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**CONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION EFFORTS IN
NATION BUILDING: PLANNING FOR EVERYTHING IN
AFGHANISTAN EXCEPT THE AFGHANS**

by

Aaron M. Cooper, Major, USAF

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Advisor: Dr. Patricia Fogarty

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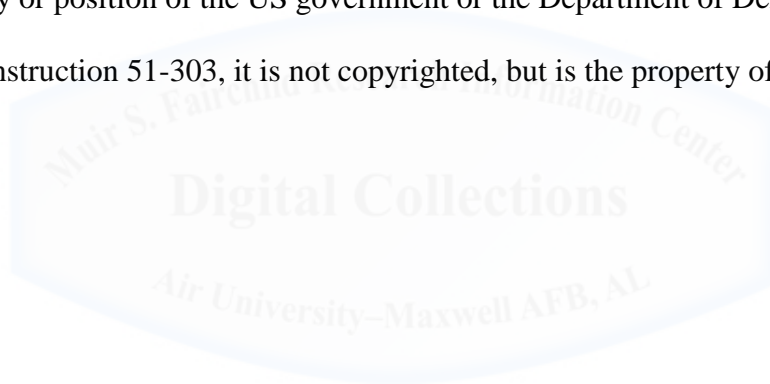


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The Foundation of Nation Building Construction

“Engineering is the practice of safe and economic application of the scientific laws governing the forces and materials of nature by means of organization design and construction for the general benefit of mankind.”

S. E. Lindsay

The US has been involved in nation building efforts across the world since the Marshal Plan in Europe. The Marshal Plan is a paradigm for nation reconstruction efforts. An expenditure of over 100 billion dollars in 2014 money between 1948 – 1952 was the foundation that helped rebuild the economies of 16 countries in Europe. The US has now surpassed this level of spending on the construction projects in Afghanistan, yet the Afghan economy shows little sign of long-term progress.¹ One interesting comparison between the rebuilding efforts includes how the recipients were involved in the two colossal tasks. In his speech at Harvard University, Secretary of State George Marshall said “It would be neither fitting nor efficacious for this Government to undertake to draw up unilaterally a program designed to place Europe on its feet economically. This is the business of the Europeans. The initiative, I think, must come from Europe.”² The Marshal Plan could be described as the US helping Europeans help themselves. However, as we review the involvement and participation of the Afghans in the effort to rebuild Afghanistan, it could be described as the US paying American and international contractors to build a US solution for the Afghans to be more like Americans. Large reconstruction efforts without buy-in and integration of the local population have yielded results that fall far short of what could have been achieved with the participation of the host nation.

Since World War II, the US has been involved with numerous reconstruction efforts. Smaller endeavors included Panama, Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia, and large scale efforts included

Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Although each showed different levels of success, all of them strayed from Secretary Marshall's idea of helping someone else help themselves. On a small scale, the US can plan and execute projects quickly to restore order by fixing basic utilities and repairing existing structures. Two examples include Operation Restore Hope and Operation Sustain Hope in Somalia. Despite being UN sponsored efforts, repairs to existing runways, roads, schools, clinics, wells, and bridges were accomplished by US military engineers without coordination with the UN. This greatly assisted aid efforts in the country.³ Pre-existing infrastructure and buildings were the key to the Somalia effort. Other unilateral examples include reconstruction and repair efforts following natural disasters such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti or the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. Both involved repairing necessary critical infrastructure to restore function and order. By contrast, in Vietnam and Afghanistan, the US built entire bases, wells, power plants, sewage treatment plants, police stations, and check points from scratch. One may conclude that larger-scale, long-term, and "projects from scratch" require the involvement and participation of the local population.

When building new it is important to allow the host-nation to plan and have locals involved in the planning and construction part of the process. The US, along with coalition partners, NGOs, and international donors can share their experience during the planning process, but the process should belong to the host-nation government at the national and local level, and be carried out by the host-nation population. Frederik Rosen in his article on using military organization for non-kinetic operations discusses the "temptation" to allow donor nations and coalition partners to make the decisions and create plans rather than seeking the advice or opinion from the host nation. However, there is a need to give the ownership to the country in need.⁴ Currently, in Afghanistan, international contractors accomplish the vast majority of the

work, the Afghan people are separated and isolated from plans and projects until they are ready for turnover.⁵ According to the report prepared for the European Network of NGOs in Afghanistan, Afghans were not allowed to participate in planning processes due to the security environment. Reconstruction efforts were “disconnected from the realities and concerns of practitioners at field level and completely disconnected from those of ordinary Afghan people.”⁶ Much of the construction effort fell into the framework of a charity offering. Therefore the Afghan recipients often did not see projects as beneficial to the community. Sewage treatment facilities, power plants, dining halls, and even entire bases were white elephants that had more benefit broken down for materials. Sewage treatment plants become lagoons, power plants were dismantled and switched for small inexpensive generators or solar panels, and outdoor freezers were converted into supply closets. Ironically, in a campaign with the stated goal of winning hearts and minds, the US skipped the mental half of the equation. Without engaging the minds of the Afghans, the US hoped to endear themselves to the population. This paper will examine host-nation involvement in nation building efforts with a particular focus on Afghanistan, and cycles and patterns of waste and how to break these cycles. With the correct application of planning and training, the US military has the potential to be viewed as the paradigm for creating long-term benefits through focused and purposeful construction and reconstruction efforts in communities around the world.

Possibilities for Construction and Reconstruction Success

“If everyone is thinking alike, someone isn’t thinking.”

General George Patton Jr.

Reconstruction and infrastructure development efforts are key components of the bigger phase IV or nation building processes. The US, UN, NATO, EU and countless NGOs have been heavily tied up with nation building processes since WW II. According to James Dobins from RAND’s International Security and Defense Policy Center, the US Defense Department issued a directive coining the phrase “stability operations” as their official term for nation building and making it “a core mission of the American military, on par, in principal at least, with preparation for major combat.”⁷ Despite the obvious trend for future infrastructure development tasks, and the 2005 directive creating a core mission for stability operations, there is a clear disconnect with the reality of military planning and direction. Numerous flag officers from all branches of service, during senior visits to the Air Force officer development schools in 2014-15, have spoken candidly and shared their strategic perspective on current large-scale small wars that involve nation building and construction efforts as their foundational task. With few exceptions, there is a general recognition that US and coalition partners have struggled to adjust to mission changes during these conflicts and efforts, and the overall results have not been favorable. Yet, instead of providing insight on a way ahead or a new outlook to approach stability operations, these officers preached an overall need to retool our aging war fighting platforms, refocus on the military’s preferred task of fighting and winning large nation-on-nation wars, and discount infrastructure and development during small wars as a task more suited for NGOs and the Department of State. There seems to be a cultural belief among senior military leaders that the military will always be incapable of working hand-in-hand with civilian populations or on non-

combat tasks. This does not have to be the case. Stability operation processes need to be reviewed and adjusted.

For example, George Braggs's paper *Civil-Military Relations in Afghanistan* points to some alarming case studies where Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) lacked sufficient construction expertise, oversight, and coordination. He points to buildings collapsing or being torn down after only one year, construction of unneeded facilities and infrastructure, and even locally inappropriate facilities that undermined local sustainable projects. When the military shows up it does not provide a true long-term solution to local problems.⁸ Unfortunately, even necessary and well-planned projects are planned and executed without local support, labor, or materials.

Civilian organizations encounter similar problems with stability operations. Autesserre's, book, "The Trouble With the Congo," captures nation-building in the Congo from a civilian perspective. Ultimately she feels that despite the longevity of many organizations and the dedication of some well-intentioned individuals, the efforts were a failure due to numerous preconceived notions and a lack of planning at the local level. One fundamental problem which she calls "vicious circles and shocking events" occurs when UN workers, NGOs, and diplomats do not travel outside of the capital region in the Congo and therefore do not have any sources or vision of the situation at the local level. So, plans, directions, and programs are created in a bubble and then applied across the country without regard for specific needs or challenges.⁹ Her conclusion can be summed up in two key words—local involvement. Broad brushed solutions without local leader involvement will have great difficulty achieving success.

As seen in the Congo example, the US military does not have a monopoly on inappropriate nation-building habits and performance. The key is to take lessons from these examples, and

apply them to future operations. Trends and issues that continue to defeat military and civilian construction planners can be evaluated and measured to create better guidelines and strategy for military and civilian organizations in the future.

Bragg makes an argument that military personnel should never be involved in aid activities because it confuses the population about the military's role. Having been involved in several deployments, including traveling and working on a personal level with many Afghans I must say that this is a gross overstatement. This relies on the assumption that the Afghans or any other group of people are incapable of common sense or complex thought. Advisors or aid workers from any region must realize the people are just as intelligent as you are and they are not impressed by an outsider's inherent genius. Good ideas and the enormous potential due to access to vast amounts of resources does not also make a person inherently right. The local population must be the main source for the answer and solution for construction and reconstruction operations.

Dr. Fogarty in 2012 while working in Moldova noted several of their best practices of the Social Investment Fund (SIF). Projects were championed by local government officials, and were completed one at a time enforcing transparency and rules against bribes or other illegal activities. SIF workers were involved in the community processes to add ideas, but the town was in control, ensuring their desires, customs, and culture were promoted in the development. Project meetings had a minimum requirement for community participation and consensus. Projects required a percentage of local financing and an economic study to account for operations and maintenance for sustainability. This caused some communities to change their project concepts due to financial shortfalls and burdens. An example in the study included a gas line where the community had to purchase gas appliances and connection lines prior to the main

line being installed. The first lines also had to go to public facilities, ensuring it benefitted the entire community, and not the personal gain for an elect few. These procedures did not always work out precisely as prescribed, but overall they promoted long-term benefits to the community, championed activism and involvement of the citizens, and taught planning and organization skills, while elevating transparency and the rule of law.¹¹

For construction to be sustainable, it must take into account local building methods and materials. Afghanistan, like many nations in this part of the world, is covered with adobe building.¹² Adobe construction consists of dried clay or earth bricks, rammed earth, and sometimes a cement binder. Adobe type construction has been around for thousands of years. It has many benefits for moderating extreme temperatures, keeping interiors cool in the summer and maintaining warmth during winter.¹³ In terms of Afghan stability operations, the best attributes of adobe materials are that the local population is familiar with using them, they are locally available, inexpensive, and very durable.¹⁴

Instead of adobe-style buildings, the US built K-spans in Afghans. There were over 1,000 of these steel bunker-type facilities just in one province in the southern region. Locals often commented that K-spans looked like something from outer space. Also, because they were steel, they heated up like an oven and required large amounts of foam insulation which turned out to be highly flammable.¹⁵ The end result was a structure that was uncomfortably hot, potentially dangerous, despised by the local population for its odd appearance, and unrepairable because the building components are not available locally. Thus, cooperation with the Afghans could have produced cheaper, more useful, and sustainable facilities.

Abuse Cycles in Construction Efforts

“There is no worse tyranny than to force a man to pay for what he does not want merely because you think it would be good for him.”

Robert Heinlein

During Ramadan in 2013, an Afghan Army Colonel, while reflecting on progress following a meeting with NATO Training Mission Afghanistan (NTMA), commented that he still did not understand the big picture construction goals. He summed up the overall accomplishments by the US in Afghanistan by saying, “It seems that the rebuild effort took a little money from a whole lot of poor people in U.S. and gave a whole lot of money to a few very rich people in Afghanistan.” The meeting included discussions concerning the fate of a nearly completed 30 million-dollar police training compound. Americans and Afghans were trying to come up with a reason for completing the behemoth walled fortress. Due to its remote and austere location, the compound would never be used for police training, but it did become a personal “dude ranch” for the head of police. Instances such as this one are not unique. The media has captured many additional examples of fraud, waste, and abuse in Afghanistan. Similar headline news stories include, “Cost of Afghanistan project soars, benefits exaggerated”¹⁶, and “the United States military spent millions of dollars on a shiny new command center in the Helmand province of Afghanistan – a center that will never be used and is now likely to be completely demolished”.¹⁷ Too many projects were designed and kept close hold at such a high level that much of what was built had little to no use for the Afghans, either because the structure had no purpose for the Afghans, or because the structure itself was built in a way that was unsustainable by the local population.¹⁸

There were numerous factors that contributed towards fraud, waste, abuse, and mission creep in the development effort. To begin, Afghanistan is a dangerous environment. Because of the logistics and transportation requirements through dangerous choke points, subcontractors were often forced to pay bribes to insurgents in order to be successful. Contracts for stability operation projects were generating profits for the same people who were compromising stability. Next, it is easy to look at a map and place dots representing police stations, military posts, check points, training centers, depots, and municipal buildings across a country. However, it is very hard in a hostile environment to send representatives to discuss with local leaders where these items should be built, and more importantly, how. Limited communication and mistrust prevented the Afghans from seeing detailed drawings of facilities or overall plans. This led to the construction of unwanted air conditioners, freezers, western toilets, deep fryers, and incompatible utilities and connections. On an even larger scale there were unwanted buildings, bases, and infrastructure whose components were not sustainable or usable. Last, the dangerous environment directly contributed to inadequate oversight. The United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), workers, military members, and contractors were often reminded of the dangers of driving through canyons to check on construction projects. USACE tried to solve this problem by checking on some projects from the air. However, a general lack of oversight in remote and dangerous areas created an environment where work was completed poorly or not at all, which resulted in wasted funds. The dangerous environment combined with a desire for progress created a vicious cycle of continued and increased fraud, waste, abuse, and mission creep. For many military, contractors, and civilian organizations involved, it was easier to turn a blind eye to the problem and remain safe for the remainder of a rotation or assignment.

Increased scope is another factor involved in a reinforcing loop with fraud, waste, abuse, and mission creep. As travel quantity and work requirements increase, personnel have less time for oversight. The absence of definable and measurable goals made it difficult to notice when the scope changed or increased. No goals also meant that data was not tracked or transferred between rotations. Next, NGOs and government agencies rely on increased scope of work to keep up funding. Andy Tamas, in his book *Warriors and Nation Builders: Development and the Military in Afghanistan* states, “Donor agencies that do not spend sufficient funds, especially in some of the more publicized troubled regions of the world, are therefore at risk of having their budgets reduced, resulting in loss of personnel...in what some cynically call Aid Incorporated, a self-perpetuating industry.”¹⁹ Moreover, USACE, which is heavily involved in the management of construction projects, charges a fee of 7.7% of the overall cost for overhead and supervision. According to Glenn Hastedt, over 177 billion dollars were spent in stabilization efforts from 2002 to 2010.²⁰ This can equate to a very significant income for NGOs, contractors, and USACE alike. The profits from large contracts lend themselves to an obvious reinforcing loop for scope increase. Bigger contracts create higher profits for contractors, and incentivize the need to expand services. Locals are connected to the pressure of scope increase too. Communities know they do not need costly high maintenance infrastructure, but they certainly will not say no to costly assets and infrastructure being left in their area.

A third factor influencing the trend towards waste and abuse is that military members have a desire to make an “impact” during their limited rotation of influence, to set themselves up for success in future assignments and promotions. Therefore, they needed to quickly make good relationships with the Afghans, which was typically accomplished by handing out gifts. Every rotation of personnel became littered with needless and expensive promises from senior NATO

leadership. As new general officer commanders traveled to different Afghan brigades for introductions, staffers tracked promises for items like new cranes and generators. The Afghans looked forward to new rotations of personnel, knowing it would be accompanied by a new focus and another windfall of money and assets. This was all made easier due to the lack of goals, and continuity between commanders.

Peter Senge, in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, explains that to change performance, there is a need for correcting mechanisms that can break abuse cycles.²¹ Strong, measurable goals can negate or balance the reinforcing loops for scope increase. Percentage of completion could be used for military performance reports rather than numbers of higher expenditures and quantity of construction. Definable goals would also check the desire for growth by local populations, contractors, and agencies. Reduced scope increase would help negate the lack of oversight and remove the reinforcing loop with fraud, waste, and abuse.

Next, although we can not remove the dangerous environment in Afghanistan, we can reduce the unwanted waste created by this factor. For example, inadequate oversight can be minimized by only working on projects that will allow appropriate supervision. Also, similar to the example from Moldova, projects should be completed one at a time per area. No solution can work without the buy-in and cooperation of the local population. Subject matter experts from a variety of backgrounds should collaborate with communities, introducing plans and validating decisions with the local population to ensure that construction efforts are wanted. Involving the local population also places the solution back in the hands of the people being helped.

Strategic planners desired to efficiently help and support the Afghan people. The NATO/ISAF efforts in Afghanistan certainly built infrastructure that was not there before.

Unfortunately so much of it has been the wrong infrastructure. As the nation-building process is mapped out, it is not difficult to see what inputs redirected the intended result, and how numerous forces acted against the planned outcome leading towards fraud, waste, abuse, and mission creep.²²



Strength In Ownership

“Military power wins battles, but spiritual power wins wars.”

General George Marshall

As the future Infrastructure Training Advisory Teams (ITAT) officer in charge in Southern Afghanistan, I tried to learn as much as possible about the culture and country. I even brought a chess set because I read that many Afghans loved the game and took pride in their prowess. Upon arrival, I found that relationships were very important. At first, I too became caught up in a loop of gift giving with Afghan commanders because I wanted to make a difference during my deployment. Many Afghan senior leaders tried extremely hard to create and strengthen relationships with not only tea and snacks, but sometimes lavish meals. In return, my counterparts and I also had much to offer. We had authorization to hand out small items to commanders and troops to include care products, food and snack items, building supplies, and repair parts. In addition, we had the ability to provide additional training opportunities for locals, issue or expand contracts, deliver large supply orders, and obtain additional goods and services. Last, we also could acquire and deliver high demand items such as additional generators, pre-fabricated buildings, and connex storage boxes.

Over their years of working with the US military, Afghan leaders had become accustomed to the routine and knew of the potential for huge personal gain, along with the realization of the social power that came from asking for and receiving large gifts. The more gifts an Afghan obtained, the greater his prestige, which led to an enhanced desire for even bigger gifts and more power. Afghan police, military, or local municipal leaders would follow the slow, methodical social protocols before producing their new request list. My initial visits were not only cumbersome due to bringing boxes of supplies, but also demoralizing as I left each meeting with

a laundry list of requests and favors to hand out. If this was not bad enough, as new US senior leaders rotated in to the theater, they too made promises, which my office was required to fulfill. I tried to stem the burgeoning flow of requests by reiterating that the Afghan brigade engineers needed to identify their needs to their own proper Corps channels. This did not make the Afghans or the senior Coalition officers happy. I was ruining their opportunities to create bonds of trust, and I was taking away from their credibility, and still not gaining an understanding the overall readiness level or expertise of the Afghans.

To address this issue, I created a list of measurable criteria which defined a self-sustaining Afghan National Police (ANP) station or Afghan National Army (ANA) base. This would align needs and requests with goals rather than social protocol. My initial main category topics for Afghan productivity included:

1. correct number of personnel,
2. proper amount of tools and equipment,
3. benchstock and supplies,
4. employee training,
5. internal processes,
6. external processes, and
7. contracts.

These main categories were further broken down until each unit had a custom set of checklists that they could use to demonstrate their quantifiable progress toward self-sufficiency. I was excited to show off the new accounting method to our US Army Brigade Commander, and our first visit was to Zabul Province in the city of Qalat. Unfortunately, our visit was completely disrupted by an overwhelming amount of requests and favors that poured in. The Afghans saw

the arrival of the colonel as an opportunity for gain. This visit was extremely frustrating. That night I came up with a plan to break this vicious cycle of constant handouts to the Afghans and help them be more sustainable and independent. I knew that it was still important to build relationships, and that prestige mattered a lot for both the Coalition partners and the Afghans; therefore, I added an eighth category: recognition.

During the next few days, the advisors created certificates that highlighted accomplishments and progression toward sustainability. Advisory teams around the South handed out a certificate to each unit on a weekly basis. The certificates were a huge hit. Engineer commanders received recognition from their Brigade commanders who received the awards and the troops were seen by their peers as superior performers. Afghan troops also felt a huge loyalty to their supervisors for helping them receive the recognition. Part of the program also included giving workers or troops their picture with their Afghan and Coalition leadership. Many younger Afghans wanted these pictures to take home to show their families what they were doing. When senior leaders were visiting different areas, we coordinated the presentations to involve them too.

The overall effect was quite successful. The program was pushed as a best practice for implementation by ISAF throughout Afghanistan. The best part was the result. Afterward, when we visited each area, the Afghan commanders were eager to show off their accomplishments and best troops. Instead of asking advisors for shelving, they would properly procure and build their own shelving and organize their own supplies. This became the perfect way to break the cycle with a two-fold effect. Senior NATO leaders were eager to give out the certificates, because they quickly realized that their visits were not spoiled by the awkward requests for financial gifts, and they had more time to actually focus on building real relationships. The certificates not

only stopped the waste on unneeded contracts, supplies, and equipment, but it reinforced the overall goal of a self-sustaining Afghan military and police force. A similar approach that focuses the results on a population should be applied to construction and reconstruction efforts prior to future engagements.



Conclusion: Change and Move Forward

“There are two primary choices in life: to accept conditions as they exist or accept the responsibility for changing them...Don’t dwell on what went wrong. Instead, focus on what to do next. Spend your energies on moving forward toward finding the answer.”

Denis Waitley

A host nation population must be engaged at the local level during stability operations. They must be involved in the planning, selecting, and designing process, and most importantly, they must provide labor during the construction phase of the projects. Without this involvement, a population has no buy-in, or even worse, new infrastructure and projects become a burden on communities to maintain and operate without any real hope of a sustainable future. Uncoordinated and unsolicited projects lack enduring meaning to a local population, only adding to local haves-and-have-nots and furthering local factioning and political agendas.²³

Prior to the next nation-building engagement, the US should examine the following checklist as a guide to direct efforts.

Checklist for Nation-building reconstruction process:

1. Nation-building must involve the host nation, including the local population, in the planning process,
2. With the exception of expedient repairs such as cases due to disaster, construction efforts need to be executed primarily by the local populace,
3. Nation-building efforts can not outpace the host nation’s own ability to plan, build, supervise, and then maintain their own projects,
4. Strong definable goals with an overall execution budget must be set in order to avoid the temptation of scope creep and reduce practices open to fraud, waste and abuse,

5. Projects must be accompanied by a long-term maintenance plan, created and sustained by the local population that does not involve external financial or technological capital and support,
6. Approved projects should comply with local building standards, practices, and materials, and local construction techniques should be used for bids and designs during construction efforts, and
8. Combatant Commands need to engage with multiple diverse construction agencies and external groups to review and add insight during Phase IV construction and reconstruction planning as part of the crisis action and Joint Operation Planning Processes.

The US military is not necessarily the most appropriate organization to take on the task of construction and reconstruction efforts. However, in many cases it will continue to be the only workable option.²⁴ The US military is one of the only organizations worldwide, military or civilian, with the manpower, transportation, financial backing, physical security, and political will to be successful in the immense task of reconstruction efforts. These capabilities make the US military an easy and obvious go-to solution when nation-building needs arise. Based on previous and current experiences neither the US political leaders nor the military personnel are excited to engage in another nation-building task, but this ideal is not likely to be realized. The US therefore needs to give more attention to the details of the art of nation-building beginning at the combatant command level and down through the tactical level to prepare and train for this mission. Combatant Commands need to add the same emphasis to Phase IV operations as Phases III (seize the initiative), to their planning process, as well as adding the necessary training and research to execute these plans. Plans already exist for entering and occupying countries around the world. We need to include plans with exit strategies. However, because of the stigma attached to “nation building” and Phase IV operations, it is either glossed over or not included in planning and training activities. Whether the US military should or should not be involved in

construction or reconstruction efforts, the reality is the military IS involved. And if our history is any predictor of the future, not only will the US continue to use the military as a nation-building tool, but they will do it again very soon. We need to plan now for the next time.



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