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BOOK REVIEW

Colonel Garland H. Williams, *Engineering Peace: The Military Role in Postconflict Reconstruction* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2005, 317 pp., £12.95 pbk.).

In view of ongoing events in Iraq, Colonel Garland H. Williams' analysis of the military's role in the post-conflict reconstruction of war-torn territories is a seminal work that should be read by anyone interested in the study of civil-military relations within peace missions. His well-argued, well-researched analysis offers the reader new conceptual ideas on what continues to be 'one of the most challenging aspects of the international response to conflict and disaster' (p. 32).

His study is motivated by the conviction that 'there are better ways to conduct post-conflict reconstruction [...] or the cost, not only in money but also in human lives, will continue to escalate' (p. 117). This conclusion is shaped by twenty-two years of military experience on security operations around the world, and in-depth knowledge of the complementary abilities of military and civilian agencies. Colonel Williams is particularly concerned by the 'reconstruction gap' (p. 10) that tends to develop during the first year after the cessation of hostilities. Among the reasons leading to this gap, he includes the precarious state of local physical infrastructure after the end of the fighting; the often limited (or non-existent) local capacity to resolve this situation; the inadequate planning and slow deployment of international civilian-led financial assistance and personnel for infrastructure purposes; and the military's reluctance to embark on nation building tasks. The 'reconstruction gap' results in an ambiguous situation where the lack of basic infrastructure precludes setting in motion essential processes of economic and social recovery, and institution building, for the promotion of long-term peace in the war-torn territory.

To resolve this impasse he proposes a role for the US military that combines its primary task of providing security and stability with a wider reconstruction mandate for physical infrastructure. Furthermore, the American military engineering and construction battalions accompanying peacekeeping contingents should execute this role. Colonel Williams' starting point is that the latter are the only actors in theatre 'uniquely positioned and equipped to take on such postconflict reconstruction tasks immediately' (p. 6). Nevertheless, despite this fact, the use of US military engineering capabilities has so far been essentially limited to the improvement and repair of that physical infrastructure that served a military purpose, such as enabling mobility to and from base camp in areas with damaged, destroyed and mined bridges, highways and roads. In those exceptional cases where military engineering expertise went beyond this limit, the American engineers involved were acting on their own initiative.

Colonel Williams' proposals might appear, at first glance, too forward-looking for an institution that considers involvement in nation building as 'mission creep' (p. 84). However, as rightly pointed out in the foreword to this book by Richard H. Solomon, President of the United States Institute of Peace, it is a qualified proposal, only meant to cover the immediate post-conflict phase until international and local civilian agencies can take over. The prime objective is to ensure a rapid, well-planned normalisation of the war-torn territory and therefore, a fast and efficient exit strategy for a strained US military.

The last chapter of this book is arguably the most important from a policy standpoint. On the basis of the lessons he draws from the US interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Afghanistan, Colonel Williams designs a four-stage 'Postconflict Reconstruction Template' (p. 217) to be applied in future US peace operations by an inter-agency civil-military working group and operations centre. This

template emphasises the need for clarity of mission, unity of authority and integration of effort, and the importance of timely political decisions and international commitment.

Colonel Williams acknowledges the limitations of his template, including the fact that ultimately domestic forces, rather than external intervention, are the critical determinants of successful peacebuilding and sustainable recovery. However, he argues against reconstructing the war-torn territory to its pre-war state because, in cases like Afghanistan, it would not provide the local authorities with the capacity to ensure long-term growth. He therefore recommends aiming for a ‘higher starting point’ (p. 246), without taking into account the possibility that the war-torn territory may not have the necessary resources to sustain anything above pre-war levels without becoming dependent on international aid.

This book would have also benefited from a more detailed account of how Colonel Williams’ template relates to other non-US military and civilian actors deployed in the field as part of peace missions, or how the ‘reconstruction gap’ could be closed in situations that fall short of the ‘relative calm that exists immediately after the cessation of hostilities’ (p. 226). Notwithstanding these comments, this book represents an important contribution to the growing literature on the post-conflict reconstruction of war-torn territories.

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