
Cornwallis Fellow on the Joy of Metrics

Ambassador (ret.) Robert W. (Bill) Farrand

Cornwallis Fellow
Distinguished Fellow, Affiliate Faculty, and Senior Advisor
Peace Operations Policy Program (POPP)
The School of Public Policy
George Mason University
Arlington, Virginia, U.S.A.
e-mail: Pamichko@aol.com

Bill Farrand came to POPP after serving three years as the first Supervisor and Deputy High Representative for Brcko (1997-2000). A retired Foreign Service officer, Farrand led a distinguished career focusing on Soviet and Asian issues. He had been appointed Ambassador to Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu (1990-93); principal deputy assistant secretary of state, Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs (1987-90); deputy director, Office of Foreign Service Career Counseling and Assignments (Personnel) (1985-87); deputy chief of mission, US Embassy Prague, Czechoslovakia (1983-85); deputy director, Office of Eastern European and Yugoslav Affairs (1981-82); officer-in-charge of bilateral affairs, Office of Soviet Affairs (1978-80); director, US Commercial Office Moscow, USSR (1976-78); chief of economic/commercial section, US Embassy Prague, Czechoslovakia (1973-76); commodities officer, Bureau of Economics and Business Affairs (1970-73); chief of consular section, US Embassy Moscow, USSR (1968-1970); and junior officer, US Embassy Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (1965-67). Farrand served as an officer in the US Navy (1957-64). He also spent time teaching, serving as deputy commandant for international affairs at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces at Fort McNair, Washington, DC (1993-95) and economics instructor at the US Naval Academy (1961-64). Farrand hosts the Peace and Stability Operations Colloquium Series for POPP and is completing a manuscript about his experience in Bosnia. He holds an M.A. Economics from Georgetown University and B.S. Economics and Business Administration Mount Saint Mary's College. He is a graduate of the National War College.

First, let me thank you for this unexpected honor. When Dave Davis told me that I had been selected as this year's Cornwallis fellow you could have knocked me over with a feather.

As a generalist and "non-quant," I see myself bringing little by way of precision to the elusive but vastly important search for criteria to measure progress in post-conflict peace interventions. I say elusive because as a one-time practitioner under pressure to show tangible progress in moving a peace process along I had continually to respond to questions: "When will this operation be done? When can we shut down? When can we leave?" I found myself struggling to find the right words, the right approach in addressing these legitimate queries from donor representatives who had every right to expect a sensible reply. For the truth of the matter is the longer one is exposed up close and personal to a post-conflict peace operation the more one is humbled by the complexity, the interconnectedness, the "holistic-ness" of it all. This tends to slow you down as you seek simply to comprehend and define the seemingly endless array of tasks and issues confronting you, all of which require time and care to fix.

While operators on-the-ground are equally interested in measuring and tracking progress by any and all means available, they must beware of spending a great deal of time generating and monitoring false indicators, which, to those less closely engaged in their issues may appear perfectly rational. I have several examples of false criteria in mind, but for the sake of brevity let me mention but two that I have experienced:

The first example concerns using electricity generation as a key — perhaps *the* key — index of rising living standards in a war-devastated community. Who could argue with the importance of this statistic as a guide to progress? Surely no one, or so I thought until local engineers came to me complaining that the electricity they were with great difficulty bringing on line was being systematically bled out of the system by poachers who had found ingenious ways of siphoning off electrical power without paying a penny for it. Unless this leakage was stemmed, power generation could not be sustained. So it turned out that the electricity index to which outsiders commonly point as a key metric was flawed.

My second example involves the reconstruction of war-damaged school buildings. Here again, few can deny that a repaired or newly constructed school house would represent solid progress in revitalizing a war-weary town or city. Just so, but what if most qualified classroom teachers had either fled the community or, worse, were casualties in the war? What if the only teachers you were able to find had a deep-seated antipathy toward what you were trying to achieve in the community? What if such teachers set out actively, if subtly, to undermine you in the classroom? The teaching of wahhabism in the Middle East comes to mind, but there are other examples. The point here is that the mere physical repair or new construction of a school house — bricks and mortar, if you will — while it can certainly be quantified counted and therefore used as a metric of sorts, needs to be carefully qualified before it is embraced as a measure of progress.

During my three-year tenure as international supervisor of the Bosnian city of Brcko, I learned over time that many of the so-called measures of progress tossed about in the international community were in fact either false or not germane to the task before me. With wartime ethnic hatred still on the boil, it was extraordinarily difficult to chart a path leading to the restoration of multi-ethnic institutions of government and, simultaneously, to the introduction of democratic principles. Infrastructure repair (water and sewer lines, electrical lines, roads and bridges, hospitals and clinics, schools, etc., etc., — all easily measurable activities) was a necessary but insufficient precondition for reaching these higher goals.

As time wore on, it slowly dawned on me that despite glimmerings of calm returning to life in the divided city, the dominant mood in each of the three ethnic groups remained one of pervasive and deep-seated fear. First and foremost, there was fear of “the other;” followed by a numbing fear of what the future held for the people and their families and, finally, there was an abiding fear of the supervisor and his strange band of foreign peace interveners. What were they up to? How could a group of outsiders, none of whom spoke even one of the local languages, simply drop in as if from outer space and make any sort of useful difference whatsoever? And yet the supervisor seemed to have all this power; what were they to make of it?

Once I made this leap in understanding, I began to alter my public pronouncements away from tough talk and finger-wagging and toward a more positive view of the plight the Brcko municipality and its residents found themselves in. I began to address the concerns of women, since it occurred to me that women, much more than men, bore the brunt of war and

the hard times that followed. Think of mothers. Mothers had to worry from the moment they awoke until the moment they went to bed about their children: what were they to eat?, how were they to be clothed?, how to keep them safe?, what if they fell ill?, and, worry of worries, what if harm befell their father and she were left alone to care for them? What then?

As ~~Miklaucik~~ Miklaucic noted in his excellent paper, we must never under-estimate the deleterious effects on people – especially on women – of living lives full of fear, unrelenting and unforgiving. And Roy Williams reminds us that we, as outsiders living temporarily in a zone of conflict or post-conflict, can easily overlook the presence of fear in part because we retreat safely behind fortified gates at night. The local citizenry, on the other hand, retires to the vagaries of a community living on the edge. They live in fear, we, for the most part, do not.

Once this revelation took hold, I began consciously to listen more and expound less. I began trying to put myself in the shoes of those whose lives to some degree been entrusted to my care. In public I struck a more positive tone, appealing to would-be power brokers to keep foremost in their minds the children, the need to protect them, and make provision for their welfare. I knew, of course, that in speaking in this way my words would filter back to women looking after their families in partially rebuilt houses across the 500-square-kilometer municipality. To ensure the message got out, I read key passages of my speeches and press statements in the local languages for added impact. One phrase I came to use more and more was “Sve ce biti uredu.” (All will be well.)

The purpose of all this was to lower the temperature and, I hoped, to improve the climate for change and eventual reconciliation in the community. But while I attempted to strike an optimistic pose in public, neither I nor my staff were under any illusions that we could work miracles. We kept a close rein on our expectations as we slogged ahead.

For me, however, the *reduction* of fear became as important as the *reconstruction* of infrastructure. The problem was that the first was elusive (there’s that word again) and hard to calibrate while the second was comparatively easily measured if one kept certain limitations in mind.

That said, one day while speaking before a crowd of sullen Serbs, I pledged not to evict those living in houses or apartments not their own if they had no place to go. I had indirect, but reliable, feedback later that that statement alone went further in reducing tensions in the town than any of the other points I had been trying to make. In the elusive world of metrics, it doesn’t get any better than that.

Let me close on a simple note: interveners in post-conflict peace operations must guard against the tendency to get lost in the world of analysis and measurement. We need to keep to a broader perspective. The fact that we know so little should fill us with a sense of humility. For at the end of the day it’s not about us, it’s about them.