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Strategic Insights: Unlearned Lessons and the Dual-System Problem

January 25, 2017 | Dr. Robert D. Lamb

In early 2003, the Association of the U.S. Army and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) released the final report from their joint, blue ribbon Commission on Post-Conflict Reconstruction (PCR) that had completed its year-long study in 2002.¹ The PCR Commission had extracted lessons from U.S. and international stabilization, reconstruction, and transition efforts over the previous decade and distilled them into a framework intended to inform such efforts in the future. The United States did not have long to wait to put those lessons into practice; it entered Iraq just 2 months later.

Fast-forward to 2013, a full decade after the PCR Commission report and the start of the U.S. intervention in Iraq. The Special Inspector General for Iraqi Reconstruction (SIGIR) was set to release his final “lessons” report to the public.² At the time, I was director of the CSIS program that the PCR Commission had stood up at the end of its tenure, and the SIGIR asked me to host the report launch at CSIS.³

Lessons are intended to be learned. When they are identified and published in a “lessons learned” report or distilled into a “best practices” guide, that report is supposed to be another way of saying: “We did these things wrong last time. Let’s not repeat these mistakes next time.” The SIGIR’s report on lessons learned in Iraq from 2003 to 2013 contained seven top-level lessons intended to communicate exactly that: “We did these things wrong in Iraq. Let’s not repeat them next time.”

But here is the problem: six of the SIGIR’s seven lessons had also appeared in the PCR Commission report a decade earlier—just before the United States went into Iraq in the first place. The one lesson the SIGIR included that the PCR had not: “learn from mistakes.”

In 2015, the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), U.S. Army War College, published M. Chris Mason’s monograph, *Strategic Lessons Unlearned from Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan*, identifying reasons for the failures in those and other conflicts—namely, that political leaders who want to go to war will find a way to go to war, even over the objections and evidence of experts regarding the strategic impossibility of their leaders’ nation-creating, state-building, or democracy-promoting objectives.⁴ That same year, the National Defense University published Richard Hooker and Joseph Collins’ edited volume, *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, which can be read as a plea for military leaders to learn that same lesson and press harder against civilian leaders who insist on starting or fighting unwinnable wars.⁵

“We did these things wrong in the 1990s, so let’s not repeat them in Iraq” might as well have been, “We did these things wrong in Vietnam and these other things wrong in the 1990s, so let’s not repeat them in Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.” And yet, the mistakes keep getting repeated.

To find out why, during my last year at CSIS I assigned my research assistant, Kathryn Mixon, to review lessons-learned studies published as far back as we could find. We identified 15 top-level lessons that made disturbingly regular appearances across stages, types, and locations of

conflict; a wide range of stabilization, reconstruction, political transition, and peacekeeping efforts led by the United States and multilateral institutions; and international development efforts taking place in a number of conflict and post-conflict environments. We looked not only at content produced by private research centers like CSIS and the Stimson Center, but from U.S. Government entities such as the SIGIR and SSI, the rationales underlying presidential directives and national security strategies, military doctrine updates, high-level forums on development, and multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The top-level lessons we identified as common themes in that review were:

1. Adapt as conditions change;
2. Coordinate planning;
3. Coordinate policy domestically;
4. Coordinate with other donors;
5. Decentralize implementation;
6. Demand results;
7. Develop the local private sector;
8. Follow the host country's lead;
9. Foster self-sufficiency;
10. Learn from experience;
11. Make realistic promises;
12. Measure progress;
13. Protect communities;
14. Respect local systems; and,
15. Set feasible goals.

Because it was an unfunded and informal study, we never published the results, although they did form the basis of a few talks and my last keynote address at CSIS in October 2014.⁶ As I pointed out in that talk, many of the observations made in, say, the OECD's development cooperation report in 1996, the international donor community's Paris Declaration of 2005, and the Accra Agenda for Action in 2007 would have sounded entirely familiar to readers of the World Bank's Pearson Commission report in 1969⁷—and even to readers of the following quotes in a different World Bank report:

To raise hopes of a spectacular transformation may only invite disillusionment and failure. . . . Development is necessarily a gradual process.⁸

No amount of aid, technical or financial, can replace the essential will and determination . . . of the country concerned.⁹

Strong vested interests often resist any changes which would alter their position. . . . The problem of making necessary adjustments in traditional social relationship without destroying the stability essential for development is one which requires exceptional understanding and leadership.¹⁰

These quotes are from the World Bank's fourth annual report—published in 1949. In our reading, that 67-year-old report contained a full two-thirds of the 15 lessons listed above.

Any organization that makes the same set of mistakes over and over for nearly 7 decades is not a learning organization. In addition, it seems there are a lot of such organizations involved in stabilization, reconstruction, and development work.

To be fair, it's not as if these organizations have learned nothing. There have been real improvements over the past decade in, for example, civil-military cooperation, interagency coordination, and a recognition of the importance of understanding local politics and local systems. Civilian and military institutions have also contributed to important successes, albeit mainly at the sector and community levels, that have been a result of policy and operational learning. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that these 15 themes are not necessarily lessons that should be applied to all contexts, and they certainly are not the only lessons that need to be learned, especially as conflicts continue to change qualitatively.

However, the stability of these 15 top-level lessons over two-thirds of a century suggests there are systemic impediments to effective policy in fragile and conflict environments—and those impediments are not just in those environments themselves, but in our own agencies and societies as well.

So what are those impediments? I've asked hundreds of experts and policy professionals this very question over the years, and everyone, it seems, has their own pet theory: incompetence and stubbornness of political leaders, lack of knowledge about best practices, competing and perverse incentives at all levels, too little money, too much money, too short rotations, and on and on.

Despite the fact that these are views held, in some cases, by social scientists, most of these hypotheses have never been tested systematically. They should be.

In that 2014 talk, I identified 24 sets of hypotheses for why mistakes keep being repeated, categorizing them by knowledge, culture, incentives, and processes. When there are so many hypotheses to explain a set of outcomes—and when so many of them seem reasonable—that is a fairly good indicator that a complex system is present.

It is already widely acknowledged that conflicts can be understood as complex systems, in the scientific sense of having too many interdependencies, feedback loops, and causal delays for anyone to be able to reliably predict what immediate, second-order, and higher-order effects any particular conflict inputs (such as weapons, money, troops, diplomatic pressure, etc.) will have on conflict outcomes (such as casualties, control of territory, legitimacy, etc.). In addition, the complexity, and therefore unpredictability, of conflicts has been growing for years.

It is less widely understood that our own policy processes—expert recommendations, policy decisions, operational plans, regulations, budgets, laws, evaluations, lessons learned, etc.—also add up to a complex system. The recommendations and decisions that go into a policy are the inputs into that system, and because the policy system is complex, there is no guarantee that the actions taken by implementing agencies and partners will resemble what had actually been recommended or decided in the first place.

In a recent publication, I referred to this as the “dual-system problem”—the challenge that between policy decisions and conflict outcomes there is not one but two complex systems, the policy system and the conflict system.¹¹ Policy-system inputs (recommendations and decisions) are turned into policy system outputs (goods and actions) in unpredictable ways. Policy-system outputs are intended to be conflict-system inputs. However, conflict-system inputs are turned into conflict-system outputs in unpredictable ways as well.

Sound complicated? It gets worse. The U.S. policy system is embedded in the international system, in which every other participant has their own complex policy system generating inputs into any given conflict system.

This not only explains unintended conflict outcomes, but also unintended policy outcomes—such as why recommendations based on “lessons learned” keep getting made but not institutionalized: they disappear into a black box, and nobody has ever studied the policy system as a complex system to find the sources of “policy resistance” to institutionalizing lessons learned.

Happily, there are established methods for studying policy resistance. For example, I’m collaborating on a study with some top-notch system-dynamics modelers to find sources of policy resistance to flexible civilian contingency funding, expected to be completed in 2017.¹² However, there are other methods for studying policy resistance as well, and they can be applied to any of the hypothesized impediments mentioned earlier: if contracting officers are risk-averse, we can find out why and look for ways to change it; if personnel offices have management philosophies that fail to reward regional expertise and long rotations, we can find out why and look for ways to change it; if political leaders mistrust certain types of recommendations, we can find out why and look for ways to change it.

But if we don’t bother to study sources of policy resistance within our own policy systems at least as systematically as we study paths to victory in foreign conflicts and political factors in stabilization and reconstruction in foreign countries, then we are doomed to continue repeating the same mistakes for another 65 years. A political system is weakest when it refuses to learn the mistakes of the past; American democracy is strongest when it heeds the knowledge held, and sometimes hidden, within its own people and institutions.

ENDNOTES

1. *Play to Win: Final Report of the bi-partisan Commission on Post-Conflict Reconstruction*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the Association of the U.S. Army, January 2003.

2. *Learning from Iraq: A Final Report from the Special Inspector General for Iraqi Reconstruction*, Washington, DC: Special Inspector General for Iraqi Reconstruction, March 2013.

3. The Post-Conflict Reconstruction (PCR) Commission was founded in 2001, and completed its work in 2002, when it stood up the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project at CSIS to carry on its work; the PCR Project was renamed the Program on Crisis, Conflict, and Cooperation in 2010, and I became its director the following year.

4. M. Chris Mason, *The Strategic Lessons Unlearned from Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan: Why the ANSF Will Not Hold, and the Implications for the U.S. Army in Afghanistan*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2015.

5. Richard D. Hooker, Jr. and Joseph J. Collins, eds., *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015.

6. Robert D. Lamb, “How Will We Learn?” Keynote Speech, *Advances and Challenges in Political Transitions*, Washington, DC, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Conference, October 21, 2014, available from rdlamb.com.

7. *Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Cooperation*, Paris, FR: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), May 1996; “Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness: Ownership, Harmonization, Alignment, Results, and Mutual Accountability,” Organization for Economic

Cooperation and Development (OECD), March 2005; "Accra Agenda for Action," Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), September 2008; Partners in Development: Final Report of the World Bank Commission on International Development, Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1969.

8. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), *Fourth Annual Report to the Board of Governors, 1948-1949*, Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1949.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. Robert D. Lamb and Melissa R. Gregg, "Preparing for Complex Conflicts," *Policy Brief*, No. 7, October 2016, Fragility Study Group, available from rdlamb.com.

12. Nancy K. Hayden, Leonard A. Malczynski, and Robert D. Lamb, forthcoming.

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