

**'LIONS AND DONKEYS....' -
STILL GETTING IT WRONG**

July 2010



DAVID RUBENS
ASSOCIATES

David Rubens Associates

David Rubens Associates is a specialist corporate security consultancy offering strategic security services to individuals and organisations across the world.

DRA has worked with government agencies, NGO's, international conglomerates and major global events, and brings a mixture of strategic vision, operational experience and academic research to all of its projects, however large or small.

David Rubens, DRA's founding director, holds an MSc in Security and Risk Management from Scarman Centre, Leicester University, is a Visiting Lecturer on their Global Security and Policing MSc programme, and is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Security and Resilience Department, Cranfield University at the UK Defence Academy, specialising in Terrorism & Public Policy and Strategic Management & Leadership.

David is widely experienced at developing, delivering and managing large-scale strategic security development programmes, and has worked with government agencies and academic institutions in Asia, Africa, Middle East, Caribbean and Eastern Europe.

David Rubens Associates
The Arches,
Maygrove Road
London NW6 2EE
post@davidrubens-associates.com

'Lions and Donkeys....' – Still Getting It Wrong

Main points:

- Political meddling in operational decisions is a certain path to disaster**
- At the most basic level, there are only three things that can go wrong in Operation Management**
- You must always have a reserve capability that will allow you to respond to unexpected circumstances - 'just enough' is never enough**
- The failure to understand the most basic principles of classical risk management is still impacting organisations which are meant to be amongst the best in the world**

Lions and Donkeys – One More Time....

It was the First World War that gave us the phrase 'Lions led by donkeys' to describe the bravery of the British fighting soldier and the foolishness and incompetence of the senior staff officers who led them, though it was probably a feeling that was recognised and echoed by fighting men back into the dawn of time. A recent report in The Times suggests that the strategic planners responsible for the battle plans for British troops in Helmand Province have learned nothing from history, except perhaps the undoubted truth that politicians (and politically-influenced military leaders) should not be trusted with the lives and destinies of those that they command.

It is easy to make such criticisms retroactively, and it is an equally famous saying that hindsight is always 20-20 (ie perfect), but, in another sector, the reports that have been coming out concerning BP and its failures both to plan for a major pipe-line malfunction as well as the clear lack of capability to respond to a major situation when one did arise, indicate that even the people at the very top of two of the largest (and supposedly most professionally competent in their own fields) organisations in the UK either did not have a basic understanding of major project management, or ignored those facts for their own ends.

According to classical risk management analysis, at the most basic level there are only three reasons why things can possibly go wrong in an operation: You have either misunderstood the nature of the problem; if you have understood the nature of the problem, then you have misunderstood the nature of the required response, and if you have got those two basically correct, then you have mismanaged the response over time. A further level of analysis says that the two ways that you can misunderstand the problem are in its nature - what it is, and its scale - how big it is going to be; there are three ways that you can misunderstand the response: the required nature of the response, the scale of the response and the timing of the response (ie the correct response at the wrong time is still wrong); and lastly you can mismanage the response over time on three levels: strategic, tactical and operational. (For an example of what happens when mistakes are made in every single one of these points, one has only to look at the FEMA response to Hurricane Katrina).

The Only Three Things That Can Go Wrong in Operation Management

1. You have misunderstood the nature of the problem

- i. The Nature of the problem
- ii. The Scale of the problem

2. You have misunderstood the nature of the response

- i. The Nature of the response
- ii. The Scale of the response
- iii. The Timing of the response

3. You have mis-managed the operation over time

- i. Gold Command Level
- ii. Silver Command Level
- iii. Bronze Command Level

It has become clear that the misunderstanding of both the nature of the problems in Afghanistan and the required response to those problems were so fundamental that it is being questioned even by senior military officials whether the battle plan that was finally put into operation was ever fit for purpose in the basic meaning of the phrase. It is hard now to remember that the original purpose of the Afghanistan mission was one of stabilisation and development, and that the military role was primarily to offer security cover to the civilian missions on the ground. Shortly after he announced the deployment of 3,300 troops to southern Afghanistan, then-Defence Secretary John Reid famously announced that he hoped that they would return within three years 'without firing a shot'.

A basic law of operation management states that you must always have a reserve capability that will allow you to respond to unexpected circumstances, and that 'just enough' is never enough. However, the force that had planned to be deployed (re-deployed) to Afghanistan would have been drawn from troops that were freed up by the scaling-down of the operation in Iraq, and once it became clear that the withdrawal from Iraq would be longer and more complicated than planned for, then the Afghanistan operation was always going to be significantly under-resourced.

And the third and final principle of operation management that comes into play, and one that I have repeatedly referred to in my various columns, is that complexity is a major cause of failure, and increasing complexity leads to an almost inevitability of failure. That has clearly been the case in the BP oil disaster, where even now BP is claiming that the responsibility for the maintenance of the defective oil well was not down to them, and the BP CEO, in his evidence before a Congressional Committee, repeatedly stated 'I don't know' or 'It was not my responsibility'.

In military terms, the chain of command should mean that responsibility for any action should be clearly delineated, and yet even the command and control structure for British troops in Helmand was unclear, with the larger British force being subsumed into a smaller international force led by a Canadian brigadier, at the same time that it was expected to report directly to its London HQ.

There is a natural tendency for all operations to suffer from 'Mission Creep', when what starts out as a clear and simple operation gradually grows bigger and more unmanageable as extra bits are added on to the original programme, but when Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Fry, at the time Director of Operations, can state that the campaigns in both Iraq and Afghanistan vastly exceeded the scale for which they were planned, resourced and organised, then it becomes clear that an understanding of classical risk management is still lacking even in organisations which have been planning operations for hundreds of years.

To see a free-access version of The Times' report see

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/afghanistan/article7146449.ece>



DAVID RUBENS
ASSOCIATES

David Rubens Associates

The Arches,
Maygrove Road
London NW6 2EE

post@davidrubens-associates.com

www.davidrubens-associates.com