



DOS 101: DECODING THE STATE DEPARTMENT PART 2

By Alex Avé Lallemand and Amanda Cronkhite May 18, 2021
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Amanda Cronkhite: Welcome to A Better Peace the War Room podcast. I'm **Amanda Cronkhite**, Assistant Professor of Political Science at the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies and Associate Editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. Today we continue to delve into the similarities and differences between the Departments of State and Defense. We are happy to welcome back to the podcast a Foreign Service Officer (FSO) with over 20 years of experience who has served overseas in Afghanistan, Nepal, Hong Kong, and Greece, among others. He is currently the Consular Section Chief in Harare, Zimbabwe. Please welcome back **Mr. Alex Avé Lallemand**. Thank you for joining us again, Alex.

Alex Avé Lallemand: Thanks again for having me, Amanda.

AC: I'd like to start by talking about the different paths toward whatever the government might define as victory. I've often heard military officers talk about wanting to define the problem, get in, fix it and get out, and that sometimes in the military business involves violence. Whenever I've heard something like that from an officer, I've pointed out if State ever leaves some place, that's the worst outcome. Pulling an Ambassador or being expelled is never something State wants to happen and State generally assumes a non-violent way to get to a resolution. The difference is the timeline. As an FSO who's interacted much with the military, I'd appreciate your thoughts on the differences in, let's call it organizational culture, between the two organizations.

AAL: Yeah, that's a great way to start the second half. I'll start by again referring to the broad similarities in that both sets of organizations are very mission focused, very driven to achieve a mission and service-oriented and then we can kind of parse out how, maybe either by indoctrination or self-selection, the kind of people who go into whatever organization, State or the military, might differ. Of course it's never a neat comparison because there are plenty of former military people in the State Department at all levels, so it's not completely opposite. I think back in the day there was an article that someone wrote called Defense is from Mars and State is from Venus.

AC: Yes, I've heard that.

AAL: People contain multitudes, right? So it's not that clean, but it's a good kind of rough, on a population level, pretty good distinction to make. And I kind of alluded to it in the first part of this too, is that military by indoctrination, by personality, what have you, are all about achieving discrete and concrete objectives, and you know when you've achieved them because you've taken the territory, you've killed your enemy, be they at the micro level or at the bigger level. If you haven't it's because you haven't done that yet. When I joined the Foreign Service, part of the information I got before as I was considered joining said you have to be comfortable with ambiguity and that's certainly something you have to do over the course of a career. You can rarely know anything for certain. I think part of that then is as diplomats, we're kind of looking at process management or relationship management and tending to relationships. I know George Shultz who recently passed away when a lot of literature was coming out about the impact he had, he called it "watering the garden," I think. And so you're always trying to keep relationships up. You're always trying to guide a process—the international relations process, let's say—and it's really characterized often by successes that aren't super evident because we're not inclined as a species to look at spectacular success very often. You might have for example, the end of the Cold War. Well, you knew it was over because there's all these people on the Berlin Wall sawing it down and jumping on top of it and you thought, well, that's the end of that. But that's a rare kind of outlier in terms of big success stories. Mostly, success stories are really kind of pocketed and become the baseline for what's next. For example, there might be 150 people who die in airline crashes a year, but you might read about all of them, but you don't read about the 3 million people who, obviously pre-COVID, who landed successfully and walk away from their flights and go on to see their families or whatever because that's what we are as a species kind of inclined to lookout for. So a lot of these things, to go back for example to our multinational multilateral agreements on things like civil aviation or on food and agriculture or on economic policy and the rules of the road for our economy, economic interaction, whatever, are all just kind of about gradually and almost imperceptivity moving things along and you contrast that with the military and when the military gets involved it's... there's military interaction all over the world every day that's not violent, but when it's there, it's there and it's violent and you see rockets blowing up buildings, you see war corresponding on the frontline and there are bullets flying back and forth in the background and so that kind of thing you read about a lot more. And if you look at the history of the last 20 years, kind of my time in State Department, unless you're kind of a real junkie for this kind of stuff or someone who reads the news diligently to read about foreign affairs, you're going to know about our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, almost the exclusion of many other things in terms of our international relations, and yet those are really two outliers in terms of what we've been doing around the world historically and in that time period. We go back to organizations... diplomats are generally there to build relationships and use those relationships to advance our interests in very incremental ways and

soldiers, when we deploy them, are there to keep peace or make war and a very different set of objectives.

AC: In that way, maybe part of why people understand less about State, maybe is that the State Department is dog bites man versus when the military does something it's man bites dog. It's news as opposed to just every day.

AAL: Yeah, and I think also, we Americans are very prone to looking at the world in terms of... when we think about these greater things, we look at it in terms of this lens of our interaction with war. It probably goes back to World War II almost or Korea or Vietnam, and they see us interacting in that way and it's out there, it's prevalent, but it is less common. It is an outlier. But we're also comfortable, I think, with the idea that there can be a solution as a society. We can solve these things. We can fix these problems and the idea of relationship management isn't as prevalent, even though it's something everyone does every day. But our mindset kind of goes more towards, we're problem solvers, right? That's one thing I think most people around the world when they talk about Americans agree that we have this positive attitude, this "can do" attitude and we like to solve problems. Military action is one example of if there's a problem, let's use this tool to solve it, because again, the problem pops up and there we are, whereas tending the garden is all about making plants grow and flowers bloom and that is a very slow process and doesn't yield immediate results.

AC: I'm glad you mentioned the difference in tempo because as we were talking the last time we talked to you, the military is very direct and diplomats obviously try to be more cautious and careful in their language and being careful sometimes really annoys some military personnel. I know at the school I teach at, we have been trying to get them to stop referring to the room as "gentleman" when I'm in it or to use to use verbs like "manning" and this to me seems something very obvious and some people are annoyed. They don't seem to understand the change, whereas from a diplomatic point of view that type of language strikes me as it's almost Hippocratic. First, do no harm in terms of relationship management. How would you explain to military personnel the importance of that kind of proactive being careful, as opposed to just let's fix it?

AAL: Yeah. I think that really highlights kind of the rub. That's one of the biggest differences in our organizations and it presents an opportunity for someone who has an interest in making sure the organizations work well together, that's kind of where that starts. And that's how really developing relationships with your military colleagues, understanding that fundamental difference and being able to bridge it is absolutely key. And I would actually say that's also true for us with organizations like the FBI and other law enforcement agencies as well because they are similar kinds of mission focused and outcome-oriented groups, but for the purpose of our discussion obviously we'll keep it focused on the military.

AC: Actually, I was going to ask you about governmental entities that State works better or worse with than the military, so please feel free to talk about any interagency things you've noticed.

AAL: Yeah, again, from my perspective, it's just the perspective of one individual. At the working level, uniform military and State generally get along pretty well because of these other kind of bigger issues I've talked about. I would say that maybe less so with elements in the law enforcement community and also in the intelligence community. And then we have the narcissism of small differences, is the U.S. Agency for National Development, which are also largely full of foreign service officers, just like us who go through a slightly different process and are out there in embassies every day doing great work and it's like we're so closely related, we often have these heated... we all complain about each other, but really we're kind of almost always on the same page with these things. But from my perspective... and a lot of it also, especially when an embassy overseas is very personality driven, if the country team leads, the section chief and agency heads get along at post, you can do a lot because you can work together in spite of whatever is going on in Washington. So it often is very personality driven in those contexts. Back in Washington, the personalities that drive it are often the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs or the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State. And to the extent to which they get along, then you'll find that the working level gets along. But I think even still, there's a decent affinity notwithstanding some of these cultural issues that we're going to dive into and just second here. Just to go back to your point about, put on your big boy pants so to speak and fixing it, to me that is really where if your people are interested in making these relationships work, you have to start. I remember when I first got to Bagram, just to recap, I spent two years as a political advisor based at the division headquarters there at Bagram Airfield from 2012 to 2014. I found it once refreshing and also kind of astounding how much more direct the military officers were and the military men and women were in general that would say things to each other that we could not say to one another in the State Department. And I found it certainly somewhat refreshing just because I think I'm a more kind of direct personality, but by the same token, it's one thing when everyone kind of is in the same and understands and buys into that, but then you're working with another group of people that can be very off putting. We have a saying in the Foreign Service where we say, "use most of your diplomacy inside the embassy," and like you said, to be hippocratic about it and do no harm, first you want to make sure you're getting everyone on board with something. A lot of what we do operates by consensus, which is inherently slower and inherently involves some tradeoffs, and inherently also forces you to focus on the larger picture. What am I willing to kind of let fall by the wayside in order to keep advancing the core parts of my goal? And something in that respect that we could borrow from the militaries, for example, you don't hear by and large in the Foreign Service at State Department, you don't hear people using the word commander's intent, right? Well, number one, we don't have commanders per say, but we're also not great at articulating what is our intent. What is it we want? What is it that we're trying to get out of this particular engagement or out of this particular set of

engagements or out of our policy or whatever? Even though we have these big strategy documents, we don't refer to them nearly as much as the military might, and so we're not as good at saying, well, this is my intent out of this or this is what the boss' intent is and if we know that, then we can figure out what tradeoffs we need to make. So that's kind of something I think we can adapt. Again, we wouldn't call it the commander's intent per say, but what does the boss want out of this? That we can adapt a little bit from our military colleagues. And likewise, I think where I found my kind of value when I came in... I said, let's take a step back. Yes, I understand we want to do this, but if we were looking at our bigger goal, we could probably let a few things go if we still keep our eye on the prize and moving forward. So that is really a big difference. And I found when I was working, particularly in my first assignment in Afghanistan, when you show that you have a certain understanding of how government works at any level, and you're being asked to help promote governance, military people, who have been asked to do something similar but don't really understand that because that's not what they do normally, are really keen to listen to that and take that advice, and so that's how you can build those bridges. And invariably whenever the military is being asked to do something that trades upon that space that isn't about concrete definable outcomes, that's where you have an opportunity as a civilian to build that relationship and kind of show that the way forward in such a way that, let's keep our eye on the prize but remember that in order to get more people along, we'll get more of what we want means we may have to give up some of the bells and whistles but keep the core of our intent intact.

AC: When I've talked to military officers, they are very surprised that Foreign Service Officers don't hyper-specialize. I know when you were on last time, we talked about the five kind of different general career tracks, cones, but there is an expectation at State that you will be much more adaptable, be that Jack of all trades versus in the military, I would say their people are better at specializing, they're better at planning, they're better at very specific tasks. How would you explain that kind of Jack of all trades, assuming you agree with me, Jack of all trade expectation of an FSO to someone who doesn't really understand much about State?

AAL: Yeah, I think it's generally true. Overtime, you get a bit more specialized. If you're a consular person, you're expected to kind of move up the ranks in consular management and focus on that. And likewise, with public diplomacy and certainly in the management field, that is extremely specialized. But by the same token, we have a career kind of progression playbook as we call it that does stipulate that we need to spend time out of our main functionalities to be a generalist. So yeah, I would say that that is in the main quite true. One of the things in the Foreign Service you have to learn is how to learn, and what I mean by that is you go from one job to the next. The basics may be the same, but the specifics change drastically, and you have to learn how to pick up the kind of salient points quite quickly and often we don't, and I think this is something where we could be a bit better, that is we don't train each other or ourselves well enough. We could be training each other better or ourselves better to take on these new

assignments in a variety of ways. So you're expected to learn very quickly what the core points are, what the tent poles are if you will, and then kind of gradually filling the rest. Every job you change even in the military do that. If you're infantry that's going to be fairly standardized, or if you're military intelligence, or if you pick your MOS, that's going to be fairly similar. If you go bounce around within that field, as I see it. So yeah, what you do then is you become a Jack of all trades and what you kind of become relied upon... and I'm the equivalent of Colonel right now, but I have never commanded a brigade. The most people I ever managed was thirty, so our promotions come not necessarily because of how many people we managed but those thirty people that I was managing we're responsible for a unit that made national security decisions hundreds of times a day in issuing visas to foreign nationals to come to the United States and over the course of a year, would adjudicate about 120,000-130,000 of those, each single one of them had national security implications and required a battery of background checks and in addition, brought in millions of dollars in revenue to the federal government through the visa fees we collected. So there's still some sophistication and important stuff there but it's not the same good or bad, it's just different than like a brigade command or something like that. So a lot of where we get how we're graded and how we're judged for promotion is kind of our wisdom that we've accrued over that time. The difference between knowledge and wisdom—would you rather know how to use what it takes to run a nuclear power plant or have the wisdom to know what to do with nuclear power? So we're kind of graded on our ability to accrue that wisdom and apply that wisdom. That's where our value added comes from, and that comes from seeing things over and over in our international relations with a variety of countries and drawing those parallels to the situation you are in now. If I were to say to a military colleague, we're not as specialized, but let's talk about this as a kind of breadth of experience, and that's what I want to use to help you guide your operations or help us guide our operations depending on how we define it.

AC: How then do you think the State Department passes along cultural norms of the job to newer officers?

AAL: There's a variety of ways. We have our training. You have your A-100 orientation class when you first join. You are required to take leadership training throughout your career. You do get subject specific, for example, there's political economic tradecraft, there's consular management tradecraft, so there's a variety of courses like that and you do touch base on that periodically throughout your career. Then when you go into an organization, your boss in your first couple assignments does a lot of the work in terms of teaching what it is to be a Foreign Service Officer and what's expected. And then at certain point, you become that mentor and it's your responsibility to kind of mentor those around you. Every deputy chief of mission at every Embassy... so the number two person at an Embassy has as an official part of their work requirements to mentor the 1st and 2nd year officers in the embassy or the consulate and to regularly meet with them and they do stuff for enrichment and for professional ongoing

education and they also talk about any number of things. And then there are mentoring opportunities throughout as well that people can sign up for. So kind of a variety of different ways.

AC: One thing I'd like to talk about since we've been at war for 20 years now and with President Biden's recent announcement that by September 11th troops are coming out of Afghanistan which presumably seems to suggest he's putting State more at the forefront. I recently had a conversation with the Colonel who said to me that after 20 years of war, we might need to re-teach the military that the Chief of Mission or the Ambassador is the senior person in any country, that because the military has been so visible that people have forgotten that, ideally and supposed to do it, the military coordinates everything with the Embassy. If you were trying to explain the role of the Chief of Mission to let's say in my case, a room full of majors, how would you explain the Chief of Mission's role?

AAL: There are a couple of ways you could go about that. I think the first way I would explain it is that person is the president's personal representative in that country and is therefore the by law ranking U.S. official in that country to the point that even, for example, I've heard it said and I'm not a hundred percent sure about this, but I've heard it said that when the Assistant Secretary of State visits for African affairs, let's say visits Zimbabwe, that person is still in the hierarchy of things while in country under the Ambassador. Because the Ambassadors are accredited by the host country as the president's personal representative. So that, for military people who all operate in a chain of command, that's a pretty good explanation. Now I don't mean to be like, you better do what they say because they're the Chief of Mission there but establishing it like that is a good start. And then there's also... it depends on how you develop a relationship with anyone you're talking to, and after years of the Authorization for Use of Force, it was different in Iraq and Afghanistan where there was a lot going on—people prosecuting a war. In that specific instance, obviously the Chief of Mission and the combatant commander's lines of authority were distinct. But as that kind of thing minimizes, as you said with the troops withdrawing from Afghanistan, and as we are reordering ourselves towards a great power competition, that kind of thing is only going to become more important. And I think it starts with an understanding that every President, every Ambassador who goes to a country has a letter from the President with their instructions and it says you are my personal representative, here's what you may do on my behalf, and that includes, for example, the Ambassador without really any pushback, if they feel like it, can send anyone home from post for any reason. They just have to say, I've lost confidence in this person's ability to do their job and that person has to go with very few limitations. So that's a pretty absolute authority when you think about it. And with that kind of authority, it's called the Letter of Credence that the Ambassador gets and then they go to the host country and the host country then agrees that this person is the United States Chief Representative in country. And so then from that flows the articulation of priorities in a country, which is kind of a mission wide, an embassy wide exercise in which all agencies and sections

play a role. There's always a part on border security. There's always a part on economic growth. Let's say there's a part on defense relations, but that's all kind of contained in that document, the integrated country strategy, which is all available online for every country in the world and will include as planning, military, civilian agencies and is kind of blessed by the Ambassador and then sent back to Washington for their take on it. So that's kind of how you do it, building it back into that process, I think. And as these wars in these countries kind of wind down, there are fewer instances where we'd be deploying troops without the awareness of the Chief of Mission I think, and that's probably a good way to kind of start it out, to frame it as a teaching tool.

AC: I'd like to know what you've observed in 20 years about who stays in the foreign service versus who leaves, and if you've noticed anything, you mentioned earlier self-selection about particularly who's self-selects and any differences there.

AAL: Yeah. When I joined the Foreign Service, there were fewer women joining when I joined then there are now. And I'm not an expert on all the stats, so I want to just caveat that, but as I've seen, by and large nowadays as of a few years ago, I think I read article about, I think nowadays roughly 50/50 men and women are joining foreign service. I do know that you see a similar thing in the Foreign Service as you just mentioned in the military, that overtime you see fewer women getting up to the senior levels, relatively few or relative to the number that come in. I do believe it's still overall higher than it would have been 30 years ago or 25 years ago or something like that, but that has been something that's been paid attention to—the historical stereotype of the Foreign Service is pale male and Yale. I will say one area of true success is the geographic diversity that's coming to the Foreign Service. Ivy Leagues and if you add Hopkins, SAIS and Georgetown School of Foreign Service, those groups, the elite Northeastern universities, they're a minority of people who come into the foreign service which I think is good. You have people come and join in from all over. I went to a small college in Texas for example, so that I think is a good and positive development. I do think the Foreign Service continues to work hard and need to work even harder to make strides in terms of retaining a diverse workforce. I can't speak to the promotion statistics per say, but I do know retention is an issue and that's really been focused on of late obviously with everything that's happened in the last couple years but has been historically there. You can go back decades and find these analyses that say that there's a diversity issue, so it continues to be something that the foreign service needs to work at, but I can say there are a lot of efforts continually being put in to work on that. Insofar as the quality of the people coming in, I have to say, I'm pretty bullish on it. It's very fashionable, maybe a little bit less these days as new generations come to the board, but in the past year, it was very fashionable for people to kind of talk down about millennials and about how porky they were and how they didn't understand anything, but I've actually managed more than my share of millennials and they've all been excellent. I think we still remain selective, and that means that there's a kind of spectrum of quality within that, but the people that we've been bringing that I've seen have been really great to work with and give me hope for the continued viability of our

ability to do our jobs. We need to be more diverse in my opinion, in my personal opinion, and I know that the Department leadership agrees with that and continues to work on that. We just appointed a Chief Diversity Officer and I think that's a good way to go and an awareness of that and an attempt to kind of work that and bend that into the right direction.

AC: Yes, I did see the news about the Chief Diversity Officer and I was reminded that the new Deputy Secretary is the first woman to hold that job. That was part of the news when it came out and I think it's certainly fair and talking about millennials, Gen Z is even more diverse so presumably if things are on a good track, they will get better, hopefully. So Alex, I'd like to go back to something we were talking about earlier, which is planning. And I'd like to ask you, what you see in terms of similarities and differences in how State and Defense approach planning?

AAL: Yeah, we have a lot to learn about planning as an organization. I don't necessarily think that the State Department because our aims are often process management or relationship management and not new initiatives or objectives, we don't need necessarily be so developed at planning, but I think we could do a better job at planning. I remember when both times I've worked very closely with military in Afghanistan, I'd go in and talk to the planners and just the way they plan for things, it's like you could get a Master's in that. You have a captain who's doing it and their senior NCO is heavily involved in it and up the chain it goes and the further up they go, the more military leaders, both in the NCO Corps and the Officer Corps just really digest planning and we don't. And parallel to that or a kind of corollary to that is the military just has so many more resources to throw at problems than the State Department does, and so you turn that into an organizational culture. A lot of times the military goes, what is your planning about this? And we say, we just thought about it today. We just for the first time are hearing about it. Planning will be me and a couple other people going off somewhere and thinking about it and writing down a few notes for that and not devoting an entire office worth of resources for three different cycles about it and to plan for multiple different scenarios of the same outcome. So it's kind of foreign to us and that along with the massive resource disparity then it's like when all these plans get going, these exercises get going, as a State Department person, when I was involved for example in doing a mission rehearsal exercise or mission readiness exercise (MRX) for one of the units coming out to Afghanistan, I was kind of trying to figure out... because I wasn't really aware of how that worked and the process, where can I slot myself to be of the most value to the most people given there is one of me and we have rooms of people working on these things and that's an area where, again, you as a civilian or as State person, you just have to kind of learn as you go. I refer to it as the ability to learn how to learn. That's another perfect example. And what happens, I think is because of that then, some commander will ask a question and because of the timelines driving this thing, they don't have an answer, they're going to make an assumption and go, and the assumption may not be the correct one and assumption may have been one that could have benefited from the input of a diplomat or a development official or someone who has some knowledge and can guide that process and therefore once the assumption

goes in, you plan based on assumptions, the planning kind of veers off by some factor all because no one knew who to ask where the guy was or those relationships were never made. And in the big picture of these things, as we kind of retool for the next generation of foreign affairs after kind of pivoting away from the Forever Wars, the small wars, whatever you want to call them, that's an area where a hefty dose of really good interagency coordination at any level can really be beneficial towards policy formation.

AC: One last question. You mentioned great power competition which has been everybody's favorite cliché for the past few years. How do you think State and Defense might see great power competition differently?

AAL: Well, I like to turn back to what you kind of led off with. The Department of Defense sees great power and plans for great power competition in terms of actual conflict, and I think our whole mission at the State Department in terms of great power competition is how to advance our goals and win without that conflict. So it's like fundamental opposite sides of the coin, really. You know you can read these Op plans or whatever about a conflict in Asia, a conflict between China and Taiwan or conflict in North Korea, conflict wherever, and my first thought is man, I hope we don't get to that point. And of course, everyone does. But it's the military's job to plan for how to win that and our job is to plan so that we don't have to enter. Almost like if you have to go in that conflict, we've lost already and that's where diplomacy fits, that's what diplomacy is. I don't agree with this statement at all, but there's this cliché about diplomacy is the art of saying nice doggy until you can find a stick. That almost implies that it's like holding off until the military can come in there and save a day. I would say that diplomacy is the art of saying, "here, Fido have a seat and eat from my hand," instead of needing to say nice doggy or whatever. So our planning is all premised on not needing conflict and avoiding conflict and asserting our interests whatever that may be successfully without conflict. It may be great to and successful to use the, let's say threat or make an illusion towards our great capacity to prevail in that conflict as a deterrent to conflict, absolutely, as one way to advance our interest in other ways as a deterrent. But we're just as invested in advancing the American interest. As statecraft and diplomacy is advancing American interests, and it doesn't have to be that conflict is an almost inherently zero sum. If we triumph, you've lost. But diplomacy, in my opinion, and I think the history of our world post World War II is pretty clear evidence that diplomacy is not zero sum. In fact, there can be multiple winners to this competition. So when I say prevail in let's say our great power competition with China, that doesn't mean that China somehow brought to heel. What it means is that we've come to some point where we've expressed our interests and the world is buying into our interests and we've shelved kinetic conflict in favor of that and the world continues to prosper as it has and remain peaceful. So that's what we plan for, and I remember once a guy I worked with Afghanistan who was a special forces Lieutenant Colonel, he said, when it comes to these things that we're doing in civil affairs—he had moved over into the civil affairs world—he said, we really lose if there's a conflict. Our whole point is preventing the conflict in those

circumstances. And I remember thinking about it. It kind of stuck me and has stuck with me ever since, obviously. But yeah, for us in terms of a tool of statecraft, that's the game: to win by advancing our interest. And that could mean that other states win as well without needing to have the big guns, literally the big guns brought out and engage in a kinetic conflict.

AC: Wow, you also referenced realism, liberalism and constructionism, which is another very important thing the Army War College always tries to push on people that is important.

AAL: Well, I knew I was a realist.

AC: Alright, that seems like a good moment to end on. Thank you, Mr. Alex Avé Lallemand for joining us today on A Better Peace. And thanks to all of you for listening. Please send us your comments on this program and all the programs and send us suggestions for future programs and rate and review this podcast on your podcaster of choice, which helps others to find us. We're always interested in hearing from you. Until next time from the War Room, I'm Amanda Cronkhite.