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THE 800-POUND GORILLA AND STABILITY OPERATIONS

by James P. Hunt, Major General, USAF
Deputy Commanding General, MNC-I, April 09 – Jan 10

It's early 2010, Baghdad, Iraq. At the New Embassy Complex, three Foreign Service officers wait for the start of their meeting with officers from United States Forces-Iraq. It's a small room, seating about ten people, but with only three Department of State representatives there should be plenty of room for the military participants. The door swings open, and twenty officers walk in the room and scramble for seats. One opens up a satchel and pulls out sets of briefing slides—it looks like there are close to fifty slides for the briefing. After lots of shuffling around, an officer starts the presentation. Today, he's talking about how the military will support the Provincial Reconstruction Teams; he goes through the entire military planning process: Mission analysis, courses of action, the results of the military's war gaming, and which course of action the military supports.

Throughout the hour-long meeting, the Foreign Service Officers listen politely and ask a few questions. They ponder the complex diagrams, troop-to-task calculations, logistics concepts. Their few questions are answered in sentences filled mostly with abbreviations or acronyms. It's as if questions or discussion will ruin the rhythm and timing of the briefing. At the end of the meeting, the senior military officer comments, —Thanks for listening to us today. We think we've got a good plan here and are ready to support you. After all, civilians are in the lead for improving civil capacity in Iraq, and we're here to help. Please let us know what you think, but we're ready to execute right away...”

After the military team leaves, the Foreign Service Officers look at each other and sigh. They've just attended a meeting describing the military support they'll be receiving without being part of the planning dialog that led to the military's support plan. The stacks of briefing slides wind up in the burn bag. They'll meet with the military planners again in a week, but next time the military will bring a 100-page operations plan full of objectives, metrics, and implementing instructions. The Embassy was not part of the process that led to the plan and wasn't asked specifically what support it needed. They don't necessarily understand the plan, would spend staff hours they simply don't have to make significant changes to the plan, and would probably rather just be asked —how can we help?” The military officers walk away frustrated because the civilians are not jumping with joy over their excellent briefing and plan that took many man-hours to build and sense their civilian counterparts would rather have no plan at all.

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So goes another day of two very different cultures striving to work together in a complex and challenging environment. While this particular story is an amalgam of the worst examples of the many meetings I attended between the Department of State and the US military, it brings to light the serious challenges we have today of working together as we transition into Stability Operations. To be successful, both cultures must change and adapt. They must learn how to work together at all levels of war. The Department of State must assert more of a leadership role, with all the tough decisions that requires. They need goals and a strategy to achieve those goals. The Department of Defense must act as a partner and learn to give up control as it helps its civilian counterparts operate in complex environments. Both organizations are filled with patriotic Americans, dedicated to mission success, willing to sacrifice their lives to serve their country. Both cultures are resistant to change, but both must learn to work together now and in the future if they are to be successful pursuing our national interests in this ever-changing world; each must change and adapt to succeed in Stability Operations.

**...WHERE DOES AN 800-POUND GORILLA SIT?
...ANYWHERE IT WANTS TO!"**

We've all heard this joke before, referring to a strong, totally overpowering force able to take over and control any situation or environment. The 800-pound gorilla today is the United States military; able to sit wherever and whenever it wants. It has the people, the resources, and the processes to take over almost any organization in any situation. After all, that's what it's trained to do, that's what it gets paid to do. While having an overpowering military is critical to success in a kinetic environment, that same 800-pound gorilla can be less effective when it must work with the totally different cultures of the Department of State, the interagency, non-governmental agencies, or even private organizations.

As we move into Stability Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, we must learn to adjust and adapt to a new interagency operating environment. Gone are the days when only the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) "does development" while the military only fights battles. Soldiers, diplomats, USAID and other interagency civilians are all partners in rebuilding infrastructure, shaping the political environment in Iraq and Afghanistan, and achieving U.S. policy goals. Successful Stability Operations require the coordination of all the instruments of national power, in collaboration and coordination with other governments, non-governmental organizations, and private organizations, to provide a safe, secure environment, essential government services, infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian relief. Stability Operations require cooperation, coordination and synchronization between civilian and military organizations at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. Our US national policy directs the Department of State to lead Stability Operations on behalf of the US government, requiring the military to relinquish control of an operating environment and pass that leadership and control to other civilian entities. Therefore, to be successful in Stability Operations, one must be successful at cooperating and collaborating in an interagency environment, whether you're a Corps commander, platoon leader or a Foreign Service Officer. Joint Publication 3-0 and the US Army's Field Manual 3-07 provide full definitions and go into great detail as to how the US military should operate in Stability Operations, but neither gives much advice on how a military organization adjusts to the culture chasm that stands between those in uniform and those in civilian clothes. As civilian entities take over responsibilities for building civil capacity and rule of law in Iraq, the military needs to span across these cultures to effectively support the

civilian operations and the Stability Operations mission. It must learn how to —~~let~~ “let go” so that civilian organizations can take the lead. We’ve spent a great deal of time analyzing military operations in support of Stability Operations, but we’ve not focused on training our military on when and how to let go of the lead and effectively transfer authority and accountability to the civilians.

There are many examples of the difference of civilian and military cultures in Iraq. For example, the Department of State has a less defined planning structure. They don’t have Operational Planning Teams and don’t use the Military Decision Making Process or the Joint Operations Planning Process to develop their plans. Their meetings may be less structured and might take longer to reach consensus or resolution. They call each other by their first names, don’t always sit at a table with one person in charge, and don’t even use briefing slides most of the time. For us in the military, it is an anathema to have a meeting with no one at the head of the table, without a structured agenda, and without 50 or 60 briefing slides.

Just because the civilian culture is different doesn’t mean our civilians are wrong or ineffective. They get their work done quite well without using the military models of meetings and planning. It is unreasonable to ask our civilians to change their ways just so they can work with the military. We in the military, as the 800-pound gorilla, need to make the changes. If we don’t change and adapt, our military culture will drive civilian organizations further away from us; our larger numbers of people and resources will literally overpower any other organization. This kind of “partnership” can lead to mistrust and sometimes outright resentment. We must adjust our military culture, our expectations, and our definitions of success when we work with our civilian partners. That means attending a meeting with no briefing slides and a rather fuzzy end state, and be both comfortable and effective in that environment. It means huge discomfort as we attempt to support civilian-led operations that don’t seem as precisely defined as we’d like. It means although we all speak English, there is no guarantee that any of us are actually communicating.

I was involved in these kinds of challenges for the past year in Iraq. As Deputy Commanding General for MNC-I, one of my tasks was to help our Department of State take over responsibility for improving civil capacity and rule of law through their Provincial Reconstruction Teams. —“The PRTs are in the lead,” we said, then inundated them with military planning, briefing slides, and plenty of manpower. When we went to a meeting, we walked in with a platoon’s worth of briefers, slide flippers, and other horse-holders to talk with two or three people from State, and we were often appalled to find that there wasn’t even a computer and a screen for our 150-slide briefing. But we were the 800-pound gorilla and usually got our way, at least at first. After a few meetings, we found that the civilians weren’t interested in another meeting, didn’t particularly listen at the ones we did have, and didn’t follow through on the things we talked about. In the end, our State Department colleagues followed through on only the things they thought were important. We had lost them as partners (assuming we ever had them). Neither the military nor our civilian partners verbalized this friction to the other; after these meetings, both groups usually returned to their offices and raised their hands in frustration of the other. We only became effective when we adjusted our ways and changed our approach. We needed talking and discussion, not briefings. We had to draw out ideas on blank sheets of paper and white boards—together. We listened to ideas that we didn’t always support and plans

that we probably couldn't execute, but worked together until we had an executable plan. We had to listen, mentor, and adapt. Above all, it took time and a good amount of patience!

Despite these challenges, we are learning to work in the field with this very different culture, particularly at the tactical level. In the trenches, our military is moving forward with their civilian partners every day in Iraq. They listen, communicate, and build credibility and transparency. It isn't always easy, and for a "Type A" brigade commander with lots of other things on his plate, these efforts can be frustrating. As the relationship matures, that same brigade commander usually discovers that his civilian partners understand the environment very well, recognize the challenges, and know how to work through the issues. They haven't done "mission analysis" the way we do it, and they haven't put it on a briefing slide, but they know what they're doing. The State Department is learning also, particularly at the tactical level. They work shoulder-to-shoulder with military units on the ground. They've developed work plans that meet the ground commander's objectives as well as their own. They successfully share the workload with the military and both groups strive to keep the other informed on recent actions and events. Our Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are improving their working relationships daily with their military partners. Each PRT has a work plan coordinated and synchronized with the military's battle space owner. The U.S. Embassy's Office of Provincial Assistance (OPA), responsible for all the PRTs in Iraq, has regional agreements with U.S. divisions to better coordinate military and civilian efforts across a number of PRTs in a region. The U.S. Army's new Advise and Assist Brigades have learned during their pre-deployment training to cooperate with their civilian PRT partners. U.S. Forces-Iraq has provided a handful of military officers to OPA to help with planning and coordination. These officers are more than liaison officers; they are an integral part of the OPA staff and report directly to the Director of OPA.

The Ninewa PRT is a great example of a tactical-level partnership. The civilian PRT Lead is very successful working with the provincial governor and council because Iraqi politicians are far more comfortable and receptive to recommendations and advice from other civilians, rather than military officers. The brigade commander works closely with police and military, and often with the province's civilian leaders. But the brigade commander knows he shouldn't talk to provincial leadership without the PRT Team Leader present; they must present one, single American face to the Iraqis. They both understand that there is a fine line between military operations and politics in Stability Operations—everything is related, everything is connected. As a result, they have been successful at improving civil capacity and rule of law up despite one of Iraq's most challenging environments.

While we've made progress in this relationship over the past year, we have much left to do. There remain examples of a dysfunctional partnership: Commanders who speak of support to PRTs and civilian efforts, but still concentrate only on the kinetic fight. Military officers with little or no political experience who think they can credibly advise provincial councils and other politicians on how to govern a province. And unfortunately there are some in the State Department, usually because of a previous bad experience, who mistrust the military. We need to take what we've learned from the Ninewa PRT and other successful partnerships and apply those lessons to the operational and strategic levels of war. It is at these levels that the challenges of the interagency become intense. This is where "good ideas" and strategy meet with reality; it is where cultural differences can combine with strategic challenges to bring

progress to a grinding halt. This is not the place or time to iron out cultural differences; we have to address those differences before we face the challenges of Stability Operations in the field. We have to learn and train together at home before we deploy. It's time to train the 800-pound gorilla.

TRAINING THE 800-POUND GORILLA

Both cultures will have to adapt to the other if we're to be successful in the future. However, the military needs to take the next step in interagency relationships and processes with better training to operate within the civilian culture and practice working within that culture. Our professional military education and officer professional development need to seek out additional opportunities to work with civilian counterparts in exercises and planning scenarios. Our young leaders need to learn how to give a professional briefing without briefing slides (by the way, it's a lot harder than it looks). We need to learn how to communicate and operate effectively in a civilian-chaired meeting that operates under different rules and expectations. We need to learn when we need a platoon of support, and when we don't. The easiest way to clamp down on free, honest discussion is to walk into a meeting with a score of aides and assistants to talk with the three people the State Department sent to the meeting. We have to learn that there are other ways to plan besides MDMP and JOPP.

Our relationship with the Department of State is just the first step. As we continue in Stability Operations and similar environments, NGOs, Private Organizations, and host governments will play larger and larger roles as we continue in Stability Operations. The contributions of each are essential to eventual success, yet each has a different culture, a different world and local perspective, and a different policy for cooperating with the US government and US military. Some will cooperate fully and some will never even consider it. In any case, we can't expect any of them to change their ways and their culture to work effectively with the US military. We need to adjust to these cultures as well. The first step in understanding and working with these vastly different cultures and perspectives is effective communication. To begin that communication we have to actively reach out to these groups whenever possible and encourage their participation in war games, tabletop exercises, and seminar discussions. These interactions build trust, credibility, and transparency. Developing these relationships in the non-threatening environment of exercises and seminar discussions will increase the potential for communication, collaboration, and cooperation in real world situations.

Finally, we need to heed the advice of T.E. Lawrence, writing in 1917: "Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than you do it perfectly." In this case, it's better our civilian partners do it tolerably. They probably won't do it the same way we would and, like the military, may even make mistakes. Most of the time, they'll amaze you with their dedication, their intuition, and their effectiveness. But if they're in charge, if they're in the lead, then the 800-pound gorilla needs to sit where it's told.

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