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## **The Necessity of Learning Lessons**

**by Adam B. Siegel**

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*The United States needs to revise its approach to the development and utilization of lessons learned.*

As the President has declared, the United States of America is now at war—a war of indefinite duration with evolving tactics, techniques, and operations within the objective of eliminating international terrorism. This war has a quite different set of complexities and challenges—many, at best, unclear at this moment—when compared to past conflicts. Most striking, of course, is the lack of a clearly defined enemy with a clear geographic hub for all of its activities (Afghanistan notwithstanding). This will be a war fought in a coalition, interagency, interorganizational context with a continually evolving and adapting set of partners and players as the conflict evolves. This evolutionary context is key. We will have to adapt and change to successfully prosecute this war.

Years ago, a British Army general explained to me that the United Kingdom (U.K.) has a “lessons identified” rather than “lessons learned” program. “We identify lessons, only to forget them, and then to identify them at another time . . . often at too great a price.” He concluded, “. . . and we are striving to change this.” The United States must learn—and adopt—this approach. We must rapidly identify and strive to assimilate lessons, both positive and negative, from every aspect of this conflict. These lessons learned cannot await the end of the conflict nor can they be isolated to the U.S. military. This must be an adaptive process with cross organizational sharing of information, observations, and lessons to develop innovative approaches to the challenge the Nation faces.

The Department of Defense (DoD) currently expends significant resources on a wide range of lessons learned programs ranging from formal automated systems to large study teams to specific studies to crash efforts following conflicts (or incidents) to provide reports to Congress. A Defense Science Board panel has recently formed to learn the lessons from Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. Many of these efforts discover important lessons and innovative solutions to solve problems. At this time, however, this material is haphazard in quality, coverage and, as has been seen after recent conflicts, often focuses more on writing lessons to support winning budget battles than on honest analysis to help the Nation win future wars. While DoD lessons learned programs have serious problems, most other areas of the U.S. Government and international community have far less robust programs and suffer from similar bureaucratic pressures hampering frankly honest performance appraisals. The Nation is now at war. The lessons learned status quo is not acceptable.

The United States should adopt a new approach to examining all phases of operations—even while underway—to foster an environment of continuous learning and continuous adaptation to improve our approaches to the highly complex challenges of this new war. The Nation must establish a network of lessons identified teams to work across agencies and across issues in the war on terrorism.

These teams should have the following key characteristics:

- Wide-ranging in background and organizational affiliation for staff sourcing:
  - Multidisciplinary (quantitative and qualitative backgrounds) specialists.
  - Include military, civil service, academic, contractor, and industry.
  - Include international and multiagency elements when appropriate.
- Work across traditional boundaries with a reporting change that fosters interorganizational responses to the challenges of this conflict.
- Support in realtime while collecting data for future analysis-observer participants.
- Composed of a network of analytical teams with elements:
  - Working at all classification levels.
  - Ranging from U.S.-only to broad-ranging multinational teams.
- The teams should, at the same time, work toward three stages of analysis:
  - Immediate application of lessons to ongoing operations/activities while collecting data for future analysis.
  - Quick-look analysis of planning, intelligence, and operational activity.
  - Long-term documentation and analysis.

Just as the work environment will span the spectrum from unclassified, international work (such as on effectiveness analysis of different approaches to feeding/housing refugees) to compartmentalized analysis of alternative intelligence approaches, so, too, will the products. The products will range from participating in planning meetings to short memos to large studies to archives for future analysis (or historical documentation). Within appropriate restrictions, the teams will openly distribute as much material as possible to foster learning from identified lessons.

During World War II, U.K. and U.S. operations research analysts worked issues critical to victory. Whether determining optimal search patterns for sinking enemy U-boats, code-breaking, or analyzing the shipping requirements to move a division ashore in Normandy, these analysts were a tool toward more effective warfighting. A critical part of this was analysis of past engagements to help win future ones. The Nation and civilized society is again in a worldwide conflict. This war, however, cannot be neatly discussed as a set of military campaigns. Developing a more effective process for learning while we prosecute this war is literally an issue of life or death. We must focus our efforts so that the death is our enemy's.

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