

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 46
Number 3 *Parameters Autumn 2016*

Article 12

Fall 9-1-2016

Commentary and Reply

USAWC Press

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Recommended Citation

USAWC Press, "Commentary and Reply," *Parameters* 46, no. 3 (2016), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2758.

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Commentary and Reply

On “The ‘Practice’ Problem: Peacebuilding and Doctrine”

Raymond D. “Boz” Bossert Jr.

This commentary responds to Christopher H. Tuck’s article “The ‘Practice’ Problem: Peacebuilding and Doctrine” published in the Summer 2016 issue of Parameters (vol. 46, no. 2).

Dr. Tuck’s article highlights several challenges inherent in defense support of stabilizing weak and failed states. Unfortunately, the article fails to offer solutions to improve these efforts or future planning. Not only is Tuck reluctant to identify and address planning dilemmas, but his definition of stability operations encompasses three seemingly interchangeable meanings: nation-building, state-building, and peacebuilding. This usage creates a problem. The terms used in his article are not interchangeable and mean different things, at least they should. Nation-building refers to constructing a national identity using the power of the state. State-building influences the security, political, and economic dimensions. Peacebuilding denotes actions that identify and support structures that strengthen and solidify peace to prevent relapse into conflict. Thus, the three terms are not synonymous.

Over the past two decades, state-building, the focus of this argument, has become a specific stabilization approach of the international community. Internationally-led state-building has three dimensions: security, politics, and economics. Of these, security—creating a safe and secure environment to make comprehensive political and economic development possible—is almost always considered the first priority.¹ The security aspect is inherently a military and police function requiring some form of doctrine or handbook contrary to the assertions previously presented.

Tuck’s “planning school” discussion assumes the stabilization approach is inherently defective. Having been personally involved in updating our current Joint and Army doctrine on stability operations, I can guarantee that we do not create cut-and-paste approaches to how the United States should conduct stabilization tasks and I welcome Tuck’s thoughts on improving the process.² Stability operations are the current that flows throughout our engagement in another state; they are neither upstream nor downstream of other actions or decisions, but constant.

Tuck notes President Obama’s position: “American isolationism is not an option. . . . But a strategy that involves invading every country

1 Anders Persson, “Building a State or Maintaining the Occupation? International Support for Fayyad’s State-Building Project,” *Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security* 2, no. 1 (April 2012): 101–19.

2 Headquarters, US Department of the Army, (HQDA) *Stability*, Field Manual 3-07, (Washington, DC: HQDA, June 2014).

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that harbors terrorist networks is naive and unsustainable.”³ Thus, America should focus on building the capacity of local partners. In fact, building partner capacity is already a key, albeit challenging, part of stability operations, which seek to build effective and accountable public institutions, including those in the security sector.

In regards to Tuck’s thoughts on building democratic states, I agree with his analysis and examples; however, he fails to provide historical examples of success or offer solutions. Would he grant that planning can entail a dynamic, flexible, and open-minded approach to how we engage in stabilization rather than a closed, ethnocentric, and otherwise biased one? Good planning should drive stabilization practitioners to be more sensitive and aware of the myriad issues that confront a fragile state, and thus understand those issues even if they contradict the values of the countries contributing to security efforts.

While Tuck’s article highlights many key dilemmas and issues worthy of expanded treatment, ultimate success is a result of learned experiences, for better or worse, that help us innovate our practices. Many of our military and interagency partners have been struggling with stabilization missions for decades, but progress has been made. Dynamic senior leadership—characterized by accepting risk, respecting local customs and cultures, emphasizing change over time, and engaging in stability early, often, and always, as well as preventing one-size-fits-all or Western approaches to every situation—will strengthen future missions. The willingness of the intervening nation’s government and populace, host-nation “buy-in,” and an understanding that the mission will take time to be successful are also required.

The Author Replies

Christopher H. Tuck

I would like to thank COL Bossert for his thoughtful comments on my article “The ‘Practice’ Problem: Peacebuilding and Doctrine.” In the context of such crises as those in Syria, the topic of peacebuilding is one that merits continued reflection and debate.

Bossert’s critique revolves around three related themes: that I have implied that planning for peacebuilding operations is pointless; that I am, in effect, advocating isolationism; and that my article does not provide planning solutions to the problems it identifies. Let me take these points in order.

On the first issue, it is important to understand I am not criticizing the military for preparing as best it can for peacebuilding operations. Indeed, while peacebuilding may be out of fashion, there is no guarantee the military will not again be tasked by governments to conduct such operations. Military organizations have no choice but to prepare for

3 US President Barack Obama, “Remarks” (speech, United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony, West Point, NY, May 28, 2014), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony>.

these activities. Nor, do I say in my article the military only “cuts and pastes” its approaches.

But I ask whether success in peacebuilding activities is “simply a matter of getting the right principles and honing tactical and operational methods.” My answer is we cannot assume the processes of producing a better doctrine actually will improve outcomes for peacebuilding operations because there is no wider consensus on whether or how these operations should be conducted. This position is an expression of the wider distinction between tactical and operational excellence on the one hand and strategic performance on the other. We simply do not know objectively if successful peacebuilding is possible, or whether top-down liberal approaches are the right means to achieve it. It may be that no amount of tactical military acumen will bring success.

So, to answer Bossert’s question, yes; I would “grant that planning can entail a dynamic, flexible, and open-minded approach to how we engage in stabilization rather than a closed, ethnocentric, biased one.” I would hope the former would be the preferred choice, but the point of my article is that even it may ultimately make no difference to the overall outcome. If peacebuilding cannot be done, good doctrine may simply mask failure longer. On that basis, I would probably disagree with Bossert that “ultimate success is a result of learned experiences—for better or for worse—that help us innovate our practices.” Leaving aside the practical and conceptual problems surrounding the notion of learning lessons, if Bossert’s statement were true, our prior accumulation of experience would have led us to much more success in peacebuilding than we have recently experienced.

On the second theme, given my skepticism, Bossert notes my argument implies an isolationist stance. Actually, my article does not argue for isolation; rather it says we should expect less from peacebuilding operations, and future performance in such operations is unlikely to improve radically. To argue peacebuilding is likely to remain highly problematic is not to argue that it cannot be used.

The final critique is I do not provide a set of recommendations for military practitioners. This is entirely true and for an organization focused on producing doctrine for stability operations, would indeed be a frustrating and possibly alienating outcome. But this criticism misinterprets the purpose of my article. Explicitly, my article says “there is no consensus on the practice of complex nation-building” and “the difficulties derive from fundamental uncertainties about whether such operations can be done at all.” To put it another way, my article does not provide answers because it sets out to show that we cannot even agree on the questions.

