

Why Promoting Positive Political Development is So Damn Hard Even When We Agree on What Should be Done

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I. Introduction

The last 20 years have been a searing experience for the US military and foreign policy professionals. They have seen defeat snatched from the jaws of victory multiple times in Iraq and Afghanistan at every level. At the city-level in places like Tal Afar, Fallujah, Nad Ali, and Ramadi. At the provincial-level in Anbar and Ghazni among the others. And, of course, at the national level. Iraq, for example saw steadily rising conflict from early-2004 through mid-2006, experienced a remarkable turnaround by late-2008 thanks to the coincidence of local political changes and adoption of new operational approaches by U.S. and allied forces (Biddle, Friedman, and Shapiro 2012). The country faced political stalemate and the steady marginalization of Sunni political elites from 2010-2013, which contributed to the tragic return to violence in late-2013 as ISIS fighters advanced across the border from Syria, ultimately taking much of Nineva and Anbar provinces with support from some local political organizations.

And we look out today at mediocre strategic outcomes, at least judged against the standards which motivated the wars. By the end of 2019 the United States had spent more than \$2T ([estimates vary](#)) and lost 7,029 KIA in [Afghanistan and Iraq](#). That spending is associated with a [marginally-democratic Iranian-influenced](#) government in Iraq and an Afghan government with uncontested control of [less than half its territory](#). If you had told anyone in late-2003 that such an investment would end in the outcomes we have you would have been laughed out of the room. But that's where we are.

For much of that time there was a rough consensus about what should be done in both Afghanistan and Iraq. That consensus revolved around building partner capacity so that US could draw down its presence in manner that reduced long-run terrorist threat.

Now exactly how those goals were phrased varied a great deal. We went from the kind of grandiose language that President Bush offered in his [2004 Army War College speech](#) when he proclaimed that “The rise of a free and self-governing Iraq would deny terrorists a base of operation, discredit their narrow ideology and give momentum to reformers across the region. This would be a decisive blow to terrorism at the heart of its power, and a victory for the security of America and the civilized world.” To President Obama’s [December 2014 brief statement](#) on the end of the Combat Mission in Afghanistan which acknowledged that “Afghanistan remains a dangerous place, and the Afghan people and their security forces continue to make tremendous sacrifices in defense of their country.” And spoke of the “...enduring commitment of the United States to the Afghan people and to a united, secure and sovereign Afghanistan that is never again

used as a source of attacks against our nation.” But the broadest outlines of the policy have changed very little.

The other thing which has been constant over more than 15 years of the intervention is that policies were rarely executed in the manner those who designed them intended. Aid programs ran slow and often failed to complete planned projects in insecure regions (see e.g. Berman, Felter, and Shapiro 2018, pp. 110-113), and [security force assistance programs struggled](#) to meet their [force generation targets](#). And even when programs were executed as envisioned, they often had [unexpected outcomes](#).

Given all of that, I want to focus on the deep political economy challenges which make it so very hard to do the right thing even when there is consensus on what that thing is. In doing so I will draw on 15 years of studying these kinds of conflicts, including: impact evaluation projects in Afghanistan, Colombia, India, and Pakistan; dozens of research papers with a fantastic group of co-authors and students, many of whom served in these conflicts; hundreds of hours of conversations with folks out there doing the hard yards like Carter, Kael, and Rick; and years of trying to figure out what it all adds up to for my 2018 book with Eli Berman and Joe Felter.

I think about problems that show up again and again as falling into three broad categories:

1. Problems within supported countries;
2. Issues related to supporting country politics; and
3. Challenges created by supporting country budgeting/manning/procurement practices.

I’m not going to talk much about specific programs or evidence on what worked or didn’t in specific cases. Instead, want to focus on why execution is just so damn hard. You should think of these as lessons learned on the side while doing traditional research.

II. Problems within supported countries

A number of problems within supported countries show up again and again in efforts to support positive political development.

The most obvious such problem is that entrenched political divides aren’t solved by foreign presence/support. This is clear in the broad trajectory of Iraqi politics from 2009 through the present, where Shiite and Kurdish leaders have consistently avoided the kinds of compromises that might address Sunni concerns for the long-term. But it also shows up at the local level. As [Carter](#) and [Kael](#) demonstrate to great effect in their books, it is almost impossible for outsiders to shape local political bargains in an enduring way, nor often to even anticipate how their actions will reverberate through complex chains of relationships. The skills required to do so are rare, and not particularly scalable.

Understanding such problems the U.S. Army sought to bring “[sociocultural knowledge](#)” to deployed units in Afghanistan and Iraq from 2006-14 by hiring civilian experts for the Human Terrain System. In addition to facing significant criticism from academic social scientists, the program [provided highly varying levels of talent](#) and went through almost [continuous reforms](#) throughout its lifespan. While some [commanders found value in the program](#), it was ultimately

terminated in 2014. The history of HTS suggests it is unrealistic to expect military units supporting nation building to avoid falling afoul of local politics.

And, of course, major interventions have a storied history of creating dangerous unanticipated conditions. This should not be a surprise, as [James C. Scott](#) noted long ago, there are deep epistemological reasons why it is almost impossible to anticipate the net impact of large-scale programs. A clear example of this, one which plagued U.S. and NATO efforts in Southern Afghanistan, is the long-running series of land conflicts created by the Helmand River Valley Project. As Rajiv Chandrasekaran wonderfully documents in *Little America*, by bringing unsustainable irrigation to the region the project first attracted large numbers of migrants, then set them up for conflict with long-standing residents as irrigation gradually salinated the soil and agricultural productivity dropped precipitously. We see variants on this theme at a smaller scale in any of the hundreds of stories aid professionals who have worked in conflict zones share about well-intentioned projects that disrupt long-standing local political bargains (see e.g. Fishstein and Wilder 2012, Zürcher 2017, Zürcher 2019).

A slightly different issue is the one David and Eli study in *Proxy Wars*. The core dynamic at play in that book is that supported country politicians always have their own agendas when it comes to security threats, agendas which rarely overlap fully with outside powers. This is a problem. Policy solutions to poor governance have historically focused on providing capacity at the national level. But such capacity is often directed at external enemies, or used to consolidate control in areas of key interest to the state, rather than being used to extend control over peripheral areas which create the externalities that trouble outside powers. And, of course, even when resources provided to fight shared enemies are used for that purposes, supported countries often shift resources they had been directing against the shared threat to focus on other matters, leaving the overall effort fixed even as aid flows in.

There, of course, two shining successes in which external powers overcame supported country politics to support positive long-term political development: post-WWII Germany and Japan. But success in these cases was enabled by conditions unlikely to be repeated in the modern era. In Germany the scale of the loss was hard to imagine. The country had a minimum of 4.3M combat casualties from a pre-war male population of approx. 27M men who would be at least 15 by the end of the war, almost 20%. And even with that scale of loss the occupying powers had to let most of the pre-war elite back into prominent positions within a few years to prevent the political project from stalling out. In Japan there was deep cooperation by the defeated state and a similar human toll from the war.

III. Issues related to supporting country politics

The key challenge from supporting country politics when it comes to promoting positive political development is that it can be hard to sustain political support for helping over the long-term. This is something of a truism, but it's worth thinking a bit harder about why it's the case.

My view is that it is almost always hard to know what will work in any given circumstance, and some of the we think will help do not do so, at least not in intuitive ways. Sometimes this is because policy choices are wrong or counterproductive. But often it is simply inherent in

execution. When interveners have a program or approach that works, they tend to do more of it in the hard places. And that will almost always make it look bad to the casual observer.

Here I want to use an example we talk about at length in *Small Wars, Big Data*, the Local Governance and Community Development (LGCD) program in Afghanistan. LGCD was one of USAID’s flagship programs in Afghanistan from 2006 through 2011. Its goal was to stabilize communities by training and supplying local officials and to fund small infrastructure projects that would employ community members. LGCD paid men to dig irrigation canals, build footbridges, and shovel snow to clear paths to markets and health centers. The intent was to help the Afghan central government “extend its reach into remote districts, encourage local communities to take an active role in their own development, and create incentives for stability in critical border provinces”—which would keep communities from sliding back under Taliban influence. By program’s end, LGCD had spent \$109 million on community-stabilization Projects. But in every fighting season since the program began violence in LGCD districts was higher than in other districts with insurgent violence.

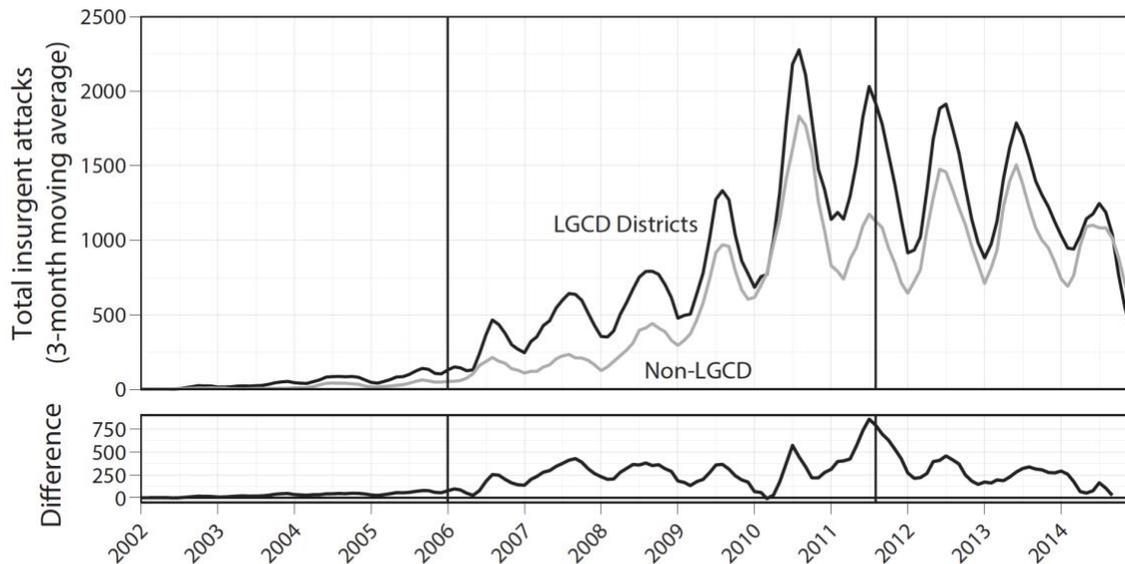


FIGURE 8.1. Trends in conflict in Afghanistan, LGCD versus non-LGCD districts, before, during, and after LGCD country-wide operational period.

Average insurgent attacks per district, January 2002–December 2014. Vertical bars denote start and end dates of LGCD spending. Attack data from ISAF Combined Information Data Network Exchange (CIDNE). LGCD districts identified in USAID program documents.

Now we don’t know if that’s because LGCD made things worse, or because it went to the harder places. I personally suspect the latter, but we don’t know. What this example highlights is the almost-intractable problem for any government seeking to justify spending on political development through localized programs (which are the only kind the evidence base suggests clearly can help improve stability). If the operators on the ground believe the program will work, they will do more of it in places where the problem is bigger. It will then almost surely appear to

the casual observer that the money is being wasted, because it's hard for any program to do so much good that it fully overcomes the selection process.

And this in turn means that the more one does to support a foreign government's political development, the more opportunities the political opposition gets to make you look bad. That dynamic means it will almost always be hard to maintain bipartisan consensus, and thus hard to sustain large-scale interventions over the time span required to build durable security and political order.

IV. Challenges created by supporting country staffing and procurement practices.

Challenges arising from the practical exigencies of executing programs are, in my view, the most underappreciated barrier to state building. These kinds of problems kept coming up on the sidelines of different research projects, and so I want to identify three big ones:

- (1) Civilian staffing.
- (2) Understanding novel dependencies.
- (3) Procurement in conflict.

Staffing the civilian side of efforts to support political development was a serious challenge throughout the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This first became apparent in the case of the Coalition Provisional Authority, which took over Iraq in June 2003, shortly after U.S. invasion, and governed through June 2004. The CPA suffered from a dearth of qualified personnel, as both [popular histories](#) and [sober academic accounts](#) so nicely document. While well-staffed at senior levels, there was a "...persistent inability to fill more than half the mid-level and junior positions in the CPA and these seldom for more than three to six months at a time" (Dobbins et. al. 2009, p. xvi), which hindered execution of even well-designed initiatives.

This was not an administration-specific problem. The Obama administration's 2009 "civilian surge" in Afghanistan also failed to meet its staffing challenges. The backstory is that when the Obama administration decided to send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan in late-2009 it also committed to add nearly 3,000 U.S. government civilians to the 714 already stationed in the country. This whole-of-government "civilian surge" was considered a critical component of the counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy and was a White House priority. The State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) were tasked with identifying, managing, and, where necessary hiring, the extra civilians. The effort did not meet expectations.

The reasons why are instructive, because they illustrate what I believe to be a broader principle: the fine details of bureaucracy tuned to steady-state peacetime functions will almost always stymie policy implementation in conflict zones. In the case of the Obama administration's Afghanistan policy, leaders chose a strategy under the incorrect assumption that the human resources would be available to execute it, or at least that was how it was discussed.

So what went wrong? Well we know some of the answer because a group of seven mid-career students at the Wilson School began a project in Fall 2015 study the civilian surge for the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) (Erickson et. al. 2016). They conducted a detailed review of decision making and staffing procedures in 2009-11 and

conducted more than 50 interviews with people who had been part of the process. The students found that recruiting people to fill the new positions was not easy. The Foreign Service was already overstretch going into the effort because of prior hiring freezes and could not compel mid-year deployments under existing staffing rules (which they chose not to change). The government contractor workforce could not be tapped for many of the needed positions (for both legal reasons and because it was already stretched thin). And Congressionally approved temporary hiring authorities encountered subtle issues around pay and recruiting.

Pay issues rose to the fore when it came to former government employees with relevant expertise. State and USAID both had many alumnus with the skills needed to staff the civilian surge. And FSOs at State and USAID can be reactivated on a limited basis after retirement as When Actually Employed hires (WAEs). But, a WAE cannot earn more than the difference between their retirement pay and their salary at separation. To stay beneath that salary cap many WAEs worked limited hours to keep their time at four to five months, despite being hired into full-time positions.

Recruiting was the key problem for another category of temporary hires, the so-called “3161” hires who could be brought in to fill positions on a ‘not-to-exceed five years’ basis. The program recruited some excellent people, Carter among them, but because there was no path to a long-term government career there was a serious selection problem. For every patriotically-motivated area expert there were many people who lacked the qualifications to enter the foreign service through normal pathways.

The underlying reasons that the pay and recruiting challenges were so damaging are simple: (1) civilian agencies of the United States government do not maintain a standing reserve capacity, as the military does, and (2) the skills required to support political development missions are not in high demand outside the government. Together, these meant that when the United States needed an additional 3,000 qualified individuals to support the mission in Afghanistan, the people simply were not there.

The experience of the Civilian Surge is very specific, but it illustrates the second inherent barrier to promoting positive political developments; the difficulties of understanding and planning around novel dependencies. When the U.S. government decided that its strategy required massively increasing the civilian workforce in Afghanistan, it was deciding to make a change with no obvious analogue in recent memory. The closest analogue was the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, but its challenges had largely been written off to a lack of planning.¹

Discussions of the civilian portion of the effort among senior National Security Council officials appear to have been divorced from the mundane details. I could not find evidence in the various memoirs of those involved in the Afghanistan Policy Review that anyone raised the question of whether the foreign service could effectively staff the effort without fundamental reforms. Similar questions were asked on the military side, perhaps because the military has sufficient planning resource to attend to the details and was able to answer in the affirmative. Not asking the question on the civilian side had real consequences. Because the quality and qualifications of

¹ For nuanced views of the situation in Iraq and challenges created by poor planning vs. other factors see [Byman 2008](#) and [Dobbins et. al. 2009](#).

temporary hires varied tremendously, and because frequent leaves and turnover of Foreign Service Officers in the middle of the summer fighting season harmed continuity at all levels, key assumptions underlying the administration's plan were not met.

Finally, challenges around procurement loom large and exacerbate the political challenges I mentioned earlier from selection bias. When it comes to buying the kinds of services needed to execute state-building projects, a number of smart folks have written about the tyranny of the annual budget cycle and how that creates a range of challenges for program execution. I want to raise a subtler issue, the fact that acquisition rules built for peace-time domestic procurement in state-building missions all but guarantees the appearance of waste, fraud, and abuse.

Hundreds of audit reports by the [Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction](#) and [Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction](#) highlight the many sources of illicit profits from programs run in insecure areas: local sub-contractors not easily subject to U.S. law deceive US-based primes on everything from amounts delivered to the quality of materials, payments go astray in corrupt banks, local construction firms collude with inspectors to get paid for sub-standard work, and security contractors pay taxes to insurgents. Some smaller-scale programs are able to get around these issues, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives, for example, has somewhat different procurement authorities that have allowed it to run programs in challenging environments such as Pakistan's Tribal Agencies in the 2010s with few issues. But OTI is the exception, rather than the rule.

And while one might reasonably consider some level of inefficiency the costs of doing business in a war zone, no inspector general can do so. There are implicit 'but-it's-a-war-zone' excuses in the Federal Acquisition Regulation (e.g. [Part 16.104](#) which gives a list of factors for selecting contract type, including "performance uncertainties"), but they are limited, require savvy choices when setting up initial contracts, and cannot cover outright fraud. Absent major acquisition reform, a significant share of projects in any large state-building effort will look terrible and violate procurement rules, with repercussions for political support similar to those of the selection bias discussed above.

V. Conclusion

So where does this leave us?

Some kinds of outside action can clearly help, at least locally. While reviewing more than 60 papers using micro-data on conflict for *Small Wars, Big Data* I convinced myself that the claim Joe, Eli, and I made in 2013 based largely on data from Iraq was essentially correct: modest, secure, and informed local aid projects by outsiders combined with discriminate military force can help restore government control in a given location. But, as the last 15 years have made absolutely clear, the route from winning villages and valleys to winning wars is long and circuitous. And while US now knows how to help our allies with the former, we have much less ability to do the latter.

Which pushes me into emphatic agreement with Carter on two principles:

1. Keep it small, that's what evidence suggests works locally and it's what the US government can staff and procure without creating negative externalities; and
2. Prepare to be there for a long time.

Side note on what to make of strategic failures²

We should be careful about conflating strategic failure with tactical failure. Doing so mixes up two questions: (1) Is it realistic to ask our military to help a foreign ally control some territory that the ally does not seem very interested in (e.g., southeastern Afghanistan); and (2) Given that civilian officials ask the military to help a foreign ally control some territory, what are the best tactics to use?

The evidence on the first question suggests that it is neither realistic nor productive to try to induce weak states to use force to establish exclusive control of ungoverned spaces. Militant groups often metamorphose into more moderate parties, and sometimes they are defeated—but only by governments that are willing to invest in controlling the entirety of their territory. The source of the strategic failure in these cases is not in the tactics used in the fight, but the lack of will on the part of the supported ally, as Eli and David have written about extensively.

For the second question, failures with respect to country-level outcomes are not really relevant. What matters is which tactical approaches obtain more or less stability on the margin within ongoing conflicts. On this point, the evidence points toward counterinsurgency as defined in doctrine as being relatively efficacious—though still inherently limited by the lack of host-nation effort in many places.

The fact that the answer to the first question is negative in Afghanistan and Iraq does not imply that counterinsurgency as an approach to irregular warfare is bankrupt. It just means it has been applied in places that were better left alone, regardless of the tactics employed.

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² Paraphrased from *Small Wars, Big Data* and informed by *Proxy Wars*.

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