War and the Art of Governance: Consolidating Success into Political Victory

Nadia Schadlow


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War and the Art of Governance by Dr. Nadia Schadlow is a timely and welcome book that bolsters the study of American war planning and execution. Schadlow focuses on the difficult, costly, and time-consuming reconstruction efforts often undertaken after major combat operations cease, which she refers to as “governance operations.” Governance operations are those efforts to consolidate military gains into lasting political order by controlling territory, building local institutions and governing structures, and supporting economic renewal and social service delivery. Schadlow contends that American politicians and military leaders “have consistently failed to devote appropriate attention and resources to organizing for the political requirements of military interventions.”1 She argues that when “civilian and military leaders debate the use of force, they must also determine whether the U.S. has the will, organizations, and resources to go from combat successes to achieving political outcomes.”2

Schadlow begins the book by describing America’s on-and-off-again aversion to preparing for the long-term reestablishment of political order after major combat operations cease. Despite some notable successes discussed later in the book, she claims there has consistently been antipathy on the part of political and military leaders for long-term political commitments after war. She coins the phrase “American Denial Syndrome” to describe the “denial of governance activities as integral to war.”3 Schadlow attributes this denial syndrome to several themes rooted in America’s political and military values and history. These themes include: “discomfort in a democracy with the idea of the military taking the lead in political activities, American concerns about colonialism, the view that civilians could take the lead in governance operations, and traditional views about what constituted war and the military profession…”4

Historically, Schadlow argues, there have been some situations where the U.S. military has effectively sought to consolidate military success into longer-term political stability. For instance, she demonstrates that the Army was relatively effective at administering governance operations during and after the Mexican-American War, Civil War, Spanish-American War, and World War I despite much of any clear guidance from political leaders in Washington D.C. Although each situation was vastly different, prominent Army generals and their staffs oversaw the reestablishment of territorial constitutions, rule of law, and administrative and judicial bodies along with, in some cases, the building of schools, roads, wells, and other public works projects. These experiences, however, highlighted the difficulty of when civilian authorities were introduced into the post-war mix, causing confusion regarding where military and civilian responsibilities began and ended. These challenges foreshadowed the tensions around unity of command and unity of effort that continue to
confound the American government today.

By the beginning of World War II (WWII), Schadlow explains, the Army had further developed its view of, and preparation for, governance operations. She claims that the Army’s leadership in the reconstruction of Germany, Italy, and Japan further demonstrated it “served as a key instrument of political change in Europe and Asia, as well as a key instrument for shifting the strategic landscape to favor U.S. interests.” These experiences also highlighted that the U.S. government anticipated that substantial political and physical reconstruction, along with ensuring security, would be required after combat operations concluded. As a result, the Army put substantial resources into research and planning for that eventuality while WWII was still ongoing, illustrating the prevailing view at the time that post-hostility reconstruction was part of the overall war effort. In many respects, the planning for and execution of governance operations in postwar Europe and Asia represented America’s most successful endeavor to transition from military victory to a durable political order, enabling long-term strategic success.

With the notable exception of Vietnam, Schadlow goes on to highlight several more examples of the Army ably performing stabilization activities in Korea, the Dominican Republic, and Panama during the Cold War era. Though much smaller in scale compared with governance operations in Italy, Germany, and Japan, in these cases, the Army once again undertook governance operations with scant guidance and in lieu of other civilian agencies. Civil instability in these countries demanded the Army continue to lead these operations despite ongoing concerns from politicians and civilian personnel that the army was not well-equipped to do so. Experiences in these countries, along with the creation of the U.S. Special Operations Command in 1987, furthered the “separation of governance operations from ‘regular war’ and general-purpose forces” and hardened the view that civil affairs activities were “purely temporary and secondary” to the “traditional combat role of the Army.”

Schadlow ends the case studies by covering the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and one gets the sense that she has constrained herself from using more colorful language to describe her view of America’s performance in consolidating military gains into long-term strategic victories in these theaters. She underscores the complexities of these wars and documents the struggle to maintain unity of effort and overcome bureaucratic inertia and civilian-military rivalries. Schadlow laments that these conflicts “revealed the ‘missing middle’– the gap between combat operations and the steps required to achieve stability, forge a sustainable outcome, and permit the withdrawal of U.S. military forces.” She argues America’s approach in these conflicts ignored hard-learned lessons from the previous 150 years and “perpetuated the belief that governance operations were not part of war.” She calls attention to the ongoing reluctance to give the responsibility for governance operations to the Army despite, in her opinion, it being the only organization that has the capability to effectively assume these responsibilities.

Schadlow concludes her book with several recommendations for political and military leaders. First, she argues “American policymakers must accept that the political dimension is indispensable across the full spectrum of war.” This means, in practice, that political and military leaders should consider governance operations as part of conventional war, not as separate and secondary to the main war effort. Second, “unity of command is essential to operational and strategic success.” She contends that civilian-military unity of effort is almost exclusively driven by personalities and relationships, concluding that in war, it is just not an effective concept. Third, she calls for civilian leaders to “give the army operational control over governance operations in war,” because only the
Army has the size, resources, and ability to operate in dangerous environments, and logistic networks to manage such large-scale operations. Fourth, Schadlow warns American leaders to not be “seduced by the idea that they can achieve policy objectives from afar by kinetic means alone.” Short-term military achievements without corresponding longer-term political gains will not lead to lasting victory. Finally, “the U.S. Government, especially the military, must have some standing capabilities and organizations that are prepared to conduct key governance tasks.” She argues the Army’s core competencies must expand to include capabilities which would enable transition to a durable political outcome.

What makes this book so timely is that Dr. Nadia Schadlow is currently the Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Strategy at the National Security Council. This is a perch from where Mrs. Schadlow should be able to influence how the United States prepares for and executes future wars. Amidst the escalating rhetoric of “fire and fury” between the leaders of the United States and North Korea, American military leaders have made it well-known they are prepared to fight and win any war with North Korea. What goes unmentioned is how the U.S. government would approach the ensuing humanitarian disaster that would take place on the Korean peninsula in the aftermath of war, especially if it goes nuclear. Given her high-level position within the U.S. government and the views she expresses in this book, the American public should have some hope that American political and military leaders are fully preparing for the mother of all reconstruction efforts that could result from war with North Korea. If not, it would demonstrate that American Denial Syndrome is alive and well and that the hard lessons of previous American-sponsored governance operations continue to go unlearned.

The opinions expressed in this review are solely those of the author and do not reflect a broader consensus or views within the USAID or of its management.

NOTES

2 Ibid., p. 12.
3 Ibid., p. 15.
4 Ibid., p. 22.
5 Ibid., p. 102.
6 Ibid., p. 176.
7 Ibid., p. 207.
8 Ibid., p. 220.
9 Ibid., p. 263.
10 Ibid., p. 273.
11 Ibid., p. 274.
12 Ibid., p. 275.
13 Ibid., p. 277.
14 Ibid.