

Planning Lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq

By JOSEPH J. COLLINS



Bradley Fighting Vehicles in Sadr City

55th Signal Company (James P. Johnson)

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For planners and bureaucrats, Afghanistan and Iraq appear to present a puzzle. In Afghanistan, on one hand, we had little time for planning; we did lots of innovative things on the cheap; our relatively small, international force has taken few casualties; we have had great local and international support; and we are, by most accounts, on the way to a good outcome.¹

On the other hand, in Iraq, we had over a year to plan; our national policy has been expensive and often unimaginative; a relatively large, primarily American force has taken over 18,000 casualties, most of them in

the so-called postconflict phase; we have had severe problems with local and international support; and the outcome, although looking up, is still in doubt.

A wag might conclude from the above that Americans should avoid planning at all costs. It brings bad luck, stifles creativity, and interferes with our penchant for achieving success through our normal standard operating procedure: the application of great amounts of material resources guided by brilliant improvisation and dumb luck.

While the wag's conclusion is flawed, problems in planning indeed contributed to serious shortcomings connected with

Operation *Iraqi Freedom*. With 3 years of hindsight, it was clear that these shortcomings included:

- ineffective planning and preparation for stability operations
- inadequate forces to occupy and secure a country the size of California
- poor military reaction to rioting and looting in the immediate postconflict environment
- slow civil and military reaction to a growing insurgency
- problematical funding and contracting mechanisms that slowed reconstruction
- failure to make effective use of former Iraqi military forces

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- slow initial development of Iraqi security forces
- inability to provide enough trained civilian officials, diplomats, and aid workers to conduct effective stabilization and reconstruction activities
- slow creation of an interim Iraqi authority that could have minimized the perception of occupation and enhanced the perception of liberation.²

Successful innovation and favorable circumstances on the ground made the war in Afghanistan markedly easier than the one in Iraq, but the planning problems in both cases have had much in common with other complex contingencies in recent years (Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo).

All of these cases have demonstrated the limitations of our stovepiped, single agency planning systems. Thus, in the future, we will have to adapt planning to a dynamic security environment and numerous challenges. Not only will we have to do better in mid-range interagency planning, but we will also have to develop and refine new capa-

complex contingencies in recent years have demonstrated the limitations of our stovepiped, single agency planning systems

bilities to deal with the nonmilitary aspects of contingencies. In turn, this will require changes in the organizational cultures of the Armed Forces and the Department of State.

The first step in understanding this challenge will be to appreciate the environment in which it will take place.

Security Environment

First, U.S. conventional military power is unparalleled. No country or nonstate actor in its right mind seeks conventional battle with the United States. Operation *Iraqi Freedom* demonstrated that the Armed Forces, with minimal allied help, can attack a significant opponent at a 1:6 force ratio disadvantage, destroy its forces, and topple a mature, entrenched regime, all in a few weeks. *Iraqi Freedom* also showed that victory in war is much larger and more dearly obtained than success in military operations.

For our enemies, guerrilla tactics and terrorism (preconflict, postconflict, and outside of conflict situations) are the order of the day. At the same time, the Armed Forces,



innovative but oriented on conventional operations, have been slow to adapt to this new kind of war, a problem we have seen many times in our history, albeit under different circumstances. In Iraq, some of our combat divisions had no plans for what to do after major combat operations ceased.

In Afghanistan, it took over a year to adapt to the requirements posed by stabilization and reconstruction in a counterinsurgency environment.

In general, not only are American planners often surprised by the “What kind of war is this?” questions, but they also find it hard to think beyond the last bullet of a climactic battle. In the Cold War and thereafter, the United States has consistently done poorly at bridging success in battle and victory in war.

Second, in recent years, the United States has only entered into conflicts in areas that were undergoing some sort of humanitarian crisis, which has either been a focal point of the war effort or a critical factor in winning the hearts and minds of the local populace.

In these operations, winning the war and solving the humanitarian crisis both had to be first-priority activities, especially since the armies of developed nations have the will and technology to protect civilian populations. A humanitarian disaster—a human tragedy in its own right—could create

the perception of a Pyrrhic victory or an insensitive policy. Intense media scrutiny, moreover, raises the stakes.

Today, interagency solutions are needed for problems that involve armed forces. The military has also become a player in what are normally civilian activities, such as humanitarian assistance, stabilization activities, civil governance, and reconstruction. The dividing line between civil and military enterprise is further blurred by the presence of contractors who may be performing formerly military functions.

Third, in Afghanistan and Iraq, unlike in Bosnia and Kosovo, there was no discrete postconflict phase. In both of the current conflicts, conventional war A was followed by unconventional war B. In turn, war B was complicated by the need to conduct simultaneous stabilization and reconstruction activities. Neither soldiers nor diplomats were ready for this development. To be ready in the future, they will have to change how they organize, plan, and train for conflict.

Fourth, both in Iraq and Afghanistan, the insurgents decided after a few months that they had to defeat reconstruction in order to force the evacuation of coalition forces and discredit the people who had worked with the coalition. In both conflicts, counterinsurgency, stabilization, and reconstruction have become threads in the same cloth. This requires a combined, interagency approach in theater, not just in Washington.

Fifth, for the soldier, the media have gone from intrusive to omnipresent, if not embedded. In this respect, conflicts such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq are much more

affected by the media than the small wars of the early 20th century.³

The ugly realities of low-intensity conflict continuously stream into Western living rooms. The sense of gain or loss, or the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of operations, is magnified by the work of relentless journalists, whose editors and producers freely admit that “if it bleeds, it leads.” Activities such as police training or well digging lose out to grisly combat scenes.

The nature of media coverage makes policy execution more difficult and time-sensitive. With intense media scrutiny, governments have to get it right early and keep things moving in a positive direction. Where governments once had years to experiment with solutions to overseas problems, they now have months or weeks before the steady drumbeat of “all is lost” begins to sound. Better mid-range planning is essential for a media environment that is intolerant of missteps.

The future is likely to present a set of challenges that will require significant institutional and cultural adaptation. In the next decade, the United States must prepare to:

- continue stability operations, as well as stabilization and reconstruction activities, in Afghanistan and Iraq for at least another 5 years
- execute counterterrorist operations in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia
- support international peace operations in the Middle East (Gaza? Golan Heights?) and Africa (Darfur?)
- manage system shocks from regime failure or radical changes in some regional powers (North Korea? Cuba?)
- deter or manage traditional threats, state proliferators of weapons of mass destruction, and future peer competitors
- improve homeland defense against terrorist groups, including those who might use weapons of mass destruction.

In the next decade, the need for effective joint, combined, and interagency planning will remain significant. Major institutional planning changes will require complementary changes in organizational cultures.

Improving Mid-Range Planning

The U.S. Government has already begun improving mid-range planning.



Commanders at Afghan National Army training site

55° Signal Company (Kevin P. Bell)

The aftermath of 9/11 saw the creation of a Department of Homeland Security, a Homeland Security Council, and a National Counterterrorism Center, as well as a set of Intelligence Community reforms. There are joint interagency coordination groups in some regional commands, and the Department of State now has a senior Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) to improve planning. In the Department of Defense (DOD), a new directive on stability operations is being implemented under the close supervision of an energized Secretary of Defense. The 2006 Defense budget was amended to emphasize counterterrorist and stability operations at the expense of high-tech conventional warfare. In Iraq and Afghanistan, there have been highly successful improvements in counterinsurgency and security assistance operations. The elections in both countries were major accomplishments in themselves. Military and diplomatic teams in both Afghanistan and Iraq are working together much more closely than even a year ago.

The following eight recommendations will build on these improvements and help planning in the future.

First, we need a new charter for complex contingency planning. The Clinton administration's oft-ignored bible on planning for complex contingencies, Presidential Decision Directive 56, was headed in the right direction. Early in the first term of President George W. Bush, the Pentagon

blocked a National Security Council (NSC) staff attempt to publish a new contingency planning policy, all in the name of preserving the freedom of action of Cabinet officers and keeping civilians out of the contingency planning business. More input into contingency planning from civilians, of course, is not the problem; it may be a key part of the solution.

War plans are rarely briefed outside military channels. Inside the Pentagon, only a handful of civilians have access to them. This prohibition may make sense for major conventional war plans, and it certainly makes sense for security purposes. However, when conflicts do not end when the last hill is taken, and include activities such as stabilization and reconstruction that we want civilians to lead, there must be a broader sharing of contingency planning responsibilities. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review's recommendation for a new interagency document called “The National Security Planning Guidance” is clearly a step in the right direction.

Second, every executive department should insist on interagency experience for its most senior civilians and make it mandatory for promotion to the senior executive or foreign service. Interagency experience should count as the equivalent of joint experience for military officers.

Too often, the best and brightest avoid interagency assignments where the hours are terrible and the rewards are less than those at the home agency. Too many junior and inexperienced personnel occupied the NSC

staff in the last two administrations. National Security Council personnel at the director level should optimally be members of the senior executive service or at least colonel or GS-15-level personnel.

It is often said that we need a Goldwater-Nichols reform for the interagency community.⁴ The first step would be to improve the quality of agency personnel across the board and increase the number of the best and brightest who have lived and worked in the interagency world.

Third, we need a better system for exporting interagency groups to the field. Interagency coordination in Washington is possible, but in the field during complex contingencies, it usually results in either a system in which one cabinet department in Washington is nominally in charge, such as the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance or the Coalition Provisional Authority, or a more cooperative system, such as we have in Kabul and Baghdad. This cooperative system features a senior military officer and a senior diplomat working together, with neither having overall charge of U.S. policy, and both answering to their respective superiors in Washington. Today, in both Kabul and Baghdad, the arrangements are working well.

Other arrangements are possible. Getting this issue right should be the subject of wargames and experiments conducted by cooperating agencies and supervised by Joint Forces Command and the State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization. The United States is not likely ever to favor a "viceroy" system, but more effective and efficient arrangements that offer more unity of command are possible. We cannot afford situations where ad hoc arrangements on the ground or in Washington stand in the way of effective national policy.

For its part, S/CRS at State—which will have the national lead in reconstruction and stabilization operations—must have an Active and a Reserve response corps, full of interagency and civil specialists. This will take hundreds of millions of dollars per year, which Congress has thus far been unwilling to appropriate.

Fourth, the military establishment needs to focus its planning more on victory in war, not on success in climactic battles. This is cultural change, and it will be difficult. It is folly to pretend that success in the final battle leads directly to victory. Particularly in cases of regime change or failed states, postcombat stability operations (*Phase 4* in

war plan lingo) are the key to victory. They are every bit as important as the ability to move, shoot, and communicate in battle, the normal preoccupations of the soldier. However, studies of postcombat planning in Iraq show that Phase 4 planning did not receive the attention it deserved.

This recommendation will entail a major change in training and culture. Occupation, stabilization, reconstruction, and other issues associated with nationbuilding must be better integrated into the curriculum of staff and war colleges. Language and cultural studies will become more important for military officers. Wargames and experiments also need to focus more on stability operations. None of this is meant to imply that the military should take over critical postcombat activities from the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); the opposite is true.

Fifth, the Department of State and USAID personnel and organizations need to become more operational (that is, able to lead in the management of grand enterprises in unsafe and austere environments).

General Tommy Franks had it right: after the battle, you need lots of "boots" and lots of "wingtips" on the ground.⁵ Absent the wingtips, the boots in Iraq have had to do



Soldiers quelling civil unrest in Mosul

9821 Signal Company (Michael Bracken)

Marines conducting stability and security operations in Afghanistan



2 Marine Division Combat Camera (Justin M. Mason)

much more than they should under optimal circumstances. This problem continues to the present day, where, for lack of civil presence, there is still too much military supervision of reconstruction and governance issues. In Afghanistan, the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, which include State and USAID personnel, have mitigated the “too many boots,

begun and should be increased. It needs a healthy budget, which will be a problem in a poorly funded department that is usually focused on current policy, not mid-range contingency planning.

Sixth, for the State Department and USAID to become more operational, they must be better funded across the board. Their

the Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization should become the centerpiece for interagency planning and exercises

too few wingtips” problem that hampers coalition operations in Iraq.

While there have been significant exceptions, State and USAID personnel have generally been restricted to relatively secure compounds in Afghanistan and Iraq. This fact is often attributed to the “tyranny” of the local Regional Security Officers (RSOs), who appear determined to apply peacetime rules to conflict situations. RSOs will likely blame the rules that come down from Washington. In any case, there are too few foreign service officers and USAID professionals in field locations. The personnel strength of State and USAID is clearly inadequate to meet their expanded roles in the war on terror.

At the national level, the Bush administration recognized this problem and established the neophyte Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization. It must now follow through and ensure that this good idea becomes a powerful center of excellence. This office should also become the centerpiece for interagency planning and exercises throughout the Government. Interagency staffing has

systematic underfunding is the single greatest impediment to effective planning, diplomacy, developmental assistance, reconstruction, and stabilization. State cannot be equipped only with good ideas while Defense has all the money and hard assets. This is a prescription for an unbalanced national security policy.

As long as there are few wingtips on the ground, the boots will be forced to move into the vacuum. As long as State is a budgetary midget, it will play second fiddle to the Pentagon colossus. If we want to fix planning for complex contingencies, we must fund State and USAID as major players and not poor relatives.

Seventh, to get better at planning and executing complex contingencies, we will have to untangle the legal authorities that hobble the Departments of State and Defense. This will be especially important now, if State begins to operate in the field on large-scale postconflict stabilization and reconstruction problems. Many of these legal provisions serve only to protect congressional committee prerogatives. Still others are

meant to prevent human rights abuses. It is tempting to say that these dysfunctional legal provisions should be waived or eliminated. This should only be done, however, after a full assessment of the rationale behind each of them.

Eighth, to gain legitimacy and promote better burdensharing, the United States should make its most powerful allies full partners in complex operations. We have run two operations in which many allies were brought into the plan *after* the action began. This did no great damage in Afghanistan, where the international perception of legitimacy has been high. In Iraq, however, the United States continues to pay a stiff price for its decisive actions in 2003. History will judge the wisdom of these decisions, but in the future, bringing the allies in before the takeoff may make for a more complicated flight but a smoother landing. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ For a negative view on stability operations in Afghanistan, see Kathy Gannon, “Afghanistan Unbound,” *Foreign Affairs* 83 (May/June 2004), 35–46.

² For a popular but incomplete analysis of planning failures, see James Fallows, “Blind into Baghdad,” *Atlantic Monthly* (January/February 2004), 52–74; and my reply in *Atlantic Monthly*, April 2004, 14; also see Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon, 2006).

³ Even without CNN and other media outlets, misbehavior and scandal in past conflicts caused problems for the military. See Max Boot, *Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 120–125, for the story of how U.S. war crimes in the Philippines embarrassed the Armed Forces and helped end the early 20th-century military operations there. However, the media’s daily impact on today’s operations has no precedent.

⁴ See the ongoing study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era*, “Phase 1 Report” and “Phase 2 Report” (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2005), available at, for Phase 1, <csis.org/isp/bgn/index.php?option=com_csis_pubs&task=view&id=62>, and for Phase 2, <csis.org/component?option=com_csis_pubs/task/view/id/1849/>.

⁵ Tommy Franks, *American Soldier* (New York: Regan Books, 2004), 422.