



## We Did Mean Well

Peter Van Buren's account of the foibles of the Iraq PRTs doesn't tell the whole story.

BY STEPHEN DONNELLY | OCTOBER 5, 2011



I was surprised to see **Foreign Policy** providing so high a **soapbox** for **Peter Van Buren**, a U.S. State Department Foreign Service officer who, by his own admission, "**meant well**" during his brief and unproductive jaunt as a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) leader in Iraq in 2009, but, according to him, caused more damage there than most any other individual I have ever heard of or witnessed.

**Two articles** and a **blog spotlight** in just a few days!

Obviously, Van Buren never got the drift of PRTs, a decisive and controversial 2007 effort by the State Department's Office of Provincial Affairs' director, Henry Clarke, to break through the failed bureaucracy of top-down U.S. colonial administration programs by forcing decision-making out to committed civilian reconstruction staff on the ground. Clarke always knew that the Achilles' heel of PRTs was poor assignments of unqualified individuals and that the only defense against the Peter Van Burens was to have many PRTs so that the failures did not pull down the whole mission.

The real Iraq PRT story is not pretty, is fraught with bureaucratic snafus, and involved much waste, fraud, abuse and war wreckage. The best laid plans of mice and men seldom survive a powerful IED, regardless of bravery or the best of intentions! But it is not the story that Van Buren tells, which inaccurately paints a very bad light on the entire Foreign Service, with which he seems very dissatisfied.

The military, as Clarke often explained, had a "do it now" attitude that compelled each new brigade to launch one "quick hit" program after another to have Iraqis pick up the trash. The PRTs had to break that mold by focusing on the real problem: The Iraqis had no system, post-2003, to pick up their own trash. PRTs had to work across the rotational boundary with Iraqi counterparties, down to the local and provincial levels, to create permanent solutions for Iraqis' technical, resource, and administrative problems, or we would be locked in Iraq forever. The real conflict was the damaging one between U.S. bureaucracy (the embassy and agencies) and the field, where localized Iraqi solutions had to be found and nourished.

Clarke's effort echoed the philosophy of former Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) colleague Ronald Neumann, who later served as U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, that endless weekly metrics reporting -- the underpinning of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's managerial philosophy -- always showed the same problems and never solved anything, and that absent a new approach, the only way to improve the metrics was to manipulate them or fudge the reports.

Of course, none of that was PC for Rumsfeld, who, according to **Pentagon documents** released after a Freedom of Information Act request from the *New York Times*, opined:

The guy who replaced him is just terrible Neuman [sic]. I mean he's a career foreign service officer. He ought to be running a museum somewhere. That's also off the record. No, he ought to be assistant to the guy.... I wouldn't hire the guy to push a wheelbarrow.

Rumsfeld added that the Pentagon working with other agencies "was like an elephant talking to a monkey," acknowledging who really controlled the power, staffing, and budgets in Iraq, and the interagency conflicts that defined much of the Iraq and Afghan debacles.

Even within the State Department, the PRT concept in 2007 directly confronted policy-planning director Stephen D. Krasner, a leading advocate for nation-building who deeply believed in the concept of almost permanent American neocolonialism as the answer to failed states -- the implicit CPA strategy outlined in a March 2008 *Harvard International Review* article "**Fixing Failed States: A Cure Worse Than the Disease?**"

Bringing in actual senior civilian advisors -- the opposite of the tried-and-true "whole of government" strategy in which any federal employee (from the Internal Revenue Service? Department of Homeland Security?) could do a better job running a water-treatment-plant reconstruction than any experienced public-works engineer -- threatened to open even more institutional Pandora's boxes, especially if many of those civilians saw local power grabs and influence pressures as something routine to their field (the regular problem to be overcome) rather than as unique proof of the corruption and incompetence of the colonials in need of intense and enduring U.S.

oversight.

Decentralization of decision-making and civilian engagement, the big "new ideas," were the essential keys to Provincial Reconstruction Teams -- getting civilians (not military or federal assignees) out on the ground to figure out what was wrong and what was needed, to deliver it with the mantra of empowering Iraqis to do things for themselves, and to rapidly work the U.S. (military) out of the job of micromanaging Iraq from Washington through short-term assignees.

The risks of decentralization, especially with civilians at the tip of the spear in dangerous, unstable, and corrupt environments, were many, as Clarke knew from Bosnia, but were the only way to escape the devil we already knew.

One risk that Clarke was abundantly aware of in 2007 was that a provincial team leader, always a Foreign Service officer, might be inept, whether at the larger provincial-level teams, with as many as 100 experts and security and support staff, or in the smaller embedded teams of a dozen or fewer members attached to military units. That risk, of course, could only be offset by the number of PRTs (one in each province), their independence of action, and the rolling assignment process (if one failed, it would not affect the others and could be corrected by reassignment). More important for Clarke and his team, now back from Baghdad to oversee recruitment, was the selection process. Getting the right team leaders and advisors on the ground in 2008 was the key, while recognizing that some might not actually pan out and that some civilians, arriving in the chaos, might just go home (as some did).

Although not nearly as entertaining as Van Buren's work, another book, *Career Diplomacy: Life and Work in the US Foreign Service*, by Harry W. Kopp and Charles A. Gillespie, seriously explains the challenges faced by Clarke and the State Department in responding to the Iraq mission, not the least of which was the sheer lack of numbers in the State Department (trained or untrained) to fill the postings needed without harm to the State Department's overall operating environment.

In December 2007, prior to my deployment as senior civilian urban-planning advisor, I sat in the coffee shop at Foggy Bottom with the ambassador and a group of former staff from the Office of Provincial Affairs and the Iraq Reconstruction Management Office. They made no bones about the mess I would find on the ground there or the need to steel myself from the "this is the way we do it" bunch. If our small handful of senior civilian advisors was not fired up every day with serious problem-solving (much of the problems being U.S. ones), then it was time to move to the next batch of problems.

It was the same message Clarke had given earlier to my whole Foreign Service Institute class in Alexandria, Virginia, but with details for my particular assignment to join Steven Buckler's PRT operating out of Tikrit. The class was a dozen Foreign Service officers (all volunteers and no "weenies" among them) and a dozen senior civilians, all past military age but fit and ready to do what was necessary. None in our civilian cohort was a federal employee, except one from the Federal Highway Administration, the only woman in our 50-something

group, and a very brave and particularly competent one bound for the Transportation Department's advisory mission to Iraq's Transportation Ministry. The rest of us were all headed for northern Iraq, giving up the safety of civilian jobs as city managers, transportation engineers, utility managers, and planners in Miami Beach, Anaheim, Kansas City, and Crofton, Maryland, for the dangerous sojourn to Mosul, Diyala province, Kirkuk, and Tikrit without any knowledge about hardship pay premiums or vacation schedules.

All of us had called the State Department in May 2007, as the war raged, after a *Washington Post* article indicating that Ambassador Ryan Crocker (and Clarke as we learned later) needed experienced senior civilians; the job descriptions and pay scales were created afterward. Surprisingly, from this national pool, many of us knew or knew of each other, having worked as senior staff on related projects or for the same employers. My transportation-engineering partner and I knew each other's portfolio, and Diyala's senior economic advisor (our provincial next-door neighbor for this assignment) and I had shared the same Gulf Coast employer at different periods of time.

As explained by Clarke, the plan was simple: Each of us had been picked because of our backgrounds and skills as problem-solvers in our respective fields; they would teach us what we needed to deploy and then deliver us to the problems. From there, we were on our own, so learn as much as you can beforehand.

The Foreign Service Institute course we attended in the fall of 2007 brought the likes of Phebe Marr, author of *The Modern History of Iraq*, who provided us with detailed briefings on the past and present of what we needed to know (and the obvious reading assignment of her book), and a military colonel to teach us (mostly veterans) the basics of current military structure, protocol, and procedures. The two Arabic speakers in our group supplemented our digital and classroom language course (though mostly with just the idioms and cuss words that make a language real).

Beyond the classroom, we learned the basics of war-zone first aid and how to use a tourniquet and all the other parts of the field kits we would later carry on our military movements. The infamous "crash and bang" tactical driving course taught us the fine points of very rough and dangerous driving, which, in hindsight, made the death-spiral landing into Baghdad's airport seem rather tame afterward. We also refamiliarized ourselves on weapons and had demonstrations on improvised explosive devices.

As our group set off for Iraq, all of us felt as very well-briefed and trained as we could be under the chaotic and fast-track circumstances, though the parallels to disaster movies like *Meteor*, in which a group of drillers is rapidly assembled and shot into space to emplace a nuclear device on a meteor threatening Earth, was not lost on any of us.

Our biggest challenge, as was predicted, was to get out of Embassy Baghdad and up to our duty stations. Transportation out of Baghdad for the uninitiated was not easy. Embassy staff held one mandatory "briefing" after another, as different departments could tell us little but implored us to report what we found to them (not the guy in the stove-piped office next door).

After we finally arrived at the sprawling Contingency Operating Base (COB) Speicher in the first week of January 2008, the lack of resources, planning, and preparedness was obvious, offset only by the warmth and competence of Buckler, the Salah ad-Din PRT team leader who, like Clarke, was one of the best examples of the Foreign Service -- a dedicated diplomat with a strength in people skills and vast experience in many diverse (and sometime very challenging) places. The huge Salah ad-Din PRT, comprising more than 100 members, was hobbled by the lack of secure movement opportunities (just a few brief movements a week to nearby Tikrit), which Buckler had offset by establishing satellite PRT offices in Baiji, Balad, Samarra, and Tuz Khurmatu in order to get out as far as the security bubble would let him. Thus, the motto of the PRT: "Outside the Wire."

My and my transportation-planning advisor partner's assignment was to rapidly survey public and private infrastructure and come up with big fixes as fast as possible that would synchronize U.S. and Iraqi efforts in and around Salah ad-Din (northern Iraq) -- a nebulous assignment to do whatever it is we could to make a difference. Within a week, we had hooked up with the division headquarters staff (Multi-National Division-North), co-located with us at COB Speicher. They had their own helicopter and military ground movement resources, so we could travel the length and breadth of the north without PRT constraints. Steve also got us in to meet the senior provincial officials, and out to the satellites to get as far as we could as fast as we could get there.

Multi-National Division (MND)-North, under then-Maj. Gen. Mark Hertling, made two engineering battalions available -- if something needed fixing, they could do some heavy lifting -- essential in provinces where every desk, pencil, and bulldozer had been looted or destroyed. The entire military team joined in our effort of mapping and assessing the north -- every road, bridge, poultry house, oil-refining facility, concrete plant, and electrical facility -- and followed that up with lots of unexpected expertise from electrical engineers to physicists (yes, really important when you are reconstructing power grids and oil refineries).

By April 2008, Hertling, using "helicopter diplomacy" (flying Iraqi ministers to broken bridges on the Tigris to meet with local officials at the problem site), had cajoled Iraq's Transportation Ministry to prioritize reopening the bridges across the Tigris -- first with temporary bridges, then with permanent ones at Mosul, Baiji, and Diyala, and all with Iraqi military security bases and checkpoints. Agricultural tracking had identified each component of the "value chain" assets and stages, from grain supplies to poultry hatcheries, with priorities on reopening local production (chickens and tomatoes) instead of big processing plants (the old U.S. way). Iraqis needed very little training to simply start doing what they used to do once bridges and roads reopened access to markets.

Behind us through the PRT was a wealth of expertise. The second in command of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was our health team lead (there to study cholera responses firsthand); his military civil affairs equivalent was a skilled senior hospital administrator from Minneapolis (essential to reopening Salah ad-Din's hospital system); the U.S. Agriculture Department sent one of its best dry-land farming experts to help restart small animal and rangeland activities; and most prominent from our group was a bold and tireless rule-of-law team, led by a senior federal prosecutor who worked closely with threatened Iraqi judges to, with great danger to all involved, establish a fledgling system of courts and prisons.

By June 2008, all hands at the PRT and many at MND-North were involved in drought relief and cholera prevention with the Iraqi ministers, provincial staff, and medical professionals. Our friend from the Federal Highway Administration (based in Baghdad) worked closely with the Iraqi Transportation Ministry and MND-North's military and mapping resources to develop a complete national transportation map with every bridge mapped, assessed, and identified (by code number) using the Iraqi highway coding systems.

The embassy provided no centralized meeting or information-sharing processes between the civilian advisors -- every communication was one way -- but the MNDs took up the slack through regional conferences. Additionally, because we had all trained together, we had our own informal networks.

The greatest assets in many respects were our "clients," the Iraqi ministers, provincial officials, and local residents who were active and engaged at every level. The minister of planning needed maps and air photos to create regional assessments to plan and allocate Iraqi funds. His critical agency had access to mountains of planning, budgeting, and project resources desperately needed in the north, so we had much to share. Plus, he sent nice thank-you letters to Ambassador Crocker for the assets we were able to make available to him. These kinds of ministerial relationships helped bridge Iraqi funding gaps for essential projects for the provinces, from hospitals in Samarra to housing projects in Tikrit.

Across all our activities, the biggest stumbling block to Iraqi self-governance was the lack of basic maps, studies, and information to allow effective management. No two governors had the same maps of the same provinces, and many in key positions were constrained from traveling. Getting basic resources like geographic information systems (GIS, or integrated digital mapping and resource information) was a critical next step that, in real life, needed to be done on a national level and through the ministries. It was also part of our immediate assigned mission.

By July 2008, our Salah ad-Din planning pair shifted to Baghdad (with support from our PRT and the embassy) to coordinate the GIS effort with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), U.S. military terrain specialists (Multi-National Corps-Iraq at Camp Victory), the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (in Baghdad and Bethesda, Maryland), the Iraqi Ministry of Planning, and the Iraqi Mapping Directorate. A basic Iraq-wide GIS framework was widely distributed to ministries and provinces in October 2008 following a large GIS conference at Al Rasheed Hotel in Baghdad.

By September 2008, much of our provincial reconstruction efforts were coming to their conclusion (as was our short-term assignment), but Hertling, of MND-North, brought us down to talk to the ambassador about the next big U.S. problem, the Kurdish disputed boundaries for which our mapping and wide travel throughout the north was important. At that point, our tour was extended and we were specially assigned to the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq's disputed-boundary team to help where we could in that effort.

Certainly, my planning partner and I accomplished a lot during our temporary assignment, but it was no different from the accomplishments of many of our senior civilian advisor cohort working throughout the north.

Several were in embedded PRTs in Diyala and Mosul. They came with the tools and put them to use. Some followed the military into Sadr City in June 2008 (not for the fainthearted).

Beyond our cohort, there were truly remarkable bands of civilians in other PRTs and EPRTs, rebuilding industry, government, and agriculture in Kirkuk and Anbar, and folks out on the very dangerous streets of small towns across Iraq, side by side with soldiers, doing important work, wherever and whenever they could.

Throughout if all, we had one mission: to turn over control to the Iraqis so that we and our military colleagues could go home leaving a functional, but far from perfect, Iraq behind.

How much did we waste in stupid project funding? I don't know that I ever wasted a penny, particularly because much of our efforts were Iraqi-funded or funded through sharing of already existing resources (mapping, assessments). Knowing the role and resources of the Iraqi ministries assured us that money was really not an effective weapon. Behind us was Hertling, notorious for not wasting Commander's Emergency Response Program funds unless there was a genuine emergency, and with whom we forced through conditions that no U.S. funds would be used without Iraqi concurrence to accept and sustain the projects (that one condition killed off a lot of stupid U.S. projects).

How much waste, fraud, and abuse did we see that was not "in our lane?"

Plenty. One of the biggest prosecutions by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction was against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' contract manager for northern Iraq. Like some poorly managed contract-management departments in U.S. counties and school systems, he never saw a contract he didn't like, and most -- for schools and clinics that were never completed and not accepted by the Iraqis -- were a Gordian knot of "pass along" contracts, shoddy construction, and bloated budgets. Our main focus was on larger Iraqi-funded projects (roads, bridges, treatment plants, etc.), so we were not completely dependent on our Corps of Engineers staff as many PRTs were.

In fact, we routinely saw waste, fraud, and abuse; we fought it daily or just avoided it (through Iraqi-funded projects). One big battle, for example, was between the State Department and the Corps of Engineers over their competing \$25 million-dollar, multiyear GIS projects; the only way to stop it was to create your own (as we all did) and give it to the Iraqis.

One battle we couldn't avoid was a State Department-funded program for 23 schools in Salah ad-Din that the provincial government did not want. These were the bureaucratic vampires that seemingly could never be killed -- until a very good new Corps of Engineers officer rotated in and killed it dead in late 2008 after a U.S. contractor showed up to knock down a crowded 12-room schoolhouse in Samarra to replace it with a six-classroom one. Nobody in Samarra wanted to lose classrooms just to accommodate a silly State Department program with no rhyme, reason, or purpose on the ground (the kind Clarke was working to stop).

Like so many things in Iraq, the Corps of Engineers was disastrous in one year and excellent in another. Every



rotation is a new year in this game.

As explained by provincial officials, if we ask for a water tank, the United States gives us a firetruck that we can't maintain (yes, in Tikrit), and if we want a school, we will build a good one for \$300,000 where we want it and how we want it. If you build it, it will cost \$3 million, be of such poor quality that we cannot maintain it, and be in the wrong place. They had watched us in every year and knew what to expect.

Oh, I forgot. The stereotype is that the Iraqis, not the Americans, are corrupt and inept. Well, no more so than the U.S. parties who trained and appointed them.

How many times did all of us see the U.S. military and PRTs alike working on projects that were little more than "make-work" projects to help create much-needed income for the many destitute families (and especially the widows) in need of any humanitarian resources within the appropriate U.S. role for post-conflict humanitarian relief?

Plenty, and though some of the efforts may look silly on paper in a very slanted presentation, they made perfect sense if you were there and understood what was really happening: women's groups, small-business efforts, trash pickup, canal clearing, etc. That was not waste, fraud, or abuse to anyone confronted with those circumstances. None of us, civilian and military alike, were unaffected by the destitute war widows and once proud engineers begging for jobs -- any jobs.

The battles for pure waste, fraud, and abuse projects were nasty, routine, and mostly between U.S. agencies. Management of reconstruction leaves little to be proud of by any U.S. agency (USAID, the State Department, or the Defense Department). All the civilians and military personnel who actually accomplished things did so by the serious efforts that Clarke had explained from the outset.

Ineptitude was not a norm, but it was around, as was corruption, but so too was bravery and sacrifice. There were some truly remarkable and competent Foreign Service officers in the mold of Clarke and Buckler (10 percent), regular folks doing the best they could (80 percent), and, as in any organization or profession, a small group of very questionable ones not appropriate for these kinds of assignments (10 percent).

It is ridiculous to compare what a dozen carefully selected civilian troubleshooter experts were involved with or accomplished to the reconstruction capabilities of a Foreign Service officer with no particular training or exposure to our professional fields. Our role was to either support them or target through them.

Beyond the PRTs, nothing "we" accomplished could have happened without countless Foreign Service officers, military personnel, and embassy staff handling the immense bureaucratic tasks and battles needed to keep us active. There were few big projects "we" succeeded on without Vinnie Azzarelli, chief of staff of the Iraq Transition Assistance Office; Hertling; or Maj. Gen. Mark Zamzow (Gen. David Petraeus's adjutant) fighting it through or, as with our ministry and U.N. work, without Ambassador Crocker's approval.



PRTs aside, Embassy Baghdad, given the U.S. role in Iraq, was a huge endeavor with many Foreign Service officers in Baghdad doing their actual professional tasks -- analysis, administration, reporting, diplomacy.

Was all of this hard for everybody? You bet.

Was it a chaotic mess? You bet.

Did security make all of this much more dangerous and problematic? Absolutely.

One of our senior advisors, Terry Barnich of Chicago, died in May 2009 in a car bombing, to the great regret of many of us who worked closely with him.

Many of us, too, owe our lives to the young soldiers who died or were severely injured making things safe for us and our projects.

Christopher Warren Lotter, 20 years old, from Chester Heights, Pennsylvania, died on Dec. 31, 2008, after being shot while on patrol to inspect one of our water-treatment-plant projects in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Tikrit. I went to Arlington National Cemetery for his service in January 2009, but didn't want to intrude on his family. I didn't know what to say, so I watched from the hillside. He's the soldier I carry in my memory as the symbol for so many more. But how do you explain all of this to his parents if they asked deeper questions?

Sadly, too, many of our Iraqi provincial colleagues were killed in the March 2011 attack on Tikrit's provincial headquarters. Political infighting aside, the friendliness, courtesy, and professionalism of these folks to their U.S. colleagues left many in the PRT with lasting fond memories and sadness at their losses.

So much bittersweet. So many mixed emotions. So many tears and smiles. And then you read the reports of Peter Van Buren.

It is just incredible.

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