

# Building a Civilian Lessons Learned System

BY MELANNE CIVIC AND BERNARD CARREAU

In addition to the problems of building and maintaining an effective civilian presence in Afghanistan and Iraq is the matter of developing institutional knowledge in the civilian agencies—what works and what does not work in the field. The task is all the more daunting because civilian agencies do not have a core mission to maintain expertise in stabilizing war-torn countries, particularly those experiencing major counterinsurgency and counterterrorist operations. Yet the Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, Departments of Agriculture, Justice, Commerce, Treasury, Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, Transportation, Energy, and other agencies have been sending personnel to Afghanistan, Iraq, and other fragile states for several years now. The agencies have relied on a combination of direct hires, temporary hires, and contractors, but nearly all of them have been plagued by relatively short tours and rapid turnarounds, making it difficult to establish enduring relationships on the ground and institutional knowledge in the agencies. The constant coming and going of personnel has led to the refrain heard more and more frequently that the United States has not been fighting the war in Afghanistan for 8 years, but rather for just 1 year, eight times in a row.

The Center for Complex Operations (CCO) is establishing a civilian lessons learned program in an effort to address some of these issues. The object is to collect civilian lessons and best practices from the field and disseminate them to the agencies with personnel deployed and to senior civilian and military decisionmakers. The military has been collecting and analyzing lessons from the field for many years, but this is a new endeavor for civilian agencies.

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## History of Interagency

### Lessons Learned

The creation of a U.S. Government lessons learned strategy for stability operations developed over more than a decade, fueled by the new national security challenges that emerged after the Cold War. The role of lessons learned to inform the response to, and planning for, these irregular warfare and nationbuilding challenges was defined by policy imperatives in successive Presidential directives, Department

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of Defense (DOD) directives, and congressional legislation, and it has been the subject of years of policy and process discussions among the civilian agencies and their military partners.

In 1997, in recognition of the complexity and multidimensional nature of postconflict and other stability operations, and to avoid repeating the mistakes made in engagements in Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti, President Bill Clinton issued Presidential Decision Directive 56 (PDD 56), which called for establishing a unified strategy and training for the whole of government, collecting lessons learned from operations, and integrating these lessons into improved training and planning for the next engagement.<sup>1</sup> PDD 56 used the term *complex contingency operations* and called for U.S. Government agencies to institutionalize lessons and develop and conduct interagency training programs.<sup>2</sup>

On December 7, 2005, in response to the lack of preparedness and the absence of

coordination among U.S. agencies working with the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, and to the complexity of the national security challenges of Afghanistan, Sudan, Haiti, and elsewhere, President George W. Bush issued National Security Presidential Directive 44 (NSPD 44). Although not explicitly building upon PDD 56, NSPD 44 took a similar approach a step further, calling for a permanent structure for stability operations—under civilian leadership, and in coordination with the military. The Secretary of State was called upon to “coordinate and lead integrated United States Government efforts” among the civilian agencies in conjunction with the Secretary of Defense. NSPD 44 established as a policy imperative “improved coordination, planning, and implementation for reconstruction and stabilization assistance for foreign states and regions at risk of, in, or in transition from conflict or civil strife.” Toward this end, several tasks and processes are outlined in the directive, including the development of improved and coordinated strategies, programming, and foreign assistance funding within and among the agencies; establishing a civilian surge response capability; and identifying lessons learned to inform improvements in operations. NSPD 44 also established a mechanism for the National Security Council to oversee agency collaboration to seek to resolve policy issues and decide on actions to be taken.

DOD Directive 3000.05 of November 28, 2005, raised stability operations to the level of a core military capability that “shall be given priority comparable to combat operations.” It was developed concurrently with NSPD 44, mirrors the civilian-military coordinating provisions, and mandates that DOD and the military Services coordinate with the State Department’s Office of the Coordinator for

Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS), the civilian agencies, international institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector. Under the directive, primary responsibility to gather and disseminate lessons learned for stability operations was assigned to the combatant commands through U.S. Joint Forces Command. This function was not to replace, but rather to complement and supplement the lessons learned centers of the individual military Services. The revised and updated DOD Instruction 3000.05 of September 2009, which supersedes the 2005 directive, makes explicit that the mandate for lessons learned is to serve not only the military, but also civilian agencies.

Under NSPD 44, S/CRS was given the responsibility to coordinate interagency stabilization and reconstruction activities. NSPD 44 also established a mechanism co-chaired by S/CRS and the National Security Council—the Reconstruction and Stabilization Policy Coordinating Committee (later renamed the Interagency Policy Committee under the Obama administration)—to oversee agency collaboration and to approve or seek to resolve policy issues. Between 2005 and 2007, the S/CRS structure included an Office of Best Practices, Lessons Learned and Sectoral Coordination (BPSC), which was designed to collect lessons learned and best practices and to disseminate them to civilian agencies and the military. The sectors that it focused on included transitional security, transitional justice and rule of law, infrastructure, humanitarian assistance, transitional economics, and governance. The BPSC engaged in regular discussions with U.S. partners to distill lessons learned into the “top 10” best practices for each of the sectors and produced lessons learned guides for the U.S. Government and practitioners on disarmament,

demobilization and reintegration, and elections in postconflict environments. S/CRS also produced tools for stability operations that incorporated best practices, such as the Essential Tasks Matrix and the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework.

In 2007, the internal structure of S/CRS evolved, and the responsibility for lessons learned was moved to a standing interagency group—the Best Practices and Lessons Learned Working Group (BPWG)—as part of the existing interagency coordinating structure. The purpose of this move was to coordinate within a whole-of-government process all interested U.S. agencies and military partners in the collection, analysis, and integration of lessons learned and best practices. During the first 2 years, the group met periodically to study the challenges and to forge a path to develop a more systematic process for collecting and applying lessons learned to present and future operations for a more coordinated civilian and military response to overseas contingencies.

In March 2008, the BPWG, in partnership with the U.S. Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute and the Consortium (later renamed Center) for Complex Operations, brought together policymakers and experts in lessons learned and training and education in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to identify ways to create a U.S. Government lessons learned system for reconstruction and stabilization. The symposium focused on Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it included many veterans of the PRTs from both countries.

## **Learning from the Military**

For many years now, the military has recognized the value of collecting and analyzing

lessons learned. The Center for Army Lessons Learned was established in 1985, and the Navy, Marines, and Air Force followed suit shortly afterward. U.S. Joint Forces Command established the Joint Center for Operational Analysis (JCOA) in 2003. In addition, many DOD components, such as the Defense Logistics Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency, have established their own lessons learned units.

In developing the civilian lessons learned program, CCO drew heavily from the experiences and techniques of the military, especially the Army, but also the Navy, Marines, Air Force, and JCOA. It examined the processes in place to collect, analyze, and disseminate lessons and best practices, and it reviewed the databases that house lessons identified and the products and publications that the Services issue. In addition, CCO has been working with all of the Services to mine lessons identified in their databases and publications that deal with “civilian” issues, such as governance, economic development, and rule of law.

There are significant differences between military lessons learned programs and the new civilian program. The military collects lessons largely at the tactical level, addressing issues

issues as chain of command, funding sources, the effectiveness of a particular program, relations with local nationals, and even the wisdom of the mission or certain aspects of the mission. Observations from civilian actors in the field often deal with interagency relations, or civil-military relations, or U.S.–host nation relations. Whereas the military performs under a single chain of command, civilian actors in the field report through multiple chains of command, and it is often the case that no single agency can address the problems identified in the field.

Many military observations collected in the field fall within familiar tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) established for a particular operation. Military planners are taught to develop operational plans in terms of impact on doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities (DOTMLPF). Often observations collected in the field “fit” into established TTPs or familiar DOTMLPF bins. Field observations may call into question certain techniques and procedures, or they may signal the need for a change in some DOTMLPF function, but they usually fit into some preestablished process, and there is usually a logical “recipient” of the observation in terms of an appropriate command, such as the G7 or J7 (for doctrine and training) or the G3 or J3 (operations).

This internal structure makes the military better situated to absorb observations from the field and to find appropriate commands to take ownership of particular issues. Yet for all this internal structure, and despite a culture steeped in military history, after action reviews, and operational lessons learned, even the military struggles with actually “learning” lessons identified in the field. The Army does not consider a lesson identified to be “learned” until it is

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such as a weapon malfunction, the problem of opening the door of a burning humvee, or the need for a variable power scope or desert steel-toed boots in certain types of operations. Civilian lessons tend to be more at the operational and strategic levels, dealing with such

actually implemented, until the problem is actually solved. Many observers lament that lessons identified in the field end up in some database and are quickly forgotten. The bane of every lessons learned specialist is seeing important lessons collected from the field never actually get implemented in policy and practice.

If these problems haunt the military, they could potentially plague civilian agencies in spades. Civilian agencies do not have an internal structure to absorb lessons learned, there are no established processes and procedures or doctrine in place to guide stabilization or counterinsurgency activities in the field, often there is no obvious “owner” of lessons identified in the field, and there is rarely a single chain of command for issue resolution.

### **CCO Mission**

With these challenges in mind, Congress mandated in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2009<sup>3</sup> the establishment of a whole-of-government reconstruction and stabilization strategy, to include lessons learned. It called for the development of a database on previous reconstruction and stabilization operations<sup>4</sup> and the establishment of a Center for Complex Operations, part of whose mandate is “to conduct research, collect, analyze, and distribute lessons learned; and compile best practices.”<sup>5</sup> Other CCO responsibilities include promoting effective coordination in preparing DOD and other U.S. Government personnel for complex operations; fostering unity of effort among the international community, including international organizations and the private sector; and identifying gaps in the education and training of DOD and other government personnel with respect to complex operations. These other responsibilities provide some outlet for sharing and disseminating the lessons and best

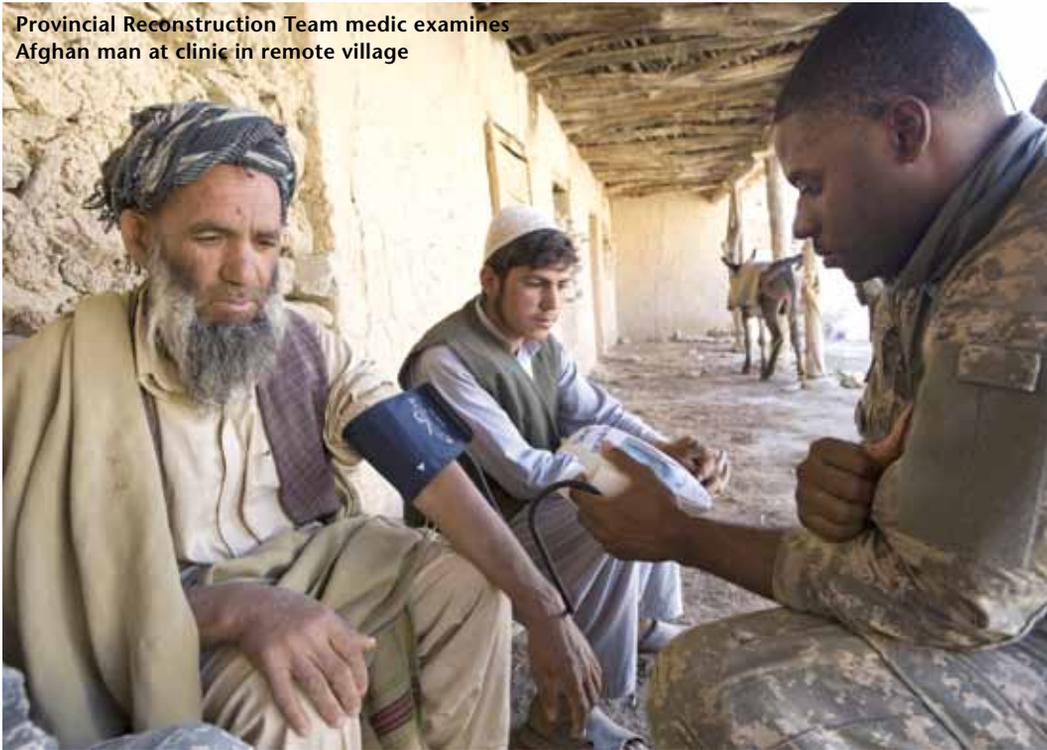
practices collected in the field and a platform for issue resolution and policy recommendations designed to promote interagency and international unity of effort. CCO has begun working with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations (UN) to identify international lessons and best practices

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and to provide a venue for sharing lessons and best practices across countries and international organizations. In addition, CCO is planning to prepare materials to enhance the training and education of government personnel in preparation for deployment.

As an initial endeavor, CCO is spearheading an interagency project sponsored by the BPWG to collect, analyze, and distribute lessons learned with respect to civilian members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan PRTs. At the same time, the Services are collecting lessons from military personnel returning from PRTs. In addition to working with the military, CCO has reviewed other lessons learned models, such as those established by the Department of Homeland Security and Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service, in conjunction with state and local firefighting authorities, to develop an internal business process for conducting interviews and analyzing observations. Civilian agencies worked with the Services to develop a common set of questions for military and civilian personnel. For instance, how do civilian participants in the field understand their role and how does that role connect to the larger mission? What kind of relationships

Provincial Reconstruction Team medic examines Afghan man at clinic in remote village



U.S. Air Force (Keith Brown)

did they develop with local nationals and was there local buy-in to their activities? Were planning and training adequate, and how did they handle security and funding issues? What kind of working relationship did they have with the military? Finally, how effective were their initiatives? Because the challenges in complex operations have already been well documented, the current program is designed to elicit from the interviewees personal recommendations for both overcoming impediments and improving operations as well as creative or innovative ways for overcoming some of the longstanding and previously identified impediments.

### **Birthing Pains**

Even with the policy and legislated mandates, the development of a civilian lessons learned program has encountered bumps in the

road. Different agencies had to sort through legal requirements for sharing personal data, protecting the identity of the personnel who provide information, competing claims on the ownership of the information itself, and appropriately using and disseminating interview data. With their mature lessons learned programs, the Services had long ago resolved most of these issues. Distinct agency cultures meant differences in policy approaches. A not insignificant hurdle was the natural tendency of those engaged in the process not to want their agency to “look bad” under the spotlight of lessons learned scrutiny. Yet just as the Services have done, CCO has stressed that the lessons learned program is not an inspector general investigation and in no way attempts to evaluate the performance of any individual. In fact, participation in lessons learned interviews and

surveys, while strongly encouraged, is entirely voluntary. Together, policymakers and lawyers worked through informed consent and nondisclosure forms, such that the interview will have no negative employment-related consequences resulting from the employee agreeing or refusing to participate or from the information provided.

Agencies collaborated to come up with questions for the oral interviews and for written surveys. This was a lengthy process, and it was here that individual agency sensitivities as to how they would look under the scrutiny of lessons learned analysis came to the fore. Agencies argued for a mix of strategic and tactical questions, with the oral interview questions focusing on the strategic and operational level, and the written survey questions focusing on the tactical level. Additionally, agencies had different comfort levels regarding the public sharing of lessons learned. All agencies agreed in principle that analysis should proceed without preconditions or restrictions; but in actual practice, agency sensitivities may come to the surface again. This is where the role of CCO will become more relevant—it does not participate directly in overseas contingency operations and therefore is the only disinterested party in the civilian lessons learned program.

### **The Road Ahead**

History has shown that merely collecting lessons, without integrating those lessons into current and future planning, procedures, and training, defeats learning and destines the U.S. Government to repeat mistakes of the past. The terms of the Iraq and Afghanistan PRT Lessons Learned project provide for a feedback loop into planning and training, and for the feedback to be disseminated as quickly as possible to inform current operations, as well as to plan for future ones. Still the program is a

work in progress, and it will evolve over time with some trial and error as CCO and all participating agencies gain more experience. To be a success, the lessons learned program must be useful to both practitioners in the field and to decisionmakers in Washington.

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There are several challenges that CCO and its interagency partners have not yet tackled. An important feature of the lessons learned program will be to establish an effective reachback capability at all the agencies, as well as a network of subject matter experts, so that practitioners in the field can receive timely information and advice on matters of immediate relevance. Another challenge will be to establish effective lines of communication with nonaugmented maneuver units that have few or no civilians at all present. The PRTs are a relatively small part of all U.S. personnel stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the longer term, it will be critical to establish effective channels to transmit civilian expertise to nonaugmented military units, and vice versa—to transmit information from the maneuver units regarding their “civilian” activities to civilian actors in the field and in Washington. Finally, CCO has just begun to establish contacts with international allies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); in the coming months, it will seek to develop a mechanism for disseminating lessons and best practices to international partners, especially NATO and the UN, as well as to receive

lessons and best practices from them. Similarly, CCO will seek to develop a mechanism for sharing lessons with NGOs as well.

Current national security challenges, especially the counterterrorist and counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, require distinct yet coordinated roles for the U.S. military and civilians and unprecedented cooperation between the two. U.S. policy must respond to changing times through the examination of lessons from actual engagements to inform current and future planning, training, and operations. Successive administrations, from Clinton to Bush to Obama, have defined and redefined this problem in their own words, with incremental differences in policy toward civil-military collaboration, interagency coordination, and unity of effort. So far, despite Presidential and other policy directives and legislation in support of lessons learned, the process has for the most part been stalled at the point of the identification of lessons, without taking the next step of transforming lessons identified into lessons learned.

CCO, working through the BPWG and interested agencies, has developed a process for turning lessons identified into lessons learned and best practices, as well as for disseminating lessons to the field. An interagency analysis group will work with CCO, S/CRS, and BPWG to develop issue papers and to make policy recommendations before the Reconstruction and Stabilization Interagency Policy Committee. At the same time, there is better interagency cooperation and better civil-military cooperation now than at any time in the past two decades. The central coordinating role of S/CRS, active participation of State's regional bureaus, renewed attention to lessons learned, and new policies aimed at increasing cooperation with the military at the U.S. Agency for International Development, as well as the dedicated involvement of several other agencies, all point to a renewed emphasis on lessons learned with increased vigor and intensity. The CCO statutory mandate for the first time provides a permanent home for interagency lessons learned and best practices. These factors all work in favor of developing relevant institutional knowledge at the civilian agencies for complex operations. **PRISM**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> White Paper, "The Clinton Administration's Policy on Managing Complex Contingency Operations: Presidential Decision Directive 56, May 1997."

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2009* (P.L. 110-417), enacted October 14, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., sec. 1607.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., sec. 1031.