



The Need for a Brigade Politics-and-Policy Staff Officer

Maj. Adam Scher, U.S. Army

By June 2015, morning battlefield-update briefs were routine in the 3rd Brigade Combat Team (BCT) of the 82nd Airborne Division's Baghdad command post. On one morning of that month, however, there was a critical difference: it was the first time a member of the staff was asked to provide commentary and analysis about the politics-and-policy decisions of regional governments, coalition partners, and the government of Iraq. Given my position as an assistant professor of American politics, policy, and strategy at the United States Military Academy at West Point, Col. Curtis Buzzard, the 3rd BCT commander, asked me to help explain how the 7 June national elections in Turkey might influence our partnership with the Iraqi Army's Ninewa Operations Command and the operational planning to liberate Mosul.

This was not the first time that a brigade commander asked me to fill this role. In 2008, while serving with the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) in Yusifiyah, Iraq, Col. Dominic Caraccilo asked me to study the Iraqi political process, interact with key State Department (DOS) officials, meet regularly with local political leaders, act as an advocate for the Iraqi population, and advise him on the political landscape within the areas of operations and interest.¹ Seven years later, I volunteered to spend the summer with 3rd BCT because I believed the setup of

brigade staffs did not account for the difference between its evolving operational needs and the structure and responsibilities of its staff. I worked with 3rd BCT in the summer because they, like every other BCT in the Army, had no officer at the brigade level to examine the politics and policy of their assigned region, and no foreign-service officers embedded in their formations.

During discussions in Iraq with others on the brigade staff, subordinate battalions, and our higher headquarters, it became apparent we lacked a clear procedure or person to assist in interpreting the Iraqi government's political decisions, in exploring the domestic politics of regional partners and adversaries, or even in understanding the differences between the Title 10, U.S. Code, authorities and functions of the combined joint task force and the Title 22 functions of the Office of Security Cooperation that has been operating in Iraq since 2011.² This lack of understanding reduced our capacity to partner, advise, and assist when our counterparts asked questions about regional dynamics or global issues with which we were not familiar or for which we lacked an appreciation. The BCT staff structure limited our ability to fully understand our operational environment and best apply combat power.

This gap also highlighted the apparent beginning of what has become a recurring complaint about field grade officers and more senior military leaders—that the “best military advice” they provide is too frequently tactically sound but strategically and politically uninformed. As former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. James Cartwright noted,

We forget the other elements of national power will be integrated into the objective at the highest levels of government. We fail to recall the use of force is a political decision—part of

Spc. Rose Lewis, 3rd Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 82nd Airborne Division, interprets for Maj. Adam Scher, Iraqi Security Forces development officer and political officer for 3rd BCT, and Col. Mohammed, Ninewa Operations Command action officer for popular mobilization forces integration, as they discuss the effect of Turkey's elections on the planning process for liberating Mosul 27 July 2015 at the Iraqi Ground Forces Command Headquarters compound, Baghdad, Iraq. (Photo by James Polk, U.S. Army)



a larger strategy—and that the end state will not be the political introduction of force; it will be a political settlement. That is, the principal reason for military intervention is to facilitate the political objectives.³

Army Doctrine Reference Publication 5-0, *The Operations Process*, indicates that commanders and staffs must consider operational variables—political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment, and time—when conducting analysis and planning, stating, “The operational variables are *fundamental* [emphasis added] to developing a comprehensive understanding of an operational environment.”⁴ Consideration of *just* the political and social operational variables may require staffs to evaluate up to seventeen different subvariables.⁵ Quite simply, most commanders and staffs at the tactical level are too task-saturated to acquire the breadth and depth of knowledge needed to create operationally sound plans in an extraordinarily complex political environment. The creation of a modified-table-of-organization-and-equipment billet for a brigade politics-and-policy staff officer could address this issue by assigning officers who are well versed in the

British Middle East scholar Emma Sky initially served 2003–2004 as political adviser to Col. William Mayville, U.S. commander of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, Kirkuk, Iraq. She developed such admiration and affection for the soldiers of the brigade that when they rotated home in early 2004, she reportedly “sobbed inconsolably all afternoon.” In 2006, Gen. Raymond Odierno, who had been Mayville’s division commander, invited her to become his political adviser when he was appointed the deputy American commander in Iraq. She served as his political advisor in 2006–2008 and in 2008–2010 when he returned as top commander in Iraq. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Curt Cashour, U.S. Army)

political, social, and economic complexities of their operational environment to BCTs.⁶

Some may argue that the intelligence (S-2), civil affairs (S-9), and foreign area officers already exist within our formations and could or should accomplish this mission. While the S-2 can produce the “road to war” prior to a deployment—which typically includes some analysis of the broader region, its stakeholders, and other key influences—the tactical S-2 is enemy-focused. The daily demands of intelligence production at the BCT level do not leave much time for examining the larger strategic environment, or host-nation (HN) security forces.

Similarly, the S-9 typically focuses on infrastructure development, and the operations officer (S-3) is engrossed in planning operations, evaluating key terrain, and coordinating between the other warfighting functions within the brigade. No functional area officers—whether foreign area officers, strategists, or strategic intelligence officers—are assigned at the brigade level. Given the likely continued emphasis on partnerships between conventional Army units and their HN counterparts, the Army cannot continue to accept this deficiency in the brigade staff. Without a trained and resourced politics-and-policy officer, only in rare instances will a commander obtain critical information by setting aside one of his or her officers or directing a staff element to look at these issues instead of or in addition to their mission-essential tasks.

The politics-and-policy officer need not be its own functional area that forces an officer out of the operations track and command pipeline like the strategist, acquisition, or foreign-area officer specialties. Rather, it could be an additional skill identifier consisting of formal schooling and a utilization tour. Selection must be competitive and nominative, and schooling should consist of formal master's degree programs in international relations, foreign policy, public administration, finance and business, or regional studies, with coursework in economics and public policy. Officers who acquire this additional skill identifier should be managed similarly to those who complete the School of Advanced Military Studies.

With a planned reduction to thirty BCTs by fiscal year 2017, the Army would only need to allocate a minimum of sixty officers to a maximum of ninety officers per year to this program.⁷ One politics-and-policy officer per BCT would require thirty officers, with an additional thirty in a one-year graduate school program ready to replace the existing politics-and-policy officers after a twelve-month utilization tour. If the Army wanted to send each politics-and-policy officer to a two-year graduate program, an additional thirty officers would be required.

The question of how to incorporate these officers back into the appropriate key development and command pipelines remains. The Pentagon is already implementing personnel reforms that are expanding officer opportunities for advanced civilian schooling. Such enhanced education proposals are a key component of Defense Secretary Ashton Carter's effort to overhaul the military personnel system. According to the *Military Times*, "the emerging slate of reforms will include new benchmarks

designed to encourage officers to go to civilian graduate schools and other 'broadening assignments' that involve spending time beyond the insular military community."⁸ The politics-and-policy officer billet could be a necessary component to institutionalize already existing military education reforms and bring enhanced capabilities to the BCT without making new, costly investments outside of existing personnel reforms.

Deployed BCTs could benefit from a politics-and-policy officer immediately. During my time with 3rd BCT, it was clear that the brigade's separate missions of building partner capacity, training and equipping an HN security force, and advising and assisting HN political and military leaders at times had competing strategic ends. In some cases, our efforts to equip and train the Kurds undermined our efforts to advise and assist the government in Baghdad. At an even more granular level, our partnership with units committed to the defense of Baghdad often took training time and space away from our HN partner units that were apportioned to liberate areas north and west of the capital. Given that no existing brigade staff section had a primary responsibility to aid the commander in processing or prioritizing competing tactical and strategic measures of performance and effectiveness, it was incumbent upon the leaders within the brigade to come up with creative solutions.

The brigade task-organized and established an advise-and-assist cell comprised of officers for whom the advise-and-assist mission was neither their primary mission nor their area of expertise. Each day, they had to make decisions on how and where to spend their finite time and resources, a situation that could be at least partially alleviated by the politics-and-policy officer, whose daily responsibility should be to organize

Maj. Adam Scher, U.S. Army, is the executive officer of 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment. He previously served as an assistant professor in the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy. He graduated from West Point in 2004 and from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs in 2013. A veteran of multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, he most recently served as a brigade politics-and-policy officer for 3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, during its deployment to Iraq in 2015.

what might otherwise be a somewhat ad hoc effort, and relieve some of the task-saturation problem for other staff officers.

The brigade was also constrained by a number of other factors, particularly restrictions on the number of personnel in theater and an inability to operate outside forward operating bases. The operational environment was also complicated by numerous other U.S. and coalition government agencies as well as many factions within the Iraqi government and security apparatus. The BCT quickly recognized that regional and Iraqi-specific context and information were critical to accomplishing its training and advising mission. Buzzard explains,

Without this context and understanding, multiple units could have easily inadvertently caused a long-term problem while pursuing a seemingly logical short-term solution. Given the complexity of the operational environment, the brigade prioritized a “mission first” perspective over concerns about lines of authority, task organization, or who received credit—3/82’s deployment adopted a “one team” approach.⁹

Despite this “mission first” attitude, some missions conflicted with others, and adjacent units, superior and subordinate command headquarters, and peers on the brigade staff did not have refined processes for evaluating the myriad of stakeholders’ interests. Various parties’ interests, both within and external to the immediate BCT battle space, influenced the area of operations and decision making for applying combat power. This is not an indictment of any individual or command—on the contrary, it is an observation that the task organization of the Army’s unit of employment, the BCT, has not been adapted to meet the changing battlefield environment, and it is less than ideally suited to operate and exercise lethal and nonlethal force among large populations of noncombatants. Operations that require the skills of a politics-and-policy officer include—

- training an HN security force,
- equipping an HN security force,
- advising and assisting HN military and political leaders on employment of their force, and
- conducting lethal and nonlethal fires in support of HN ground maneuver.

BCTs will not be able to effectively balance these tactical missions and their strategic consequences unless we task-organize and manage our talent

appropriately to bridge the gap described above. Therefore, the brigade politics-and-policy officer should be given the following duty description:

An assigned officer on the BCT staff will be responsible for making tactical recommendations to the brigade commander based on an assessment of governmental influences on HN security forces training, equipping, and employment. This recommendation should include the officer’s evaluation of data from multiple sources and, upon the brigade commander’s approval, it can be used to create products that support advise-and-assist teams at the battalion level in their evaluation of partnered forces. Equally important, a focus on this type of HN security forces assessment will help provide the brigade commander with an accurate understanding of the capabilities of training units, enabling better decisions about employment in support of all aspects of urban land operations.

The brigade politics-and-policy officer should be given the following key tasks:

- understand HN political leaders’ party affiliation, legal obligation, and election cycle;
- identify informal or opposition leaders not in government (by definition, a key leader engagement only allows us to interact with the winners of the democratic process even if they do not represent more than 51 percent of any given population); and
- track political and policy outcomes of numerous interested governments and assess the potential impact politics and policy will have on HN security force capacity building.

The purpose of formalizing this staff position is to institutionalize intellectual capital within the BCT in the same way we already focus on building tactical and operational expertise for our company commanders and field grade officers. Interestingly enough, the Army already has a repository of officers that could immediately fill this gap. They have already completed advanced civilian schooling, many have published in the fields of political science and force employment, and all have proven to be successful company grade officers at the tactical level.

Prior to making any changes to the modified table of organization and equipment, a pilot program could allow the Army and BCT commanders to test this concept. Officers teaching in the U.S. Military Academy’s Department of Social Sciences are already spending their summers attached to fielded-force units to provide this support. Col. Cindy Jebb, who heads the



Department of Social Sciences, spent the summer of 2015 working with the Office of Security Cooperation–Iraq at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, and the department considered ways to send another officer to support the joint force land component commander in Iraq again during the summer of 2016.

Additionally, during the summer of 2015, I functioned as the 3rd BCT’s politics-and-policy officer, providing the brigade commander with regional and political analysis of the major stakeholders for Iraq, as well as analysis of U.S. influences on policy decisions and recommendations. This analysis was informed by participation in key-leader engagements every day and was disseminated by publishing a daily report that gave commanders, staff officers, and soldiers down to the platoon level the ability to understand the politics relevant to their operations and to leverage that understanding in their advise-and-assist mission. Buzzard believes his building-partner-capacity and advise-and-assist missions could be enhanced if he and his team assigned a staff officer to generate a political understanding of 3rd BCT’s HN and coalition partners; despite how critical political understanding is, even at the tactical level, the Army did not provide him with an officer dedicated to this task.¹⁰

A role player portraying an Afghan provincial governor addresses security concerns to Col. Michael Getchell, commander of 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, and other brigade leaders 11 June 2012 during a key-leader engagement exercise at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California. Such engagements are greatly enhanced by the presence of trained and experienced political officers. (Photo by Sgt. Christopher M. Gaylord, U.S. Army)

The success of this “proof of concept” has generated interest from multiple brigade commanders who are interested in enhancing their units’ understanding of their operational environments and their ability to accomplish their missions. For the Army to truly benefit from the creation of a politics-and-policy officer billet, there must also be value added to the BCT organization in garrison or during home-station training, not just a deployed mission requirement. The lessons learned from 3rd BCT’s preparation and deployment provide unique insight into how the potential functions of a brigade politics-and-policy officer could enhance predeployment training. Buzzard describes his brigade’s predeployment training focus in the following manner:

Upon receipt of the mission, the BCT had to conduct a rapid mission analysis—there

were few facts and a lot of assumptions about this evolving mission. First, and foremost, the brigade aggressively implemented a leader development program that initially leveraged the Security Force Assistance Advisor Team (SFAAT) Academy, which is based at the Joint Readiness Training Center. Their program of instruction was an excellent primer for advise-and-assist tasks, refreshed the unit's understanding of Iraq's cultural nuances, and provided a great start point to examine the mission.¹¹

Ideally, the politics-and-policy officer could supply this type of "primer" at home station, using the SFAAT Academy program of instruction as a base and adding regionally specific context from a variety of sources, including academia. This type of training at home station would allow the unit's training-center rotation to serve as a certifying exercise.

In addition to existing military training programs, Buzzard expanded his predeployment preparation to other nontraditional resources that focused on leader professional development:

Col. Joel Rayburn, author of *Iraq After America*, presented a session to key leaders on his recent book and research on Operation Iraqi Freedom. His insights into Iraqi political and military institutional change since U.S. forces departed Iraq was hugely beneficial, and his connections to experts that the BCT would later leverage during the deployment were equally important. In addition, the BCT hosted the West Point's Combating Terrorism Center, which shared its most recent products on the Islamic State and offered valuable perspectives on the politics in Baghdad and the retreat of Iraqi forces in 2014. The BCT also invited the Negotiations Project from West Point and executed a seminar on developing negotiation strategies for the BCT's leaders.¹²

A full-time politics-and-policy officer could develop and implement this type of unconventional, "out of the box" training. The officer would work closely with the brigade S-3 to ensure the training was properly balanced with other mandatory and predeployment training.

Finally, the Army does not have to do this alone. A whole-of-government approach that leverages

interagency partners could also help fill this gap. Adapting the State Department Provincial Reconstruction Team program to assign foreign-service officers to Army BCTs could be explored as a pilot program for improving the task organization and enhancing the building-partner-capacity and advise-and-assist effectiveness of Army formations. Another option would allow the Army to send its politics-and-policy officers to a civilian graduate school and follow such study with an assignment to an interagency partner such as the DOS. Doing so would enable these officers to serve in an embassy as a member of an ambassador's country team or at the DOS headquarters in order to understand how the political-military sections integrate their specific country's perspectives into U.S. foreign policy goals. As I wrote in an article for the Task and Purpose website, "The United States already has experience with security sector reform and has published doctrine to define the relationship between the DOS, U.S. Agency for International Development, and Department of Defense. In it, these agencies are tasked to work together to provide reform efforts directed at the institutions, processes, and forces that provide security and promote the rule of law in a host country."¹³

Expanding this arrangement to incorporate civilian experts into a BCT's culminating training event as well as its real-world deployments could be another option for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of BCTs deployed to conduct partnership operations. While this would not expand the intellectual capital within the Army, it would leverage the knowledge of career civil servants who arguably have a better understanding of culture and politics.

The risk to the interagency support program is in the civilian's lack of experience with Army tactical operations. The advantage of training a successful company commander with an additional skill rests with this officer's ability to understand and integrate politics and policy into existing warfighting functions like fires and maneuver.

While I expect my next job to be a return to a tactical infantry battalion, what became apparent over my time with 3rd BCT was that for tactical decisions at the battalion and company level to be truly exceptional, they must be informed by a political, strategic, and cultural understanding of the HN, by the interests of other governmental and nongovernmental actors, and

by a greater appreciation for other elements of national power that support the overall U.S. strategy. As former Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond Odierno said, “We now have ... the opportunity to study and recommend changes to our brigade combat team organization. ... It is critical that this vital war fighting formation remains dominant against the evolving hybrid threats in tomorrow’s operational environments.”¹⁴ One way to accomplish this is to create a position on the BCT staff charged with the responsibility to analyze and understand the politics and policies of partnered governments and interested stakeholders that affect our partnered HN security forces. ■

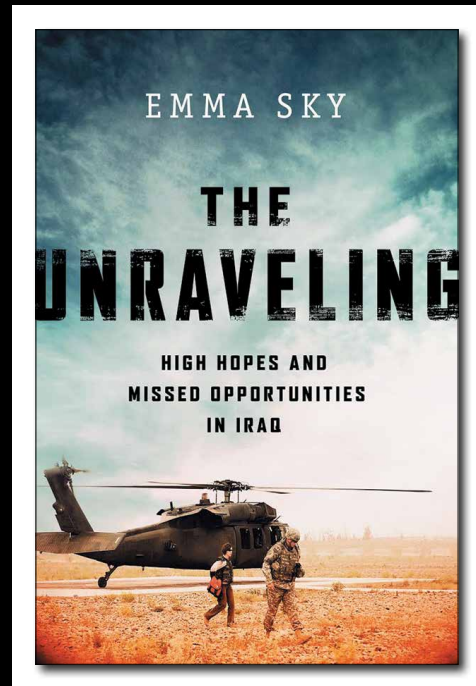
The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.

Notes

1. Adam Scher, “Political Advisors: Harnessing the Soft Power of Brigade Commanders,” *Military Review* 90, no. 1 (January-February 2010), accessed 19 September 2016, http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20100228_art013.pdf.
2. 10 U.S.C. §§ 101-18506 (2015); 22 U.S.C. §§ 1-9308 (2015). Title 10 of the U.S. Code outlines the role of the armed forces. Title 22 outlines the role of foreign relations and intercourse.
3. James E. Cartwright, “Best Military Advice,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (September 2015): 14–15.
4. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, May 2012), 1-7, accessed 19 September 2016, <http://www.apd.army.mil/Search/ePubsSearch/ePubsSearchDownloadPage.aspx?docID=0902c851800123fe>.
5. *Ibid.*, 1-8.
6. A modified table of organization and equipment is a document that authorizes the organization and equipment for each Army unit.
7. Michelle Tan, “Army BCT Cuts, Reorganization Coming as Service Loses 40K More Soldiers,” *Army Times*, 25 December 2015, accessed 7 January 2016, <http://www.armytimes.com/story/military/2015/12/25/army-bct-cuts-reorganization-coming-service-loses-40k-more-soldiers/77167510/>.
8. Andrew Tilghman, “DoD Plans to Send More Officers to Civilian Grad Schools,” *Military Times*, 20 August 2015, accessed 19 September 2016, <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/benefits/education/2015/08/20/graduate-school-proposals/32063579/>.
9. Curtis Buzzard, commander of 3rd BCT, 82nd Airborne Division, e-mail to author, 22 February 2016.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Adam Scher, “The Problem with Iraqi Security Forces Isn’t Just an Unwillingness to Fight,” Task and Purpose website, 1 December 2015, accessed 19 September 2016, [http://](http://taskandpurpose.com/the-problem-with-iraqi-security-forces-isnt-just-an-unwillingness-to-fight/)

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An early opponent of Operation Iraqi Freedom, British Middle East scholar Emma Sky nevertheless volunteered to help rebuild Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Subsequently, her educational background, language skills, and gift for diplomacy as well as her blunt honesty ingratiated her with senior military leaders struggling with the issues of occupation. She initially served as the political adviser to Col. William Mayville, commander of the U.S. Army’s 173rd Airborne Brigade, Kirkuk, Iraq, and then as political adviser to Gen. Raymond Odierno during his tours in Iraq as deputy commander and later as commander of coalition forces. Sky became among Odierno’s closest confidants during the most painful stages of the war. *The Unraveling* details her observations and critical analysis stemming from more than a decade of experience as a political adviser serving in time of war. It provides invaluable insight into the role and the risks of service as a political adviser at the brigade and major command levels.

taskandpurpose.com/the-problem-with-iraqi-security-forces-isnt-just-an-unwillingness-to-fight/.

14. Raymond Odierno, “Association of the United States Army (AUSA) Winter Symposium speech” (AUSA Winter Symposium, Fort Lauderdale, FL, 24 February 2012).