



The Military's Role in Humanitarian Efforts During Conflict and Post Conflict

NO.25-1022
August 2025





The Center for Army Lessons Learned leads the Army Lessons Learned Program and delivers timely and relevant information to resolve gaps, enhance readiness, and inform modernization.



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Introduction

The United States has engaged in 17 nation-building efforts since 1900, with only four resulting in established democracies—a 24% success rate if democracy establishment is the metric (Figure 1). How does the United States ensure future success in nation building efforts? Establishing a Military Humanitarian Cell (MHC) and applying lessons from Presidential Directive 56 (PDD-56), emergency management, and the State Department can improve future nation-building success. PDD-56, issued in 1997, emphasizes developing an integrated political-military plan for presentation to the deputies and principals committees, rehearsing the plan prior to execution (including transitions or hand-offs of responsibility), and monitoring execution to ensure unity across U.S. government agencies.¹ These principles, combined with emergency management frameworks and State Department expertise, provide a structured approach to coordinate military and civilian efforts effectively. Without codifying and implementing these lessons, the U.S. risks repeated failures.

This article explores key topics including recovery and post-conflict strategies, military applications tailored to host nation needs, communication challenges, and resource coordination. Throughout, figures illustrate comparisons such as reconstruction versus development and highlight lessons learned from previous military humanitarian efforts. This structured approach aims to provide a comprehensive framework for integrating military and civilian efforts to enhance global stability and humanitarian success.

Table 3.1 Nation-Building Efforts Led by the United States since 1900						
Target country	Population	Period	Duration (years)	Multilateral or unilateral?	Type of interim administration	Democracy after 10 years?
Iraq	24 million	2003–present	1+	Unilateral	American for one year; surrogate regime afterward	?
Afghanistan	26.8 million	2001–present	2+	Multilateral	UN administration	?
Haiti	7.0 million	1994–96	2	Multilateral	Local administration	No
Panama	2.3 million	1989	<1	Unilateral	Local administration	Yes
Grenada	92,000	1983	<1	Unilateral	Local administration	Yes
Cambodia	7 million	1970–73	3	Unilateral	U.S. surrogate regime	No
South Vietnam	19 million	1964–73	9	Unilateral	U.S. surrogate regime	No
Dominican Republic	3.8 million	1965–66	1	Unilateral	U.S. surrogate regime	No
Japan	72 million	1945–52	7	Multilateral-unilateral*	U.S. direct administration	Yes
West Germany	46 million	1945–49	4	Multilateral	Multilateral administration	Yes
Dominican Republic	895,000	1916–24	8	Unilateral	U.S. direct administration	No
Cuba	2.8 million	1917–22	5	Unilateral	U.S. surrogate regime	No
Haiti	2 million	1915–34	19	Unilateral	U.S. surrogate regime	No
Nicaragua	620,000	1909–33	18	Unilateral	U.S. surrogate regime	No
Cuba	2 million	1906–1909	3	Unilateral	U.S. direct administration	No
Panama	450,000	1903–36	33	Unilateral	U.S. surrogate regime	No
Cuba	1.6 million	1898–1902	3	Unilateral	U.S. direct administration	No

* The United States won World War II as part of the Allied victory over Japan but assumed exclusive occupation authority in Japan after the war.

Francis Fukuyama. Nation-Building (Forum on Constructive Capitalism). Johns Hopkins University Press. Kindle Edition. Nation Building-Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq.

Figure 1: Previous Military Humanitarian Efforts (Fukuyama)²

¹ White House. (1997). Managing Complex Contingency Operations.

² Fukuyama, F. (2006). Nation-Building Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq. The John Hopkins University Press.

The military excels in combat but lacks institutional knowledge for effective post-conflict recovery. Lessons from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the State Department can inform policy adaptations. In the sections that follow, themes in civilian emergency management will be explored through the lens of lessons learned and how these lessons can be applied in military planning. Finally, this article concludes with a brief observation on lessons learned in Afghanistan and Iraq, followed by recommendations from a DOTmLPF-P analysis.

Recovery/Post-Conflict

Emergency Management lessons learned: Recovery planning begins immediately in emergency management, even if secondary to immediate response (Figure 2).

Military Application: During conflicts, military planners are overwhelmed, leaving post-conflict planning under-prioritized. An MHC should coordinate with governmental and non-governmental organizations, conduct engineer assessments for critical facilities, and plan post-conflict priorities (Figure 3). The MHC would also support logistics for NGOs aiding displaced populations, acting as a force multiplier without interfering with combatant mission command.

FEMA Phases of an Emergency

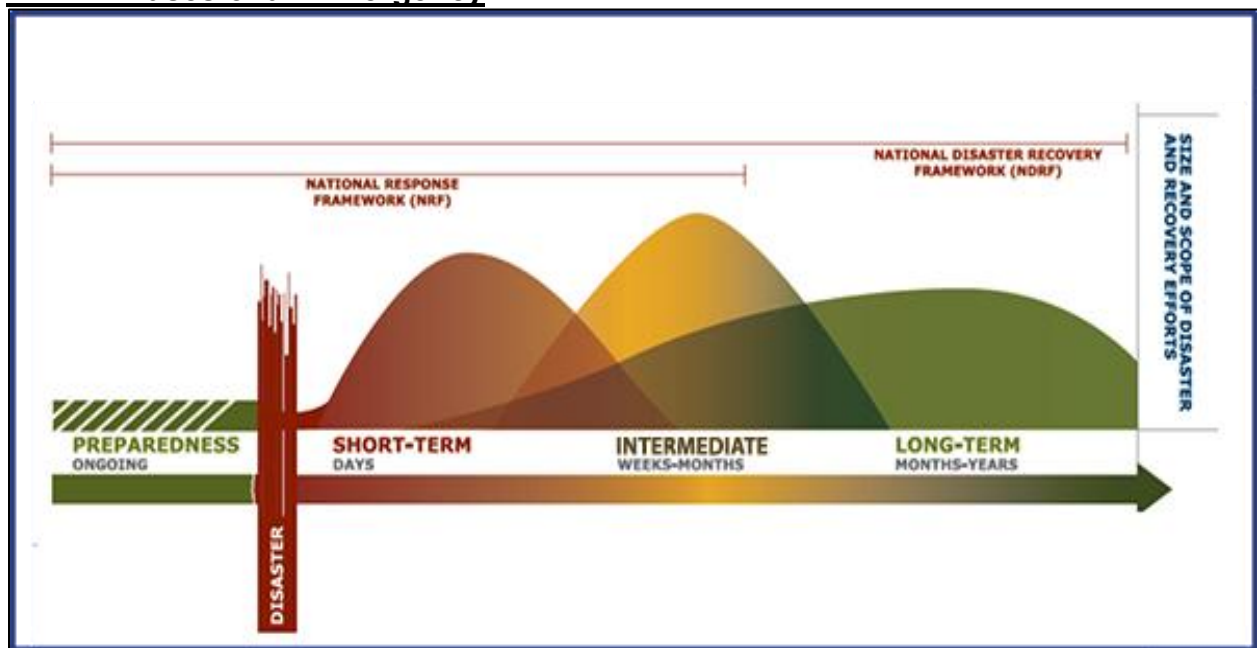


Figure 2: FEMA National Disaster Recovery Framework (FEMA)³

³ FEMA. (2024). National Disaster Recovery Framework.

Military Humanitarian Cell Post-Conflict Phases

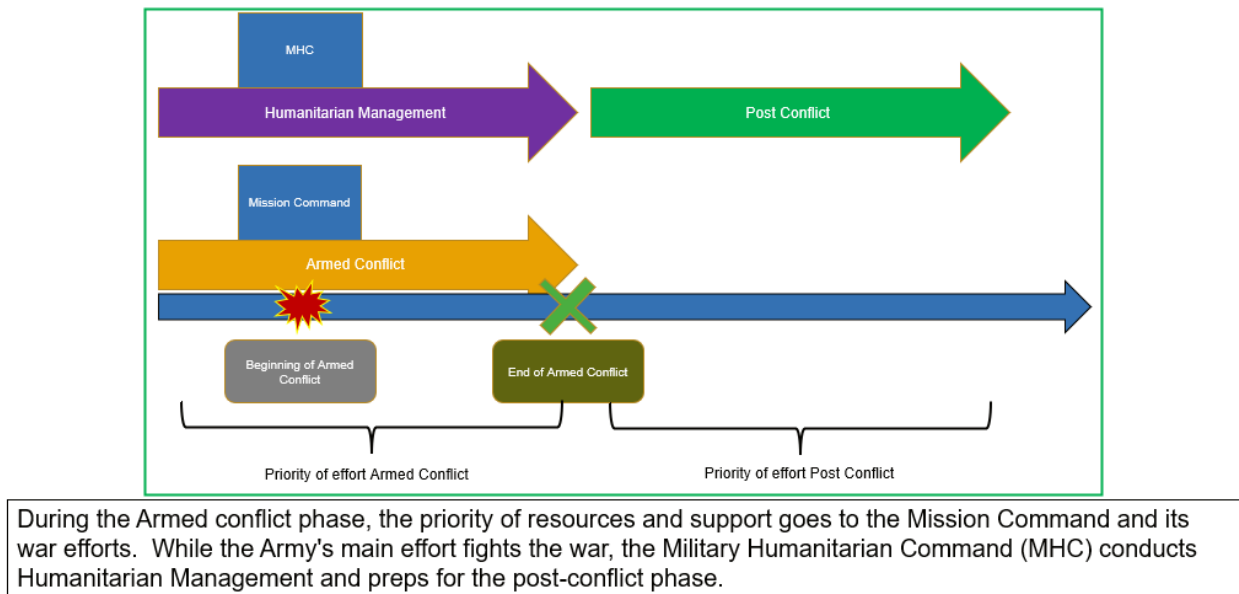


Figure 3: Proposed Military Humanitarian Cell Phases of Operation (Author)

Management System/Org Structure

Emergency Management lessons learned: The National Incident Management System (NIMS) provides flexibility and standardization through Emergency Support Functions (ESFs) and Recovery Support Functions (RSFs), managed by a Single Incident Commander or Unified Command.

Military Application: The MHC would coordinate Conflict Support Functions (CSFs), with a lead organization assigned to each. CSFs are areas of capability that enable and support military operations but are not inherently combat functions. They are critical for sustaining operations and achieving strategic objectives, but they don't engage directly with the enemy. However, CSFs are flexible and activated based on mission needs and available resources, ensuring tailored responses to post-conflict requirements.

The Contingency Response Unit (CRU), an engineer unit aligned with regional combatant commands, brings experience in disaster response and humanitarian operations, enhanced by FEMA training and reserve personnel's civilian expertise. The CRU can bridge military and civilian efforts, supporting CSFs without leading recovery efforts. Civil Affairs units are also viable assets for coordination. The military should not lead post-conflict recovery to avoid undermining the host nation's credibility and fueling anti-U.S. sentiment. A Unified Command, led by the post-conflict nation, State Department, and the U.N., should set strategic direction, with the military providing structure, communication, and resources (Figure 4). The MHC should employ a tiered prioritization framework for CSFs, ranking functions based on urgency, host nation priorities, and available resources, reviewed quarterly by the Unified Command.

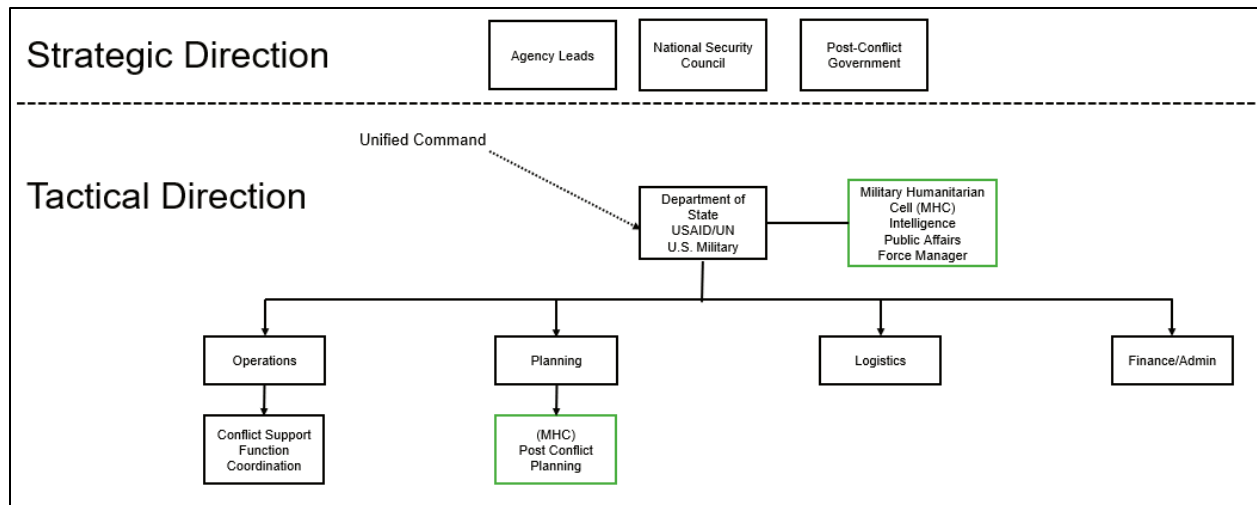


Figure 4: Proposed Post Conflict Organizational Structure (Author)

Potential CSFs:

1. **Transportation and Logistics Management:** Facilitates civilian evacuation during conflict and prioritizes transportation and resource support for nation-building efforts post-conflict.
2. **Communications:** Ensures effective communication among nation-building entities by sharing unclassified intelligence to maintain a common operational picture.
3. **Public Works, Engineering, and Infrastructure:** Assesses and prioritizes repairs of critical infrastructure and manages restoration efforts.
4. **Counter Human Trafficking:** Identifies and counters trafficking through intelligence efforts and public communication campaigns.
5. **Humanitarian Aid and Mass Care:** Coordinates resource needs and distribution with governmental and non-governmental organizations, while managing displaced persons, food distribution, and mass treatment during biological or radiological events.
6. **Public Health and Medical Services:** Addresses civilian medical needs, including specialized care for obstetric, geriatric, and pediatric populations.
7. **Search and Rescue:** Leads efforts to rescue displaced individuals and reunite families.
8. **Hazardous Materials and Environmental Response:** Mitigates risks from hazardous facilities and assesses conflict impacts on natural resources, including agricultural recovery.
9. **Energy Restoration:** Restores oil and electric resources aligned with the host nation's capacity.

10. **Public Safety and Security:** Coordinates civilian evacuation and supports local law enforcement efforts.
11. **Stabilization and Economic Recovery:** Secures funding, sets stabilization goals, restores and develops economic systems.
12. **External Affairs and Public Communication:** Communicates progress and maintains public and stakeholder support.
13. **Measures of Effectiveness and Recovery Evaluation:** Independently evaluates progress using measurable metrics such as infrastructure restoration rates, resettlement numbers, and economic indicators to ensure accountability and effectiveness.

Local Governmental Led

Emergency Management lessons learned: FEMA emphasizes local governments leading response and recovery, with federal and state support. Local governments request resources or assistance when needed.

Military Application: The military should tailor support to the host nation's needs, distinguishing between reconstruction (restoring pre-conflict conditions) and development (creating new institutions). "Reconstruction refers to the restoration of war-torn or damaged societies to their pre-conflict situation. Development refers to the creation of new institutions and the promotion of sustained economic growth, events that transform the society open-endedly into something that it has not been previously."⁴ The MHC enhances the host nation's credibility by coordinating resources and support behind the scenes, ensuring the post-conflict government is perceived as the lead. This approach aligns resources with the host nation's cultural and economic priorities, avoiding perceptions of U.S. military dominance. A robust public affairs campaign should highlight the host nation's leadership, progress, and the U.S. military's supporting role to prevent views of occupation and foster trust in the local government. The MHC should establish a formal feedback mechanism, including regular consultations with host nation leaders and community representatives, to ensure recovery efforts align with local needs and priorities.

⁴ Fukuyama, F. (2006). *Nation-Building Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq*. The John Hopkins University Press.

It is important to define the type of Nation Building/Post Conflict Recovery efforts that need to take place. This will help manage public perceptions, scope of work, and realistic outcomes.

Reconstruction

- Basic governmental institutions are still intact
- The restoration of war-torn or damaged societies to their pre-conflict situation
- Post conflict nation legitimacy is more easily obtained
- Frameworks, institutions, and culture exists to assist and facilitate post conflict recovery more easily.
- Less man-power and financial requirements
- Less likely to see host nation dependency
- Shorter timeframe to success

Development

- Governmental institutions are non-existent, corrupt, non-functional
- The creation of new institutions and the promotion of sustained economic growth, events that transform the society open-endedly into something that it has not been previously
- Post conflict nation legitimacy is difficult to obtain due to increased perception of U.S. control
- More challenging and requires greater resources
- More man-power and financial requirements
- More likely to see host nation dependency
- Longer timeframe to success

Reconstruction Examples

- Japan
- Germany

Construction Examples

- Afghanistan
- Iraq

Figure 5: Reconstruction vs Development Comparison (Author)

Common Communication

Emergency Management lessons learned: NIMS uses common terminology to ensure clarity across agencies.

Military Application: Military jargon can confuse civilian partners. The MHC should use clear language, leverage reserve personnel familiar with civilian communication, and share declassified intelligence over unclassified networks.

Budget

The Army's Planning, Programming, Budget, Execution (PPBE) process is too slow for recovery needs. To ensure funds are managed efficiently, the National Security Council (NSC), in coordination with the host nation, should lead a quarterly mini-PPBE process in Washington, D.C., with input from the MHC in the affected country. The MHC compiles a 1-N list of requirements from CSFs, which the NSC and host nation analyze to prioritize funding based on national and host nation priorities, ensuring the host nation's voice shapes resource allocation.

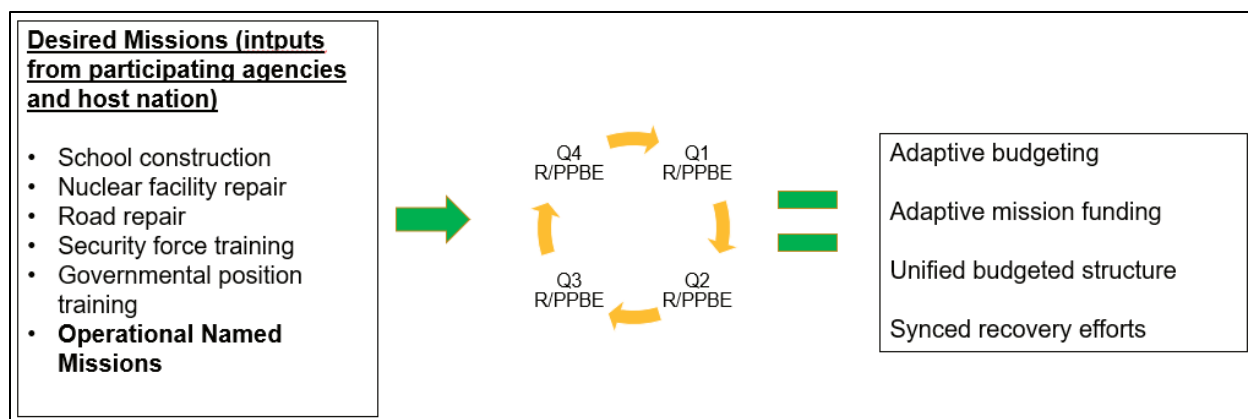


Figure 6: Proposed Force Management Cycle for the MHC (Author)

Exercises

Emergency Management lessons learned: Exercises involve all stakeholders, progressing from seminars to full-scale drills.

Military Application: Exercises should include the State Department, U.N., NGOs, and high-risk nation leadership. The Center of Army Analysis should identify gaps in post-conflict processes.

Lessons Learned from Afghanistan and Iraq

Afghanistan: Poor coordination between military and civilian agencies led to duplicated efforts and resource waste. Provincial Reconstruction Teams achieved localized stabilization but lacked a unified strategy, resulting in uneven outcomes. Insufficient local government involvement and cultural misunderstandings undermined long-term stability. Fukuyama observed that *"[t]he lack of integration between military and civilian agencies in Afghanistan led to fractured efforts, with duplicated projects and inefficient resource allocation that undermined overall effectiveness."*⁵ Parks takes this discussion further by noting that *"[t]he military's limited understanding of local cultural dynamics often led to mistrust and resistance, weakening the intended impact of aid and reconstruction projects."*⁶

Iraq: The Coalition Provisional Authority faced delays in infrastructure restoration due to inadequate post-conflict planning. Over-reliance on military-led reconstruction eroded local trust. The Commander's Emergency Response Program supported quick-impact projects but lacked integration with long-term development goals. Once again, Fukuyama observed that *"[t]he Coalition Provisional Authority's inadequate planning and mismanagement caused significant delays in restoring essential services, exacerbating instability and public frustration."*⁷ Parks concurs, stating that *"[w]ithout coordination with*

⁵ Fukuyama, F. (2006). *Nation-Building Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq*. The John Hopkins University Press.

⁶ Parks, N. H. (2011). *Armed Humanitarians: The Rise of the Nation Builders*. Bloomsbury USA.

⁷ Fukuyama, F. (2006). *Nation-Building Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq*. The John Hopkins University Press.

*Iraqi institutions, short-term military-driven projects risked undermining the credibility and effectiveness of broader reconstruction goals."*⁸

DOTmLPF-P

The recommendations provided below still require staffing and further deliberate analysis. Regardless of the solution, a military post-conflict structure needs to be established and relationships with nonmilitary and non-governmental organizations built.

1. Doctrine:

- a. Update CRU doctrine to define roles within combatant commands.
- b. Clarify military roles in post-conflict efforts and scope.
- c. Integrate MHC concepts into Multi-Domain Operations. Reinstitute PDD-56 or equivalent.

2. Organization:

- a. Define conflict and post-conflict structures.
- b. Identify military-supported CSFs.
- c. Designate a lead entity (e.g., State Department, CRU).

3. Training:

- a. Train CRU on roles in post-conflict scenarios.
- b. Educate combatant commands on MHC integration.
- c. Include non-military actors in training.
- d. Develop cultural competence training for MHC and CRU personnel, incorporating State Department expertise and local stakeholder input to align recovery efforts with host nation values.

4. Material:

- a. Integrate data analytics and geospatial tools to support CSF operations, enabling real-time tracking of recovery progress and resource allocation.

5. Leadership:

- a. Secure buy-in from non-military entities.
- b. Establish communication channels with civilian actors.

6. Education:

- a. Educate stakeholders on whole-of-government post-conflict concepts.

7. Personnel:

- a. No impact at this time

8. Facilities:

- a. No impact at this time

9. Policy:

- a. Drive integration from top leadership via the NSC.

⁸ Parks, N. H. (2011). *Armed Humanitarians: The Rise of the Nation Builders*. Bloomsbury USA.

Conclusion

The MHC, supported by units like the CRU and Civil Affairs, enhances post-conflict recovery by coordinating resources and aligning efforts with host nation priorities. Informed by lessons from Afghanistan, Iraq, and FEMA, the MHC can improve nation-building outcomes. Codifying lessons through a whole-of-government approach, as outlined in PDD-56, will strengthen U.S. influence and promote global stability.⁹

⁹ White House. (1997). Managing Complex Contingency Operations.

