

Winning the Nationbuilding War

Staff Sergeant George E. Anderson III, U.S. Army National Guard, Ph.D.

WHILE I WAS in Samac, Bosnia, an Assistant Secretary of Defense visited my unit—A Troop, 1st Squadron, 104th Cavalry, Pennsylvania Army National Guard. One of the things he said was, “We have gotten pretty good at killing people.” In retrospect, this was an understatement. As Saddam Hussein found out, the United States can reach almost any corner of the world with real power. Unfortunately, it does not seem to be quite as efficient at nationbuilding.

Construction is more difficult than destruction, and nationbuilding operations can be long, complex, and expensive. America’s mission in Bosnia has lasted several years, and no U.S. official has yet mentioned terminating operations. U.S. forces also are still in Afghanistan, and U.S. forces in Iraq have suffered more casualties since the end of major military operations than during initial operations.

As a Vietnam-era veteran, I doubt the United States has the financial capability or the political will to occupy large segments of the world semipermanently. Yet, the potential costs of not engaging in nationbuilding might be horrific. How can we shorten the commitment and reduce the cost of nationbuilding? How can the U.S. military be as efficient at nationbuilding as it is at killing people? The answer is to have the right tools, the right people, and the right processes for the job at hand.

The Right Process

Before World War II, the Germans reorganized their army in a new way and, in doing so, changed the nature of war. The blitzkrieg was highly efficient and effective. Today, little doubt exists that the U.S. Army has the structure and processes in place for victory in any conventional conflict, but when the contest has less to do with destructive power than with winning hearts and minds, is the Army organized and manned in the most efficient, effective manner to win? The assess-

ment made by many of those critical of the numerous peacekeeping operations throughout the globe is that it is not.

The military’s role in peacekeeping is to maintain a safe, secure environment. Little else is asked. Nationbuilding is seen as a separate, distinct diplomatic enterprise. Given the current structure and manning of the military force, this seems like a rational division of responsibility.

Unfortunately, as former U.S. Congressman Thomas P. (Tip) O’Neill once said, “All politics is local!” Most human interactions during nationbuilding occur between members of the Armed Forces and the local community. Few Iraqis have encountered Coalition Provisional Authority administrator L. Paul Bremer, but many have had interactions with U.S. soldiers. The millions of interactions Iraqis have with the Armed Forces create lasting impressions about Americans, and the impressions either support or diminish U.S. efforts.

The ultimate goal of nationbuilding is to establish a self-sustaining country friendly to the United States. To do so, the U.S. military must use all its assets effectively. The United States should structure, man, and employ forces to ensure the peace and optimize nationbuilding through quality interactions with civilian populations. Soldiers must go beyond being peacekeepers and become nationbuilders.

Up, not down. Ford’s assembly line and the Army’s rigid top-down command structure are good examples of the top-down approach to management that dominated the latter half of the 19th century and all of the 20th century. All organizational actions, down to the most elemental movements of the workforce, were controlled from the top. In combat operations, this type of management philosophy has proven highly effective.

Unfortunately, the top-down system has been less successful in nationbuilding. Top-down management



During SFOR 12, Apache 12 patrolled the Bosnian city of Samac. Principally Serb, Samac had a reputation for being anti-American.

encourages exaggerating good news and minimizing bad news. Run that tendency through several layers of command and the chance is slim of higher headquarters understanding what is important in any exchange between a nationbuilder and a civilian.

A Vietnam war story provides one example of failure of the top-down command structure. The command decided that building local schools would be a good hearts and minds thing to do. Military forces went into local villages and built schools. Ceremonies were conducted to celebrate the wonderful advance the new schools represented. Pictures were taken. Speeches were made. Officers congratulated each other. And, shortly thereafter, the Vietnamese burned the schools down.

The decision to construct schools was a top-down decision. No one asked the villagers what they thought about it. The villagers were not involved in the decision or the construction. As a result, they saw the school not as a benefit, but as a tool of repression.

During my tour of duty in Bosnia, my unit met an older gentleman who asked us for help. We went to his home where he pointed out a man-size pit in his back yard, which he believed was an unmarked grave. He asked for help to investigate the situation and hopefully bring closure to some family's grief.

I promised to see if I could get some help, and I reported the situation up my chain of command. I reported it four times, but I never found out any information for the villager. My superiors took no action or allowed me to do so; it was not a command priority. We did nothing other than embarrass ourselves.

Did the villager blame me personally? No, but he concluded that Americans had little interest in his concerns. The United States missed a chance to make a friend and an opportunity to shorten our stay in Bosnia.

Bottom-up success. The weapons harvest is a semiannual event in Bosnia in which the Stabilization Force (SFOR) attempts to remove military-grade weapons from the civilian population. Different units take different approaches. My unit took a positive, supporting approach. The local authorities were in charge. We would help. They set the dates and locations for action and coordinated the effort. We did not threaten or intimidate the civilian populace, and by taking this approach, we secured several antitank weapons; hundreds of automatic weapons, grenades, and rocket-propelled grenades; and hundreds of thousands of rounds of ammunition.

Other SFOR contingents took a top-down approach. With minimal coordination with local authorities, SFOR soldiers searched local homes with or without owners' consent. One unit that had taken this intrusive approach confiscated only an old pistol and one hand grenade after several weeks of work. The skills required to conduct a successful military operation are not the skills required for nationbuilding.

The small hammer. When my unit arrived in Bosnia, we spent 2 weeks with the unit we were replacing to learn the mission. My predecessor told me he would introduce me to the mayor of the local village in our area of responsibility. He explained that the mayor was a difficult man who dodged meetings, did not like Americans, and only tolerated

Apache 12-B poses next to a minefield near Samac. Ten years after the war, danger zones were clearly marked and easy to avoid. Unfortunately, the real job of understanding the people was not as easy.



author photo

our presence. When we arrived at the townhall, a secretary informed us the mayor was in a meeting and would be unable to see us. My predecessor announced, "I am SFOR! The mayor will see me now!" We then stomped up the stairs and barged into the mayor's meeting. I do not speak Serbo-Croatian, but I could read the mayor's body language: he was quite unhappy with the intrusion. My predecessor's problem was less the mayor's dislike for Americans than his dislike for a particular American. However, my predecessor executed the mission the way he had been instructed. His only requirement was to maintain a safe, secure environment. Unfortunately, he acted more like a conqueror than a nationbuilder.

A few weeks later, I went back to the townhall and asked for an appointment to see the mayor at his convenience. Then I made sure I was there when he was willing to see me. I did so because it was good manners and because my unit would be both safer and more effective with the mayor as an ally, not an adversary. Eventually, the mayor and I were able to work well together. He was not anti-American. He simply wanted to be treated with the respect he deserved as the town's mayor. Good manners go a long way in any culture.

Uncommon task training. The skills nationbuilders need to be effective, which are not now in common task training manuals, fall into two categories: interpersonal communication skills and area-

specific knowledge. The ability to speak the local language is critical to the ability to communicate. The use of interpreters is a poor substitute for communicating directly. Speaking the language immediately confers a status far beyond simple communication and is the first big step toward trust. Communication skills can be learned. The sales industry has developed countless communication models that can be adapted easily to communication in nationbuilding. After all, the United States is attempting to "sell" some of its basic beliefs.

The Reserve Component contains a reservoir of uncataloged civilian skills. Making a living as an architect has little application in combat operations, but the same ability could have great application in nationbuilding. The Army should catalog and certify such reservist civilian skills and use them when appropriate.

The great Broadway show *The Music Man* opens with the musical number "You Gotta Know the Territory!" Knowing the territory is vital and entails more than understanding geography; it entails appreciating how the locals think of themselves as a group.

Not many people wake up in the morning and say, My culture and I are worthless and insignificant. People need to respect themselves, especially in uncertain times. Every group has some accomplishment it can point to with pride. The way to create support for nationbuilding is to respect, appreciate, and acknowledge the local people's historic

contributions. Area-specific knowledge should include understanding local customs; cultural and political history; and the current political situation.

Understanding the current situation entails understanding people. Who are the significant players in the area who shape opinion—the employers, the clergy, the head of the local education system? Who is in charge of utilities, police, and insurance? Who controls the media? Where do they live? What are they trying to achieve professionally and personally? All politics is local. The discovery and effective handoff of such information is vital to nation-building.

My predecessor in Bosnia did as he had been taught. The transition briefing book he provided contained pictures of significant locations, the townhall, the police station, and local churches and mosques. Unfortunately, it contained not one word on the townspeople. In less than a week, I knew where every building was. Six months later, I was still learning about the people. One man had just lost his wife of 30 years. Another wrote poetry. One individual liked chocolate. Another was threatening his neighbors. An effective nationbuilder must understand people and relate to them, not buildings. The briefing book we gave our successors was 20 percent locations and 80 percent personalities. The book gave our successors a real resource on which to build in dealing with people. Unfortunately, I believe we were the exception rather than the rule.

The Army should develop current civil affairs units into highly effective, efficient nationbuilding units by building on their existing base of expertise and training them for region-specific nationbuilding missions, including training in the language, customs, culture, history, and significant individuals in their areas. These units would differ from today's civil affairs units in several ways. They would not be nationbuilders; they would be new units with a unique designation and unique uniforms, demonstrating to the world that the United States has moved from fighting to nationbuilding.

Unlike current civil affairs units that provide technical expertise, future nationbuilders would assist and provide governance. Soldiers need to know how to destroy targets. Nationbuilders need to know how to create good impressions and build formidable relationships. They are one part diplomat and one part soldier. We want first-line nationbuilders to be smart, educated, and capable of assessing situations and taking independent actions within the general guidelines set forth by the higher command. We want our nationbuilders to be open, approachable, and easy

to communicate with. We want nationbuilders who understand and care about the locals. We want nationbuilders to dialogue first and rely on force only as a last resort.

We want our soldiers to have *none* of these qualities. The U.S. soldier should be the wrath of God, able to bring death and destruction anywhere at any time. Let the nationbuilder be the good guy and the soldier the bad guy. Attempting to have the same people in the same uniforms perform both roles confuses those around us as well as ourselves.

We must invest more instruction in cultural studies and communications techniques. We must recruit the type of individuals we want and retain them. At the end of combat operations, nationbuilder units would deploy to the country to take over first-line responsibility. Combat units would be kept in reserve for a period of time in case of emergency.

As nationbuilding progressed, the nature and size of reserve combat forces could be altered without any noticeable change to the level of engagement. Finally, as efforts matured, the nationbuilders would phase themselves out and local authorities would assume control.

The Benefits

A bottom-up command structure with properly trained, proactive nationbuilders would—

- Improve U.S. standing in-country.
- Increase the effectiveness of diplomatic efforts and the safety of the troops.
- Decrease the costs of operations and unit formation.
- Reduce engagement time.
- Improve the readiness of conventional forces.

History is full of examples of countries that have won the conventional war, but lost the nationbuilding war. In Vietnam, we learned that you do not win a person's heart and mind by kicking him in the butt. Unfortunately, we have yet to learn the most efficient way to win hearts and minds.

Nationbuilding's effect on a client state can be profound and more enduring than that achieved solely through diplomatic efforts. A properly trained nationbuilding force cannot supplant traditional diplomatic efforts, but it can greatly enhance them. **MR**

Staff Sergeant George E. Anderson III, U.S. Army National Guard, Ph.D., is with the 56th Brigade, 6th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, Pennsylvania Army National Guard. He is the head of the Business Department of Valley Forge Military College, Wayne, Pennsylvania. He received a B.S. from The Citadel and the Military College of South Carolina and an M.S. from the University of Southern California.