. Second, no UN funds were lost. Third, the Oil for Food program achieved its two objectives: providing food to the Iraqi people while preventing Saddam Hussein from rebuilding his military threat to the region, and in particular from reconstituting his weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs.

The Oil for Food program was part of a comprehensive set of UN-mandated sanctions designed to prevent Hussein from reconstituting a threat to his neighbors. The program allowed an average of \$7 billion per year in Iraqi oil revenues to be used to purchase food and medicine for the Iraqi people but not to purchase weapons or WMD-related technology for the Hussein regime.

It is now clear, based upon the most exhaustive American post-intervention examination, that the UN sanction regime, including both the UN weapons inspectors and the UN-administered Oil for Food program, fully met this core objective. At the direction of the UN Security Council, and as a result of the international embargo and international inspections, Iraq destroyed its WMD stockpiles in the early 1990's, did not acquire new such weapons and did not even reconstitute a program to develop nuclear weapons. More broadly, UN sanctions resulted in a steady decline in

Iraq's military capabilities from the end of the first Gulf War in 1991 to the day of the American-led intervention.

At the same time the Oil for Food program served its humanitarian goal of feeding the Iraqi people, if not perfectly, at least so effectively that Washington asked the UN to maintain the program in effect for six months after the United States took power in Baghdad.

It is clear that Hussein and his henchmen certainly took advantage of inadequate UN oversight to siphon off large sums of money from the program, but the money was Iraqi to begin with, and the amounts siphoned off were never enough to undermine the purpose for which the sanctions were in place. It is also clear that unscrupulous non-Iraqi businessmen, sometimes perhaps with the knowledge of their governments, connived in these diversions and drew illegitimate profits from them.

The bad news, therefore, is that the UN proved unequal to the task of preventing a rogue regime from stealing some of its own money. The good news is that this same UN machinery proved equal to the task of preventing that same regime from fielding WMD, developing nuclear weapons and reconstituting a military threat to its neighbors. Most observers would conclude that the UN, however inadequate its financial oversight, certainly got its priorities right.

The UN sanctions regime against Iraq, including the Oil for Food program is worth close scrutiny not because it was a scandal, although scandal there was, but because taken as a whole, it is the most successful use of international sanctions on record. Documenting the why and wherefores of that success is as important as correcting the shortfalls that allowed a rogue regime, in connivance with unscrupulous international businessmen, to siphon funds from UN-administered Iraqi accounts.