Re-engineering Afghanistan: At What Cost?

THE UNITED STATES and several other countries have poured money into a technological effort that has involved hundreds of engineers and technicians, thousands of construction workers, and scores of contractors and subcontractors. It is the reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan, and it hasn't been going well. Reconstruction has been a sprawling enterprise, encompassing the building and refurbishment of such vital infrastructure as roads, schools, sewage systems, dams, and electrical grids. We began our coverage of this work in the fall of 2005, when Executive Editor Glenn Zorpette traveled to Iraq to report on the electricity and telecommunications projects there. Zorpette's first article, "Re-engineering Iraq" [February 2006], told a story of engineers thwarted by politics, and of enormous sums wasted because of decisions based largely on local and international politics rather than on engineering and logistical realities.

The electrification of southern Afghanistan remains an unfulfilled promise.

Although the on-the-ground situation is different, the same mistakes have cropped up in Afghanistan. In "Re-engineering Afghanistan," Zorpette describes what he saw and learned during a three-week trip there earlier this year. As he did in Iraq, Zorpette found generating plants with insupportably high operating expenses, and generators costing hundreds of millions of dollars that will likely be abandoned the moment coalition forces leave.

As in Iraq, the prime contractors in Afghanistan are working on a "cost-plus" basis that encourages overspending—to the ire of U.S. government auditors and analysts, who have vented their displeasure in thousands of pages of reports. Most recently, the U.S. Commission on Wartime Contracting, a congressionally mandated panel, determined that the United States has wasted or misspent between US $31 billion and $60 billion contracting for services in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Despite all that investigation, nothing has been done to avoid the pitfalls that have been so clearly and repeatedly identified in Iraq. If anything, the situation may be worse this time around. For example, for electrical reconstruction, the main U.S. government agency involved in Afghan reconstruction, the U.S. Agency for International Development, continues to rely heavily on a single contracting entity, despite recommendations to the contrary. And, as Zorpette argues in his report, this overreliance has badly compounded a complex situation.

Efforts to stabilize and develop a fledgling democracy would be difficult under the best of circumstances. Afghanistan is a poor country and a war zone, and it has had very little infrastructure, ever. It has never really had a central government and continues to be plagued by tribalism. There are a limited number of contractors who are willing to engage in reconstruction in a hostile fire zone or absorb the additional costs associated with these types of activities. Building a power plant in Helmand province is very different from building one in Piscataway, N.J.

Reconstruction efforts require partnerships among not only diverse governmental and military organizations but also civilian agencies. There are many good servicemen and -women and civilians working in this difficult situation—but all too often, what good they accomplish seems to be in spite of the policies and politics at play.

The most basic problem is the dearth of trained, articulate engineers in positions of political and policy influence who might steer these efforts in the direction of sound engineering. But there are many other problems—the undertaking of large, costly projects in military hot spots, in an attempt to improve domestic stability, being one of them. In the end, however, it may simply be impossible to establish a management structure that effectively controls both military and civilian agencies. Expecting effectiveness and efficiency in a war zone may be unreasonable.

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