Proposal Circulates on New Civilian-Military Agency Iraq Reconstruction Inspector General Urges Office to Report to the Department of State and the Department of Defense

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Stuart Bowen is the United States Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction

As the United States' Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR), Stuart Bowen has blown the whistle on millions of dollars worth of waste, fraud, and abuse. But one of his final acts in the job will be to address something more fundamental: the way United States civilian officials interact with their military counterparts during the complex wars of the future.

Bowen, acting with the institutional power of his government office, SIGIR, is circulating a draft proposal to create a new civilian office for wars like Afghanistan and Iraq that would report jointly to the Department of State and the Department of Defense. In a dramatic departure from the current ad hoc arrangement, where diplomats and aid workers come up with on-the-spot arrangements to liaise with the United States military in war zones, Bowen believes that a single agency, which he analogizes to an "international Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)," ought to be the single civilian point-of-contact with the military if the United States is to avoid future wartime coordination fiascoes. He calls it, in typical Washington acronym-ese, the United States Office for Contingency Operations (USOCO).

Bowen explains that the proposal grew out of seeing millions wasted in Iraq and tracing the problems back to fundamental weaknesses of coordination and operational management. "As the United States reconstruction effort in Iraq demonstrated, when everyone is in charge, no one is in charge," Bowen writes in a 27-page paper he has passed to the Obama Administration about the USOCO proposal that *The Washington Independent* obtained. The proposal was subject on Monday to a so-called "murderboard" of criticism at the Center for Complex Operations—one of the many ad hoc government institutions that have sprung up since the Afghanistan and Iraq wars to try to compel civilian officials to interact more closely with the military.

Experts and practitioners have lamented that in both Afghanistan and Iraq, no single individual or institution has the power to direct civilian efforts in reconstruction, economic development, and political stabilization, even though the military says that its efforts will not be successful unless those tasks are met. The result has been impromptu arrangements with different federal agencies, unclear mechanisms for accountability, and years of deterioration in both wars.

> With an ad hoc structure, you lack the formalized approach that you need to be able integrate those [civilian] capabilities with military power, said Lieutenant Colonel Steve Leonard, who wrote the Army's field manual on stability operations, in an

> interview. It is the lack of that bureaucratic structure we are all used to that makes it so difficult to point a finger, say 'I need this,' and get a response.

Bowen believes the USOCO could play that bureaucratic role. It would "solve the unity of command problems encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan with respect to relief and reconstruction operations," his paper reads, by creating a "permanent, fully accountable, empowered interagency management office." It would take "full responsibility for managing the relief and reconstruction component" of a future war and would report jointly to both State and the Pentagon. With "total accountability for" the relief and reconstruction budget, it would manage all personnel used for such an operation "except for any uniformed personnel normally answerable to the [Geographic] Combatant Commander and Foreign Service personnel answerable to the Chief of Mission," the deputy to the ambassador in a United States embassy.

Working on the proposal for months with his deputy, Ginger Cruz, Bowen keyed in several Obama Administration officials to the USOCO idea. His idea has made its way to the State Department's Policy Planning office, where it is being considered by staffers working on a major review of United States diplomacy and development policies. At the Pentagon, the proposal has been briefed to aides to Michele Flournoy, the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, who worked on issues surrounding the integration of civilian and military efforts in warfare for years while out of government. And at the White House, it has been given to Gayle Smith, the senior staffer in charge of development policy at the National Security Council. Representatives for those agencies either did not respond to requests for comment or declined to comment on the record.

SIGIR, the office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, is nearing the end of its life as the United States winds down its military presence in Iraq. In an interview Monday, Bowen said that he didn't want the USOCO proposal to be seen as SIGIR's legacy.

> It is not so much what we want, he said. We are just offering our observations for how overseas contingency operations are managed.
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> Cruz said the "easy part" of SIGIR's job was to call out waste, fraud, and abuse on specific Iraq contracts. It is making recommendations on solutions that's difficult, she said, saying that it was natural for SIGIR to move from specific criticisms of poor program management to a broader critique of the poor civilian-military coordination that led to wasted taxpayer money. The important role for SIGIR to play is the objective oversight partner that does not have a dog in the fight and does not have to align its views with the DOS and DOD.

The informal civilian-military coordination system criticized by Bowen is being applied for Afghanistan by Richard Holbrooke, the Obama Administration's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, who has assembled a staff from across the government that works on Afghanistan/Pakistan issues. Yet Holbrooke has no direct authority to deploy diplomats, development experts, legal advisers, or other civilians into Afghanistan, nor to direct them when they are on the ground. Nor does General Stanley McChrystal, who wrote in his famous assessment that his efforts leading the United States war in Afghanistan "cannot succeed without a corresponding cadre of civilian experts," have a civilian counterpart whom he can directly ask to provide those civilian experts. In a briefing last week, Deputy Secretary of State Jack Lew said that the DOS was moving aggressively to fill nearly 1000 civilian positions for Afghanistan by the end of the year; but it is unclear if the deadline will be met.

Bowen said bluntly that he wants the USOCO structure "to be used in Afghanistan" or at least for the government to address several points raised in his paper about joint civilian-military coordination, budgeting, and accountability. While his office's mandate has never extended beyond Iraq, Bowen said he was "continuing to carry out our oversight mandate, as defined by the Hill, as to how the United States is structured to carry out" its role in stability operations like those in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The position is not without problems, some of which Bowen acknowledges in his proposal. The DOS "regards decisions affecting a host nation to be squarely within its traditional area of responsibility," the proposal states; and the DOD "might resist a new entity that would exert decision making power" over reconstruction money spent by on-the-ground military Commanders. And "the creation of a new governmental agency is always controversial and subject to resistance."

Some of those criticisms arose at Monday's murderboard session, according to participants, which was attended by about fifty representatives of the DOD, Joint Staff, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) employees, Hill aides, and retired diplomats. Jeremy Pam, a former Treasury Department attaché in Baghdad, attended the session and said Bowen's USOCO proposal received a "respectful hearing" but not a full endorsement. "Some people expressed skepticism about how much appetite there was for creating a new organization," said Pam, who left the Treasury Department in 2007 and now works for the United States Institute of Peace.

Cruz said that USOCO—which, as outlined in the paper, will command "a small permanent staff"—does not represent the sort of bureaucratic entity that could spur a turf battle from wary agencies. "The proposal SIGIR is making is not infringing on anyone's turf," she said. "It is an inter-agency solution that is subordinate to and organic of DOS and DOD. That is integral."

Bowen said the "very helpful comments" at the murderboard session will help "evolve" the proposal in advance of circulating a new draft of his paper to DOS, USAID, and the Pentagon later this month before formally submitting it in December (2009) to the House and Senate committees for government oversight, foreign affairs, armed services, and appropriations. "It provided us exactly what we wanted: a good, solid critique," he said.

Leonard, who has pushed the Army to embrace working with civilian diplomats and development professionals from his position as Chief of Initiatives at the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, saw promise in Bowen's idea.

> With respect to the civilian expertise that is so critical to this. This is how you realize the comprehensive approach, Leonard said. There is great capability in the military side. But the real keys to sustainable development over the long term [are] resident in the civilian component. On the surface of it, it looks like this is the vehicle to do that.
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> Jeremy Pam is not as convinced. The advantage of it is, in theory, it gets at the coordination problem, which is one of the fundamental issues, he said. But you have to stipulate an awful lot, the existing players who are involved in this, not only in foreign affairs [agencies] but domestic as well, have to be ready to give up authorities, budgetary and otherwise. Two, you have to assume that the political leadership will use a new entity like USOCO, which is a kind of technocratic solution that makes sense on paper, but it will not necessarily involve people who political officials trust to do the right thing.

Even if Bowen and Cruz do not wish USOCO to been seen as SIGIR's legacy, Cruz tied the proposal back to SIGIR's fundamental mandate.

> It is about economy, efficiency, and effectiveness, she said. Every day we sit here, millions of dollars continue to go in these operations; and the outcomes become more critical. Are [we] doing this [the] most effective way? The body of work SIGIR produced clearly says we are not doing it in the best, most efficient way.