ETHICAL CHALLENGES in Stability Operations

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In May 2003, the United States began the daunting task of nation building in Iraq by rebuilding the Iraqi infrastructure and reformulating its political institutions. The military’s role in modern stability operations, though seemingly new, fits into a preexisting American foreign policy formula. However, the military sees stability operations through contemporary ethical lenses. Since each case depends upon current ethical understanding about what the military should or should not do, past examples of stability operations do not necessarily provide fitting frameworks for modern efforts. This article focuses on ethical abstractions as well as the ways national and social views of how “right” and “wrong” translate into political and military application, and it examines examples of stability operations and the ethical challenges and implications such efforts raise.¹

Morality in Post-war Operations

Even though moral rhetoric often permeates stability operations, international stability and perceived strategic interests have overridden moral obligations as determinants for American military commitments. A study of the ethical implications of conducting stability operations today bridges a historiographic gap in the understanding of morality in warfare. Scholars have often alluded to the prevalence of the Just War Tradition in (Western) military thought.² However, the Just War model is insufficient when discussing stability operations because it only describes jus ad bellum (rationale for going to war in the first place) and jus in bello (appropriate conduct during war).³ The moral reasons for going to war are not always the same as the reasons the victor uses to justify occupation of the defeated nation. Jus in bello does continue to have relevance during stability operations, particularly when armed hostilities exist between “insurgents” and the government, unarmed civilians, and occupying forces. Legal discourse that constitutes the “Laws of War” cover much of this.⁴ However, there is nothing in jus in bello that compels the victorious nation to provide security, rebuild infrastructure, improve public services, and see to the establishment of a democratic form of government.⁵ In the final pages of Arguing About War (2004), noted Just War historian Michael Walzer raises the issue of morality in post-war operations, and he suggests further scholarly inquiry into a new jus post bellum theory.
Walzer argues, “It seems clear that you can fight a just war, and fight it justly, and still make a moral mess of the aftermath.” Conversely, “a misguided military intervention or a preventive war fought before its time might nonetheless end with the displacement of a brutal regime and the construction of a decent one.” Walzer’s argument highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the ethical aspects of stability operations.

**Stability Operations in American History**

The term “stability operations” is an inexact concept. It can be all encompassing or exclusionary, depending upon its usage. The 2008 edition of U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, describes stability operations as—

Encompass[ing] various military missions, tasks, and activities conducted outside the United States in coordination with other instruments of national power to maintain or reestablish a safe and secure environment, provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian relief. Stability operations can be conducted in support of a host-nation or interim government or as part of an occupation when no government exists. Stability operations involve both coercive and constructive military actions. They help to establish a safe and secure environment and facilitate reconciliation among local or regional adversaries. Stability operations can also help establish political, legal, social, and economic institutions and support the transition to legitimate local governance. Stability operations must maintain the initiative by pursing objectives that resolve the causes of instability. *Stability operations cannot succeed if they only react to enemy initiatives.* [Emphasis added.]

While the concept “stability operations” does not exclude the possibility (and necessity) of defensive operations, it prizes proactive military operations in conjunction with well-conceived civil actions to neutralize enemy resistance, reduce political opposition, and earn public favor. According to stability operations doctrine, Soldiers and Marines on the ground must accept the dual role of waging war while securing the peace. This paradoxical role stems from the American public’s and elected leadership’s understanding of what U.S. forces are legally and ethically obliged to do following successful completion of conventional combat operations.

The annals of American military history are thin on addressing its long involvement in stability operations. Lawrence Yates, a career U.S. Army historian at Fort Leavenworth’s Combat Studies Institute, condensed the vast history of the U.S. military’s role in stability operations into one succinct volume, *The U.S. Military’s Experience in Stability Operations, 1789–2005*. In this comprehensive work, Yates concludes, “The U.S. military has not regarded stability operations as a ‘core’ mission with a priority approaching that accorded to combat operations.” According to Yates, the military has traditionally understood its role to be the executor of the nation’s will through military means—to win the nation’s wars. After examining 28 case studies from the early republic through the War on Terrorism, Yates makes five basic assessments concerning the future:

- “The U.S. government will continue to conduct stability operations.”
- Stability operations are joint-service, interagency, and multinational endeavors.

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The U.S. military, and the Army specifically, will play increasingly important roles in post-combat efforts. The military will increasingly play a large part in the “pre-execution phase” of stability operations. Stability operations must have the same doctrinal and operational emphasis as traditional military operations.

Although Yates’s argument is sound, he does not address the question of why military leaders are still apprehensive when it comes to conducting stability operations. If they are such an integral aspect of U.S. military history, why do post-combat operations evoke so much apprehension in military leaders? One way to answer the question might be that commanders do not know how to plan for and execute them to the same extent they do traditional military operations. For example, despite the military’s involvement in stability operations throughout its history, it was not until 2006 that Army historian John McGrath proposed that planners use a troop-density model for post-combat security operations. The reason for this, at least in part, is that external entities have directed commanders’ roles. In principle, the American public (through its civilian leadership) entrusts its U.S. military commanders with responsibilities outside of their intellectual and professional comfort zones. The former decides what the latter should and will do based heavily on ethical criteria.

Mexico. The first test of American military governance occurred during and after the U.S.-Mexican War (1846–1848). Most of the scholarship on the U.S.-Mexican War focuses on the conventional military aspects of it, not on its subsequent stability operations. The unconventional nature of the War on Terrorism’s stability operations has sparked renewed interest in historical examples, including the Mexican War. In “Occupation and Stability Dilemmas of the Mexican War”, Latin American historian Irving Levinson concludes that President James Polk and General Winfield Scott’s approach toward stability operations revolved around just that—“stability.” The U.S. military presence following conventional combat operations did not carry with it the modern condition or requirement to establish and secure a stable democratic government. The defeated Mexican and the U.S. governments both regarded the peasant and Indian rebels bent on disrupting the established order as the opposition. They both sought to quell rebellion to secure Mexico’s oligarchic social strata, its international border, and its commerce. The U.S. military functioned as a surrogate security force because it had destroyed the bulk of Mexico’s main army. Both governments relied on American forces in Acapulco, Camargo, Mexico City, Monterey, Tampico, Veracruz, and elsewhere to quash the rebels. The U.S.-Mexican War proved that American stability operations hinged on maintaining the societal status quo, not on ethical reform such as promoting just socio-political equality or implementing minimum human rights standards.

Post-Civil War Reconstruction. The moral criterion for stability operations entered modern consciousness after the Civil War. Texas A&M historian Joseph Dawson argues that post-Civil War Reconstruction provided the “foundation for American military government and ‘nation building’ in other eras.” Dawson agreed with Herman Belz and Lawrence Yates that there were no written plans for occupation prior to the end of hostilities. Dawson is not the first to acknowledge the Union “occupation” of the South as an exercise in nation building, but he goes a step further to say that it provided the doctrinal framework for future efforts. Dawson notes that Reconstruction differed from previous known stability and security efforts. Post-Civil War stability operations experienced a social, political, and ideological thrust that the American occupation presence in Mexico had lacked two decades earlier. While one could argue that, at least in part, Reconstruction-era occupation was a method of political retribution, one could also make the case that ethical concerns were a powerful motivator for rebuilding Southern society. Because the South belonged to the United States, the federal government naturally pushed for the reconstruction of the

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physical damage wrought by four years of war. Also, since the Union cause during the war ultimately sought eradication of slave holding, there was an ethical compulsion to reintegrate the South into the greater Union. There was also need to establish and safeguard legal citizenship for millions of former slaves. Dawson’s conclusion highlights the merging of stability and moral obligation as pretexts for American stability operations.\

Philippine Insurrection. In the last quarter of the 19th century, the United States revisited the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 by reaffirming it as a mandate for American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. In Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy, historian Michael Hunt demonstrates that, beginning in the late-19th century, the United States developed and gradually solidified an ideologically based foreign policy to deal with non-Western peoples and nations. This ideology coincided with and was influenced by the U.S. ability to outwardly project its economic, political, and military might.

Certainly, by the turn of the 20th century, the American military had become something more than a punitive or expeditionary force: the U.S. government could use its power as a mechanism to defend or even create foreign governmental and civil constructs. Morally buttressed with a presumed altruistic (albeit deluded) notion of assuming the White Man’s Burden, America saw the idea of using the military for stability operations and nation building eventually become a foreign policy blueprint. Stability operations became the pretext for how to deal with hostile or otherwise “un-Americanized” peoples.

From a historiographic standpoint, the American military’s involvement in the Philippines provides an instructive example of how the U.S. military flexed its muscle to secure stability where the moral dimensions of its mission held secondary consideration to the Nation’s developmental economic self-interest. An array of sources exist on American counterinsurgency and stability operations in the Philippines, with John Gates, Brian Linn, and Glenn May being among the most notable historians of the topic. More recent work attempts to extract lessons from the American role in the Philippines for potential application in the War on Terrorism.

In Savage Wars of Peace, Army historian Robert Ramsey argues that stability operations in the Philippines represented a success story, despite some significant setbacks. Because American efforts to improve the country’s infrastructure and educational, political, and economic systems often could not forestall the insurgent attempts to undermine the U.S. occupation, public improvements had to occur in tandem with proactive military operations. Continued nonmilitary support to the country was essential while low-level interaction with local leaders helped isolate the insurgents from the population. Commanders at the tactical level had to make decisions always keeping strategic objectives in mind. Commanders and Soldiers felt the same frustrations...
as those in Iraq do today over the dual military and civil nature of stability operations.  

Ramsey followed Savage Wars of Peace with A Masterpiece of Counterguerrilla Warfare, an inside look into the leadership approach of Brigadier General Franklin Bell, an engineer and intelligence officer in the Philippines between 1898 and 1902. Using primary sources and interpreting them with a prescriptive tone, Ramsey concludes the methods Bell used to remove Philippine insurgents from their popular base of support, or rather to remove the population from the insurgents, provide an excellent model for future stability operations and pacification efforts.

Another recent work on the Philippines describes the American pacification of the Moro province as embodying the Rooseveltian spirit of establishing “order out of chaos.” In “Leonard Wood, John J. Pershing, and Pacifying the Moros in the Philippines”, historian Charles Byler argues that Generals Wood and Pershing conducted stability operations in the Moro province of the southern Philippines using varied approaches. They worked at improving the daily life within the province by building infrastructure and providing improved medical care, among other public services. Byler argues that the U.S. military made progress in quelling Moro opposition until it implemented “dramatic [cultural] changes,” such as outlawing slavery and weapons and changing the legal code. In short, U.S.-imposed cultural and legal changes counteracted progress made by providing and improving public services. Though Byler recognizes that Wood’s and Pershing’s military operations against militants were successful, rebel opposition remained strong because of attempted changes in Moro culture and way of life. In the end, the need for order superseded attempts at imposing political and cultural goals based on Western ethical considerations. The need for order proved primary over other ethical considerations.

The Evolution of a Moral Paradigm  

Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson personify the two notions of order and moral obligation in stability operations. President Roosevelt believed that the United States should use its military-industrial strength to bring “order out of chaos” and police the outside world as a colonial power. President Wilson held that a steadfast moral component of American foreign policy was necessary (whereby the Nation would export its own spirit of liberty and sociopolitical structures through selfless acts of helping poor and struggling peoples), but using military force to impose such ostensibly altruistic assistance might also be necessary. Throughout the 20th century, Roosevelt’s and Wilson’s individual approaches often remained harmonious.

The mutually reinforcing ideas of order and a presumed morality in stability operations and nation building persisted beyond the 20th century into the 21st. In October 2000, the National Intelligence Council (NIC), a premier intelligence think-tank within the U.S. government, completed its assessment of the national “reorientations” that had taken place in Central Asia and the former Soviet states over the preceding decade. The NIC argues that U.S. policy regarding underdeveloped and developing nation-states in these regions should focus on effecting political and economic reform, encouraging reduced dependence on regional powers, and rewarding “intraregional cooperation—all with an eye to creating an independent, generally Western-oriented, belt of stability.” Some members of the NIC warn that “democracy and civil societies must develop within the existing cultural context, not as some kind of unnatural foreign imposition.” However, the lack of a Western role in democratizing these nations is unthinkable: “The long-term implications of a generation growing up in poverty, lacking basic education, and increasingly enmeshed in semi-criminalized societies are disturbing and run directly counter to Western goals for the regions.” This paternalistic notion resembles a sociopolitical parallel to economic modernization theory. A powerful patron state ultimately benefits from increases in standards of living and economic output, higher
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education rates, and stable democratic structures. From a strategic and ethical vantage point, the George W. Bush doctrine of the United States evidently views expending economic investment and utilizing military intervention (treasure and blood) as worthwhile to ensure the viability of developing democratic nation-states.24

From Injustice to Justice

From a just war perspective, Australian scholar Tom Frame concludes that “the 2003 Gulf War was neither manifestly just nor, it can be argued, even necessary.”25 One American skeptic comments that “Iraq is not a nation, and nobody can unite its tribes. The notion that Iraq can be democratized or even civilized must be abandoned.”26 Another notes that “the endeavor of forcing democracy on the faction-torn Iraqi society does not seem likely to succeed.”27 These concerns echo the cultural objections of political modernization mentioned earlier, namely, that external forces cannot impose democratic idealism because governments can never truly be separated from culture.

The newly formed Iraqi government may not share the West’s long-standing parliamentary orientation just as their culture persists in tribal values at the expense of individual rights. The rapid transition from autocracy to popular rule requires drastic changes in individual ethical perspective as well as in democratic procedural norms. Timely political and economic results are imperative, for both the citizens of Iraq and those of its patron state.

While not downplaying the difficulties and frustrations of stability operations in Iraq, in What We Owe Iraq, constitutional law professor Noah Feldman argues that after toppling the Hussein regime, the United States had a legal and moral obligation to rebuild Iraq in its own democratic image. In
Feldman’s view, Iraqis are not only capable of, but also entitled to freedom and democracy. According to him, the United States must limit its role in Iraq to that of a temporary political trustee and not allow itself to become a permanent military occupation force. The paramount ethical objective of nation building in Iraq and elsewhere is “creating democratically legitimate states that [treat] their citizens with dignity and respect.” In short, the United States would be morally negligent if it did not see to stabilization in Iraq.

The major obstacles to fulfilling such obligations are the aforementioned hierarchy of ethical norms among the individuals themselves and the need for order as a primary moral concern.

The difficulty is putting moral objectives into practice and sequencing them so they are practicable. A common theme in stability operations historiography is the all-too-common disconnect among American objectives. Citing the problems in postwar Iraq, retired U.S. Army Lieutenant General Jay Garner, Director of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance in early 2003, criticizes the American government’s relative lack of contingency planning. He does not deny the U.S.’s obligation to rebuild and establish order, but he says that stability operations and nation building were not high enough priorities in planning circles, that there had not been enough civilian-military coordination, and that despite their significant ability to do so, the Army Corps of Engineers and media outlets had made little headway in winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. In conclusion, Garner does not challenge America’s moral obligations as legitimate concerns, but rather blames planning failures and unsuccessful methods for the deteriorated security situation.

If contingency planning is a major element of stability operations and nation building, inter- and intra-agency conflicts can complicate putting a valid plan into action. In After Saddam: Stabilization or Transformation?, U.S. Army Major Shane Story highlights the contrasts among various institutional objectives during planning for and execution of the Iraq war. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s efforts to transform the Cold War-era makeup of the Armed Forces complicated Lieutenant General David McKiernan and Ambassador Paul Bremer’s efforts to stabilize Iraq after Hussein’s fall.

These contrasting objectives “reflected a self-defeating disunity of effort.” In concert with conflicting civilian and military objectives in the interagency, Iraq’s tumultuous cultural history hindered stability operations in Iraq from the outset. Story argues that Rumsfeld held long-standing “aversions to open-ended and to large-scale military operations,” both of which are requisite for successful stability operations. Stability operations and nation building require massive interagency planning and cooperation. Decisions to forcefully ensure security and political viability also depend heavily on ethical criteria more familiar to non-military agencies, while commanders at tactical and operational echelons often express frustration with having to assume the complexity entailed in the dual roles of leading civil and military operations. Soldiers are being asked to view stability operations through complicated ethical prisms other agencies are more attuned to, and the “problem” rests in the fact that they cannot help applying preconceived cultural and ethical notions to everyday situations in subconscious efforts to order reality. Their preconceptions have little or no currency in the moral hierarchies of the interagency and geographical cultures in which they are asked to operate. As U.S. Army Captain Porcher Taylor argues, there are invariably “circumstances in which personal and institutional value systems conflict.”

Commanders and Soldiers on the ground will not necessarily share the same ethical convictions as others who have entrusted them with carrying out stability operations.

A Moral Military in War’s Aftermath

Since Vietnam, the U.S. military has attempted to address the need to instill ethical thinking at all levels. For example, during the early ‘70s, U.S. service academies started mandatory core courses on morality and war. In 1979, U.S. Army Lieutenant
Colonel Jack Lane proposed the establishment of a single code of ethics for the United States Army. Colonel James Swartz argues, “The moral leader will not merely keep his own house in order. The moral leader will not tolerate those who abridge the standard, and the moral leader will punish those who break the rules—even when such decisions are unpopular, and even when it conflicts with the wishes of others in positions of influence.” Ethical behavior “must be inculcated” and enforced by proper authorities. Only ethical instruction at the lowest levels can help alleviate the conflicting pressures of fighting a war and doing all that stability operations entails for success.

Heavy moral language laces the discourse on stability operations and nation-building efforts; however, from a strategic standpoint, security, stability, and order have always been the first priorities—they too rest on a substratum of ethical assumptions. As Michael Walzer suggests, historians should pay due attention to jus post bellum, or the moral issues involved after the cessation of conventional hostilities. Laws of war and military training and regulations guide Soldiers’ actions in combat, but there is something missing if these same Soldiers wonder “Why are we still here?” after they have defeated another country’s forces in wartime. The ethical commitment to conduct stability operations is often forced upon America’s military in the absence of understanding, leaving the individuals therein with the psychological burden of reconciling their roles as both trained killers and purveyors of goodwill, attempting to earn an indigenous population’s hearts and minds. The Soldiers so burdened have not yet been educated to that effect—the military has treated the ethics of war, peace, and occupation more as a process of osmosis than a focused effort.

Problems arise when the majority of the population, civilian leaders, and Soldiers on the ground do not share the ethical commitment to stabilize or rebuild another country. When this conviction is absent or not evenly distributed, resentment swells, tension rises, and unfortunately, often deadly, tragic, and potentially catastrophic consequences ensue.

NOTES

1. The present work accepts Merriam-Webster’s definition of ethical(s) as “the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation” and as a set or “sets of moral principles.” (Definition accessed online at www.m-w.com/dictionary/ethics on 12 January 2008). Furthermore, ethics have the function of identifying activities and behavior “as good or bad or somewhere in between these two extremes.” On this point, see Cloma Huffman, “Ethical Bases for Military Decisions,” Military Review (August 1961).


4. An excellent work that covers the genesis of the Law of War, to include Just War and other doctrines, can be found in David Caaleri, The Law of War: Can 20th-Century Standards Apply to the Global War on Terrorism? (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2005). Amistad the numerous debates concerning the practicality of 20th-century laws of war in the current conflict against terrorism, Caaleri states succinctly that “the law of war in its current form is more than adequate to face the new GWOT challenges, [and] it does not warrant revision.”

5. The reason why the American media (and public) still refers to the U.S. role in Iraq as the “Iraq War” could be because that term is acceptable shorthand for “American stability operations and nation-building efforts in Iraq,” but it might be that certain rules of moral conduct are best understood in the context of a full-scale war. Michael Walzer, Arguing About War (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 163–189.


31. Ibid.


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