



2004 USAID Summer Seminar Series

July 20: Passing the Baton: How State and USAID Transfer Knowledge (or don't) in Iraq and Afghanistan

Organizer: Bruce Burton, Department of State, eDiplomacy.

Materials: Presentation appended

Synopsis

Many organizations face the challenge of transferring knowledge from outgoing to incoming personnel and from one generation to the next. For State and USAID, the challenge has been particularly acute regarding the hundreds of personnel who have served short-term rotations in Iraq and Afghanistan. State and USAID personnel assigned to either post quickly need to understand operating procedures, people, culture, political and economic circumstances, security, and development and humanitarian needs. The learning curve has had to be short and the stakes--for individuals, managers and for the success of the mission--are very high.

This seminar will feature a discussion among veterans of service in Iraq and Afghanistan about how their organizations dealt with the challenge of preparing new people to do their jobs, often in dangerous and harsh conditions, and to pass on their learning to their replacements. The panel will highlight what worked and where gaps remain between needs and solutions. And we'll look to the audience to suggest ideas for meeting those needs.

Notes

USAID and State Department veterans of the USG missions to Afghanistan and Iraq discussed challenges and methods for "passing the baton"—transferring knowledge—from one generation of assignees to the next in these crisis posts. All panelists discussed steps they had taken, from use of email collectives to on-the-ground pre-assignment training, but cited gaps and thought the two agencies needed to do much better. The discussion underscored important impediments to knowledge transfer such as:

- Structural – inadequate information technology;
- Operational – rapid turnover, crushing workloads and long hours;
- Cultural – classified (State) vs. unclassified (USAID) work environments, unfamiliarity of personnel of either agency with the U.S. military, and the different orientation of personnel at various phases in the reconstruction efforts.

The discussion highlighted that passing the baton must entail a process, not an event, consisting of pre-deployment preparation, knowledge-transfer during the assignment, and a systematic effort to capture and communicate knowledge afterwards. Both State and USAID need to improve information technology to assure inter-operability with all elements of the mission and to enable effective knowledge-sharing. The panelists also pointed out the importance of "buying knowledge" for emerging missions, which requires a new framework for drawing on local hires, third-country FSN's and American citizen émigrés from the country involved.

Bruce Burton, Senior Advisor, Office of eDiplomacy, Bureau of Information Resource Management, U.S. Department of State

Burton introduced the other panelists, David Sedney and John Finney of State, and Jim Bever and Ross Wherry of USAID. He said the panel topic was inspired by two things. The first was an email from David Sedney last winter, asking how to capture the knowledge of an officer in a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) so his replacement in three or four months' time didn't have to reinvent the wheel all over again. The second was a "town meeting" by State's Near East and South Asia bureaus to help recruit personnel for Iraq and Afghanistan. The town meeting focused on the personal experiences, good and bad, of people who served there—a good example of knowledge transfer in action to serve a strategic purpose.

Burton said Afghanistan and Iraq have given rise to a new term—"Emerging Missions"—although the concept is not. Beginning with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent effort to rapidly establish embassies and then AID missions in the newly independent republics and Eastern European countries, our two agencies have repeatedly needed to staff entirely new missions. This requirement continues—for example, an interest section in Tripoli may emerge into a full embassy—but the efforts that have rightly caught the most attention are the missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Both efforts feature 1) dangerous environments; 2) high

turnover of permanent and TDY personnel; and 3) the need for personnel to learn about and deal with a complex mix of unfamiliar religious, ethnic, and cultural groups, not least of them the U.S. military.

With this volume of people and activities, as institutions, State and AID are acquiring a vast amount of knowledge. We're doubtless losing an immense portion of that, too, as people are too overwhelmed by the daily workload to record what they know, and then move on quickly at the end of their tours. So, while the gains are impressive, the losses are troubling. The panelists have given a lot of thought to the problems.

Burton asked the panel to address the following questions:

1. What did you or your personnel need to know when you arrived, what did you actually know, and how critical was the gap, if any?
2. What did you learn during your tours and how were you able to pass it along to your successors?
3. If you or they were to return for a new assignment, how would you update yourselves?

James A. Bever, Former Director, USAID Mission to Afghanistan

Bever has been with USAID for more than 22 years and has been involved in nearly every area of the world. He just returned as Mission Director in Kabul and will move on to be Mission Director for the West Bank and Gaza. In Kabul, he oversaw 100 U.S. Government (USG) personnel, 1,000 contractors/grantees, and a \$1.2 billion assistance budget.

Bever underscored the difficulties of operating in an environment that demanded rapid programming and intense effort, including incredibly long work days often six or seven days. The Panel introduced by Joe Lieberona week. USAID Kabul experienced a very high turnover rate, as there were only 12 direct hires and most government personnel came only for temporary duty (TDY), ranging from a few weeks to a few months. Few Foreign Service personnel were trained to operate in high-risk security zones.

According to Bever, knowledge transfer in Afghanistan was not systematic. Incoming employees were expected to learn their new jobs in one short TDY before the start of the actual tour or else would overlap with their outgoing counterpart. Major gaps in skills and substantive knowledge included how to communicate and work with the American military, and lack of understanding of Section 660 of the Foreign Assistance Act dealing with cooperation on law and order.

Bever discussed the role of Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs) and Afghan émigrés as a source of critical knowledge. Due to the difficulty of finding Afghani nationals to staff FSN positions, USAID Kabul recruited experienced FSNs from missions in 20 countries. These third-country FSNs helped recruit and train Afghans. They were easier to recruit than U.S. employees and were very effective in many areas. They were paid at GS-12 rates (a very large raise for them) in addition to receiving danger pay. After they finished their one-year tours, it was difficult for their original missions to re-employ them as they could not match the pay in Kabul. Veteran FSNs would often find higher offers in the private or other sectors.

Similarly, the Mission attempted to recruit professionals from the Afghan diaspora to fill the FSN positions, but it was difficult. The Agency thus needs to develop effective incentives for recruitment. Bever also suggested a number of initiatives that could support efforts to prepare for and staff emerging missions, including stationing families in a nearby, politically stable country, and pre-stocking security and communications equipment.

Ross Wherry, Senior Reconstruction Advisor, ANE, USAID and Former Office Director for Iraq

Ross Wherry has been the Office Director and Desk Officer for Iraq and will soon be Deputy Mission Director in Islamabad. Wherry outlined several important problems in knowledge transfer. First, he stressed the need for continuity that FSOs on the ground can provide for incoming workers, especially in situations such as Iraq and Afghanistan where we are "parachuting them in and levitating them out" in rapid succession.

Second, he discussed the expediency of synchronization of interagency tours. Early on in the Iraq crisis, USAID had longer tours than State. Since the opening of the Baghdad Embassy, State and USAID personnel are now required to stay for the same amount of time, strengthening the capacity for knowledge transfer.

Third, Wherry pointed out that development workers are often interested in advancing development goals without first remembering the priority of foreign policy concerns. According to Wherry, development is a tool of foreign policy; therefore, USAID as a USG agency must put foreign policy concerns first before considering long-term development goals. Fourth, as the long-term managers for USG agencies, workers are responsible for documenting the decisions, relationships, and rationales of what they did. This is important for accountability, security and comprehension of the local situation. Nuances matter for their successors, who are only as well prepared as the incumbents make them. New people need to know basic information before they hit the ground during fast changing times. Baker, Sedney, Finney

Wherry said employees are expected to be technically competent in their fields. For people assigned to Iraq and Afghanistan, the real need is the ability to form, build and participate in teams on the ground. They need to know how to relate to State, the U.S. military, and whoever else is necessary. They need to understand the medium- and long-term goals and to realize that "can-do"

outweighs pure technical competence. The situations in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan are too fast moving to achieve perfect solutions and USAID personnel need to accept progress rather than perfection.

Wherry pointed out a divide between State and USAID regarding classified information. He said USAID is chatty by nature and accustomed to dealing in an unclassified environment, but this is dangerous in high-risk posts. USAID personnel must get used to dealing in the classified environment—and getting a SIPRNet account is a must (Note: SIPRNet is a Department of Defense-owned secret-level interagency network.)

David Sedney, Former Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM), Embassy Kabul

David Sedney was twice DCM in Kabul, worked in the Office of eDiplomacy and the National Security Council, and is now on his way to be the DCM in Beijing. He addressed the moderator's questions presented in the beginning of the program.

What did you need to know when you arrived? Sedney examined this question from two perspectives, first as DCM immediately after the opening of the Embassy when TDYers only stayed for 30 to 90 days and second, as DCM when the Embassy shifted to one-year tours, but still had a lot of TDY traffic. In both situations, he found critical gaps in the widely varied information that he and his staff needed to know.

Provincial reconstruction teams (PRT) in Afghanistan work under the supervision of the military to help with reconstruction programs. The PRT mission is to promote peace, democracy, and stability in the region. Personnel in Kabul seldom had the benefit of the experience or knowledge of their predecessors. This gap is magnified in crisis and post-conflict situations where there is not much institutional knowledge and a dearth of local FSNs.

The learning curve for these types of missions is very steep. The first people on the ground are often very good at gathering information, while their successors are often better at implementing programs than collecting information. He cited an example where there was a failure to pass along to a replacement officer in a PRT that the deputy provincial police chief was the “go-to guy” for conducting operations in the area. As a consequence, a reconstruction mission had to be aborted when the team was blocked from entering the target area because it did not have the deputy police chief's go-ahead.

Because crisis personnel work fast and long, there is an absence of incentive and time to write down the lessons learned from each day. Sedney mentioned several of the techniques the Embassy used to capture key knowledge that people generate in their day-to-day work. Email provided one important means – the Embassy set up an email account for every incoming staff member, and an email collective so messages would reach a wider audience. He also had expected that techniques such as chat rooms would help current, incoming and departed staff communicate; however, this had not proved very effective; for example, once people had been gone for a year, they would forget key information.

He said Kabul also tried two techniques for in-country orientation for new assignees. The first was to bring them to post for a TDY where they worked side-by-side with the incumbent. The second involved overlap at the end of the incumbent's tour. The first worked better because the incumbent was still solidly in his or her tour, not thinking of the next job. However, pulling incoming personnel away from their current jobs is difficult and expensive. Ultimately, Sedney concluded, effective methods for knowledge transfer were not very clear.

Sedney said that bringing in experienced FSNs was very important because they could start their jobs immediately. However, in forming a multinational FSN force, the government must get the right combination of nationalities, as there can sometimes be ethnic tension between groups. Further, employing émigrés from the host country poses a problem with local FSNs, who see them getting paid considerably more for similar work. This diminishes incentive and creates resentment among local FSNs. Baker, Sedney, Bever, and Finney.

John Finney, State Department, Bureau of Political Military Affairs

John Finney's office recruits, assigns, and supports senior State officers assigned to 18 military commands around the world. The office helps military commanders with the political, diplomatic, and interagency dimensions of their military responsibilities. A central part of this is to promote unity of effort between military and civilians in places like Afghanistan. Finney has served in political military assignments from the Vietnam War to the present; has been a political advisor (Polad) to the Chief of Naval Operations and other senior military commanders; and served as Polad to the U.S. military commander at Bagram, Afghanistan.

Because knowledge transfer in the military can mean the difference between life and death, the military spends large amounts of resources gathering and analyzing the lessons learned from situations. Finney described the following key points of the U.S. military's knowledge sharing program:

1. Military personnel know one year in advance where they will go.
2. Officers conduct reconnaissance tours three to four times and use these visits to update pre-deployment training for their units.
3. They participate in exercises and undergo professional development to help them understand the goals and functioning of the mission.
4. The Center for Army Lessons Learned institutionalizes the knowledge learned from the field and distributes it to the necessary people, holds briefings, etc.

Finney also pointed out a historical reference for knowledge sharing and used an example of the State Department during Vietnam. Diplomats went to the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), Vietnam Training Center in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for one year to study the language and culture of Vietnam. A most critical aspect of this training was that there were military officers among their classmates. Finney insisted that there is a need to set up a training center for Iraq and Afghanistan in order to understand these countries and gain the experience of working with military colleagues. Our operations in Iraq and Afghanistan should not be business as usual: we are at war. This undertaking requires extraordinary steps, and we need to prepare civilians like we prepare the military.

There are military personnel on the ground that do nothing but record lessons learned. If no one in the organization focuses on the lessons learned, knowledge and experience evaporates, making it much harder to achieve goals.

Finally, Finney pointed out the destructive impact that a harsh environment can play on information technology (IT) equipment. For example, the efficacy of computers and telephones are compromised. He called for IT engineers to address environmental and cross-communication (in terms of military and diplomatic core) problems. He also described the military's huge transformations in terms of doctrine, training, and equipment and cited a need for a similar expeditionary spirit by our civilian forces. State and USAID must find a way to transform military victory into strategic success, effectively changing the political, economic, and social structure of the country. To do this, the agencies need to support their staff and prepare them so that they can be as effective as possible. Knowledge sharing is absolutely pivotal.

Wrap-up

Burton wrapped up the session by pointing out that the discussion had made clear that knowledge transfer should be seen as a process not an event:

The preparatory stage includes efforts to find out what we know, to know our partners in the mission, and to prepare for the operating environment, not just the substantive skills inherent in the job.

During the assignment, personnel need better means to communicate and to record their knowledge as they go along.

After the assignment, both agencies need a systematic approach to capturing and communicating lessons learned.

Burton thanked the panelists for participating in the discussion and for their hard work in difficult and dangerous assignments to advance American interests.

Question and Answer Session

You talked about the lessons learned when people arrived. What were their gaps in knowledge?)

People did not understand the day-to-day activities that someone on the ground would have to undergo. For example, the initially cramped living conditions were such that there was no way that one could prepare for them. Other unexpected obstacles included knowing how to plan for being in a high security area and understanding how the coalition functions. An audience member asks a question

The Mission did use many FSNs. How smooth was it to use FSNs from other missions, who already had the knowledge?

It was the smartest thing we did. They hit the ground running as they knew the inner-workings of AID, government, accounting, and how to work in the Embassies. We started using them to train the Afghans. We could start to rely on them as crutches—they won't want to leave and we won't want to let them go.

You mentioned the nationalities—were the nationalities of the FSNs within the region?

We had FSNs from India, Nepal, and Pakistan. The other lesson we learned was to work with our legislative branch to make sure we can move quickly administratively. We have found it important to have exemptions from section 660, which deals with international police training.

Your staff had 12 direct hires with hundreds of TDYers in and out of the country—so why can't AID staff up with more direct hires from around the world?

It's a footprint issue. I'm not in the right position in the agency to answer. TDY folks currently come in only when it's acceptable to have them there due to the high security area.

Knowledge management—when reacting to a difficult situation, your predecessors didn't have time to establish baselines in many instances, how was your ability to monitor the projects against some of the social indicators; for example, attitudinal change. Are you able now to establish some sort of baseline to monitor your progress?

We did an analysis about two years ago on perceptions of food security. We used it as a base for another analysis this year. It's hard when you're working outside your normal system.

How successful were people in the Iraq Mission in sharing knowledge in passing along information? Did they have the communication means to do it? What were your techniques?

When we started, everyone had access to email. Anyone who had an email address could get all the unclassified information that they wanted. When they came in with a technical perspective on the program, it was generally good. The same was true for Afghanistan. The nuances—how to do work and live in close proximity to one another—were not as well communicated over email.

How helpful has IT support, such as collaboration software, secure messaging been in building teams and sharing information appropriately?

IT is handy for moving information around quickly and compactly. It's only a tool. Unless I can develop a relationship with a person on the other end of wire, then I may be uncertain if I can trust the information that is being given to me, especially if a big decision hangs on that information. If you don't know who you're talking to, it is hard to establish that link over the wires. It is good for moving executive office material, where the probity of each person is already established.

In changing the culture of AID to work in a crisis situation, how did you create a "can-do" attitude within your team to move differently than AID has traditionally moved?

You're not looking for a stellar technical person. You want to ask, "Can this person get along?" and "Can this person keep standards?" You want them to get job done rather than be perfect.

AID usually works in an unclassified mode. How hard is it to bridge the gap between classified and unclassified information? What kinds of problems do you run into? How can we bridge this gap in terms of technology, etc.?

A large gap between AID and State is that AID doesn't deal in a lot of national security matters, so workers tend to be very chatty. AID doesn't like keeping matters under wraps. In this age, there is a need for some AID workers to carry out classified goals. That is just something that we will have to get used to.

On compartmentalization of information in Iraq, how well does information flow back to USAID to be analyze?

Mission Directors hate it when Washington tells them what to do because there is no way for them to understand the situation on the ground. On the Washington side, there are external, like Congress, and internal pressures. For unclassified matters, USAID is absolutely abysmal in telling the field useful things and getting the field to tell Washington what they are doing. The Mission is reluctant to share information because they're afraid that Washington will put their hands in it. USAID was able to communicate when it came to maintaining our website because Mission didn't want Washington to post anything that they couldn't deliver; so they would have to communicate with us. Oftentimes, AID talks to AID, but no one else.

Why haven't you implemented an Iraq or Afghanistan training center for employees preparing to serve in those places?

- We did not have the larger vision. We don't have a culture of doing lessons learned—we are blind-sighted. It is one of our weaknesses. We often have a very clear picture of the problem, but not a very clear picture of the solution.

- It does come from the vision. We are in a new national security environment. We need to think about transforming our policy in communication, personnel, etc. so that we can adjust to the new environment. Congress doesn't equate development and diplomacy yet. They are prepared to allocate money for immediate national security threats, which mainly means pouring money into the military. They have a hard time justifying a large bill for diplomacy and development, which require a large financial commitment. In addition, we have outdated legislation for dealing with national security matters. For example, the National Security Act of 1947 is the legal framework that we use to deal with the crisis of the Cold War. We need a new law and flexible personnel policies.

Why don't State and USAID set up a crisis center in general if a country specific center requires too many resources?

The State Department with the approval of the NSC has opened an office that reports directly to the Secretary called the Office for Coordination, Reconstruction, and Stability (CRS). It is headed by a USAID officer/ambassador. It's the first step forward for State/USAID to establish an office to do planning for post-conflict situations.

Is there a program set up for USAID or State to share knowledge in Kabul? If not, is it due to classification reasons?

No, we don't have such a program.

What about knowledge sharing between USAID and NGO/contracting partners?

- That's a great idea. NGOs are a great source of knowledge.

- State and USAID are now looking at collaborative technology. We're doing a pilot program with an application that is being used very widely by the U.S. military in Iraq. For now, it will be used for communication between State and USAID, but has the potential to be used between the government and NGOs.

How is this a different time from other historical crises encountered by civilian government personnel?

Look at the kind of military and civilian organization and collaboration that occurred during the crisis in the Balkans. NATO made a serious long-term commitment to the reconstruction efforts in the region. That kind of investment addressed a very serious security problem that was of great interest to the United States and we've been relatively successful. Just as in war, winning a

single battle does not guarantee that you will win the war. And even if you win the war, you can still lose the peace. So, you need a comprehensive vision of what you are about and a coordinated, major commitment on the civilian side so that we leave something behind that is stable and lasting.

Isn't the business of USAID being in a crisis spot for the long term in order to provide sustainable change?

So, I'm a little bit confused about your approach. I'm concerned because I hear the call for sustainability in connection with military activity and the goal of the military is stabilization. I'd like to hear a similarly strong statement recognizing the role of development in this stabilization.

- No one wants to come home sooner than does the military. No one wants to turn the job over to development sooner. Military officers agree that security is essential but insufficient. At the end of the day, you have to have development. The military effort is only an enabling effort to serve the larger goal: development.

- Afghanistan and Iraq are special situations because the war has not yet been concluded. Therefore, the military and civilians must work together to reconstruct these countries. We have found it very difficult to convince some NGOs to work with the military. Some have outright refused.

Welcome to Session 4



Passing the Baton: How State and USAID Transfer Knowledge (or don't) in Iraq and Afghanistan

Session organizer: **Bruce Burton**, State Dept

Speakers: **James A. Bever**, USAID

John Finney, State Dept

David Sedney, State Dept.

Ross Wherry, USAID

Tuesday, July 20, 2004



Passing the Baton

How State and USAID Transfer Knowledge (or don't) in Iraq and Afghanistan

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Session Organizer: Bruce Burton, Senior Advisor, Office of eDiplomacy, Bureau of Information Resource Management, U.S. Department of State

Speakers:

- **James A. Bever, Former Director, USAID Mission to Afghanistan**
 - Questions
- **John Finney, Director of Political Affairs, Iraq Office, Bureau of Near East Affairs, U.S. Department of State**
- **David Sedney, Former Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy Kabul**
- **Ross Wherry, Senior Reconstruction Advisor, Bureau for Asia and Near East, USAID**
 - ✓ Questions and Discussion
 - ✓ Closing
 - ✓ Fill out your evaluations!!



Passing the Baton

How State and USAID Transfer Knowledge (or don't) in Iraq and Afghanistan

- ✓ What did you or your personnel need to know when you arrived, what did you actually know, and how critical was the gap, if any?
- ✓ What did you learn during your tours and how were you able to pass it along to your successors?
- ✓ If you or they were to return for a new assignment, how would you update yourselves?



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Be at the CAL Conference Room
next week for Session 5!

**When is General Budget Support
the Most Appropriate Way to
Support Development?**

Session Organizer: Joe Leiberson,

PPC

Tuesday, July 27, 2004

