United States Institute of Peace
Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Iraq/Afghanistan Provincial Reconstruction Teams: Lessons Learned

INTERVIEW #152

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INTERVIEW SYNOPSIS

Participant's Understanding of the PRT Mission

The interviewee, a State Department Foreign Service Officer, was the team leader of PRT Wasit, Iraq, from March 2010 to March 2011. He understood the PRT mission to be one of serving as a mini-consulate while pursuing capacity building in governance, rule of law and agricultural development. He was the last team leader as the PRT was closing out soon after his departure.

Relationship with Local Nationals

Observations: The interviewee had extensive contacts with Iraqis at all levels, including the provincial governor, provincial council and other officials such as the local agricultural office. Relations were generally cordial. A "silent majority" of local Iraqis appreciated the U.S. role in promoting stability and development in the province. The PRT's agricultural specialists had outstanding interactions with local Iraqis. The rule of law advisor established unusually productive relations with the local judiciary.

Insights: Although the interviewee worked on his own to learn some basic Arabic, greater fluency in the language would have substantially enhanced his effectiveness.

Lessons: Local Iraqi officials had, since the Saddam Hussein era, developed ingrained habits of dependency on governmental largess, especially in providing employment. Although Iraqi and U.S. priorities often coincided, conversations often revolved around U.S. project money that Iraqi officials hoped to steer to friends and preferred contractors. As U.S. funding largesse tapered off, the interest of Iraqi officials in attending U.S.-sponsored social functions tapered off.

Did the PRT Achieve its Mission? (Impact)

Observations: The agricultural projects and the rule of law bricks-and-mortar courthouse renovation, as well as judicial training and other assistance, will likely reap long-term, positive results. USAID's Local Governance Program III in the province was also notably productive.

Insights: Assessments of successes in Iraq are hard to quantify and must be highly qualified.

Though somewhat lacking in entrepreneurial spirit, the Iraqis are smart, educated and clearly capable of taking responsibility for their own affairs. The interviewee felt strongly that the time has come for the U.S. to depart and leave Iraqi affairs in the hands of Iraqis.

Lessons: The U.S. would have achieved greater impact had we not gone in with so much money to spread around so readily. By instead taking time to achieve Iraqi buy-in, projects would have been better and the Iraqis might have been weaned from their dependency on hand-outs.

Overall Strategy for Accomplishing the PRT Mission (Planning)

Observations: The Embassy's Office of Provincial Affairs (OPA) plans were not useful. They tended to be one-size-fits-all in nature, giving equal priority to all substantive areas at a time when the PRTs were phasing out and needed to concentrate their efforts. Thus, after the PRT contributed to the drafting of the required OPA plan for its province, the PRT staff basically ignored it, instead focusing attention mainly on rule of law, agriculture and governance projects.

Insights: Working with the military was smooth and their goals consistent with those of the PRT. The overall effort benefited from the military's careful planning, but some of their contractors not monitored carefully enough, so projects often cost a great deal more than was necessary.

Lessons: When prominent Iraqis sought to become funnels for project funding, the interviewee found discreet ways to properly award the funds without antagonizing the prominent Iraqis. His pre-deployment training was of mixed utility. The Iraq familiarization course was good, but the PRT course focused too heavily on how to fill out no longer pertinent OPA planning documents. It should instead have helped build skills to interact effectively with Iraqi counterparts during the draw-down period. Foreign language training would also have been very useful.

What Worked Well and What Did Not? (Operations)

Observations: The interviewee faced few logistical problems and got good cooperation from the military. Most PRT members were well qualified, but the interviewee had to relieve a military deputy team leader, reduce the top-heavy concentration of engineers and terminate some long-time PRT contractors. Embassy Baghdad was largely absent from the PRT's daily life and rarely visited the PRT. The interviewee methodically managed his team's draw down and sought to arrange a smooth transfer to responsible embassy offices of on-going responsibilities.

Insights: Although the interviewee had previous experience in human relations work, personnel issues took a great deal of his time. Military counterparts were good, though sometimes over-sensitive to anti-American incidents, such as when an Army officer was slightly injured by a stone thrown during a campus visit and insisted on a public apology from the governor.

Lessons: The State Department personnel system should do much better at vetting people for PRT assignments, even when desperate to fill positions. Financial incentives are good, but the system is less effective in getting officers their promised follow-on assignments. The interviewee sees a growing resentment by Foreign Service members who have not served in war zones (and do not plan to do so in the future) against those who have volunteered to serve.

THE INTERVIEW

Q. Would you please tell us what your assignment was in Iraq and the dates that you were there?

A. I was the Wasit PRT team leader from March 2010 until March 2011. Wasit is the province immediately to the southeast of Baghdad.

Q. What was your understanding of your PRT's mission and how did you fit into it?

A. My understanding of the mission was essentially that we were to function as a provincial mini-outpost or mini-consulate, if you will, of the embassy. We represented civilian engagements in Iraq in Wasit province.

Q. How many people were in your team? What was the composition?

A. Ours was a smaller PRT. We were anywhere from 28 to 35 civilians and military personnel as well as local Iraqi contractors. We focused on the areas that many of the PRTs were focused on such as governance, USAID programs, monitoring political events, rule of law and especially agriculture. It is a diverse agricultural province and we had a special focus on agriculture.

Q. How would you characterize your relationship with the local nationals—the Iraqis?

A. With the external local nationals -- not the ones who work with us -- it was generally positive. My sense was that in Wasit province there was a silent majority that was not outwardly pro-U.S and was certainly not anti-U.S – and saw us and our presence in the province as a stability factor. The problem was that you had a Saddam-era system which is very centralized, very government focused, where people wanted government jobs because those were the best jobs, and the only real jobs. It bred this dependency on the government and government jobs which was only compounded by the events from 2003 to 2011. So people were constantly looking for handouts basically.

Q. At the local level, with whom did you mainly interact and how often and for what reasons?

A. I interacted with the provincial governor, the provincial council chairman and with several members of the provincial council on some regular basis. I interacted with these people from one to three times a month. I also had quite an extensive amount of contact with agriculture officials at all levels within the province.

Q. To what extent did you feel that U.S. objectives coincided with those of the local leaders that you were dealing with, either at the provincial governor's level or the AG officials?

A. I think they were fairly close. I think the rub was that they were all for agreeing that we had goals in common, they just wanted us to achieve those goals and give them more money. Often the pitch was to give money to preferred parties and contractors.

Q. Did you have specific agreements or outcomes that you were looking to achieve? If so, what did you agree to?

A. I got there and sized up the importance of agriculture pretty quickly and saw that I had an outstanding USDA agriculture guy—very, very organized and very committed to getting things done there. So I think we were very effective on the agricultural front in making our goals their goals. We did a lot of good work in the irrigation and getting small pumps to farmers so they could pump water from far away irrigation canals. We initiated some center-pivot irrigation projects; if you are flying over the western United States you see those big circles and farmland— that is center-pivot irrigation. You have a well in the middle and a sweep of sprinklers that go out from the center there. It was a great project because we initiated this in an area with a largely untapped aquifer near the Iran/Iraq border. This had been disputed territory in the 80s during the Iran-Iraq war and never really recovered. It was a real victory to get this project up and running and show people that there was a real viability to rebuilding agriculture in that part of the province.

Q. Did you handover any programs or areas of activity to the Iraqis during your time there?

A. We did. We had a very active rule of law advisor who engaged both at the substantive level, but also at the bricks and mortar level; he got into every court house and regional real estate office in the province. This was about seven or eight of each and provided office, computer equipment, furniture and a fair amount of training. I think if there is one area besides agriculture where we made some real in-roads and where those in-roads may well be lasting, I think it is on the judicial side. I think there was general agreement that the judicial officials were perhaps the most impressive and most promising of Iraqi governmental officials.

Q. To what extent did your PRT achieve its mission as you understood it?

A. I think any success in Iraq is going to be highly qualified and hard to quantify, but I think we achieved our relatively tightly defined and relatively modest goals in a year during which funding was much diminished from previous years in Iraq.

Q. Can you be a little more specific as to what you did achieve?

A. I think these rule of law projects where we renovated the courthouses and provided judicial training and assistance were something that is going to have a long-term effect. The rule of law advisor had a particularly strong relationship with the chief judge, who gave him the mandate to work with these sub-regional courthouses and get good things done. On the agricultural front, the pumps. We also did a test program where we did some test plots for Bermuda grass. Bermuda grass is a salt-resistant grass that can be used as hay and there is a lot of livestock there. Also, it helps to reclaim a lot of the abandoned farmland there. So I think that is a success and will likely be something that has a multiplier effect.

Q. Overall, would you say that the situation on the ground is now significantly closer to not requiring a U.S. or PRT presence?

A. I feel pretty strongly that we need to get out of there. I served both in Iraq and Afghanistan, and I think the Iraqis are smart, capable people for the most part; they are educated. They lack that entrepreneurial gene because of this long standing dependence on government to provide jobs and funding, but I think they can function on their own.

Q. Overall, would you say that you achieved long-term goals and also that the PRTs over time have achieved their mission? Or is it just a matter of the political dynamic changing?

A. I would say probably a little of both. I think the PRT contribution was not insignificant. I think the PRTs would have been stronger if there had not been so much money around. For so many of these local officials and local interlocutors, it was all about getting the money rather than learning the lesson, so to speak. Not that they didn't learn some lessons along the way, but I think the money was a little corrupting—and I mean that in the broadest possible sense.

Q. Was that also a negative factor in your relationships with the Iraqis? That so much of the conversation revolved around money?

A. Yes, so much so that in the last four to five months when it was clear that we had very little money left to do any projects and very little time to complete projects, I did many fewer movements off the base to meet with people, because for some it was all about— what could they get from you. You didn't want to necessarily go visit a mayor in some town who was only going to ask you to deliver a lot of things for them. So unless you had a specific information gathering goal to go out and meet with somebody, I cut back on visits and advised my team members to cut back on broad fact-finding mission.

Q. Did that factor also affect the warmth of your interactions?

A. It did somewhat. Even when I first got there, last March, the Iraqis had already moved on a bit from this feeling of dependence on the PRT and on the military. The military folks still insisted on inviting the governor and provincial council chair to a lot of our events such as change of command ceremonies. I think they were the sort of things that two or three years ago if you were the governor or the provincial council chair, you would go to as a matter of course. When I got there they were choosing to go to these things, and sometimes not, and six months into my time there they were just not going anymore. They had moved on and they could see that we were pulling back and didn't necessarily have much to offer them in terms of money.

Q. What was the overall strategy to accomplishing the PRT mission at your level?

A. That is a funny question, because when I arrived the Office of Provincial Affairs (OPA) from the embassy had this very elaborate planning rubric that was probably about two years out of date. The planning folks up at the Office of Provincial Affairs in the embassy were seemingly very powerful and kept pushing this model and I did my work plan as they wanted it. I found it quite useless, frankly. So I said to myself "Look, you have a year left. Here are my resources in terms of money and here are resources in terms of people." That was really critical—who did I have and what could they get done? I had a rule of law advisor who was on his second year who was good. I also had a USDA agricultural advisor who was very good and I knew from the get-

go that they were going to be the "go to" guys. They were going to be the guys to get things done, and they were working in two areas that were very important. So that is how I did my planning. It was effective.

Q. How did that differ from what the people in OPA had in mind for your work plan?

A. I think there was more of a sense of balancing out the substantive areas. For instance, I got there and I felt—and I was generally correct about this with the exception of maybe one area—that we were beyond doing a lot of day-to-day governance and governance advising – like "this is how you run your government" type stuff. Although, they did run into some real budgeting problems, and that was one sub-function of governance that we probably should have focused on a little bit more, which we did toward the end, but I think the Office of Provincial Affairs has this divide of governance and economic and business development. It was a "one-size fits all and cover every area that we are covering in Baghdad" when in fact rule of law and agriculture are really by far the two most important areas in Wasit province. The military by the way got this. The military did a much better job of planning and emphasizing individual areas and emphasizing certain provinces over others. That was something that I found—the embassy has a much more centralized, "one-size fits all" approach.

Q. How did your military colleagues on the PRT and in the area interact with you in your planning process?

A. They didn't necessarily interact. I think we would talk, we were generally on the same wavelength, but ultimately they did their own thing and came up with their own plans. Because they were the major source of funding—it wasn't worth fighting with the military on that issue, because their plans were generally better than the embassy plans – for our province at least.

Q. Were their plans consistent with your priorities?

A. They were very consistent with our priorities and, as I said, more so than the embassy's. They were emphasizing rule of law and agriculture and economic and business development—which was one that I didn't think was necessarily a winning one for us. As it turns out that was third out of their three major foci; it wasn't really a distraction. They also emphasized our province's proximity with the Iranian border, which was an issue that I thought the military was rightly more focused on—the whole issue of cross-border traffic and border security.

Q. Did you have input into the military expenditures for different kinds of projects?

A. We had a fairly good input on what they call CERP funds—the Commander's Emergency Response Program or reconstruction program. Ultimately the military went with what they wanted to do. They would generally try to coordinate priorities with us and did a pretty good job. I have no issue with the funding priorities—my issues were more with the execution of the funding and the contracting which was, I felt, poorly done.

Q. How so?

A. They would choose military-approved contractors, and, once you were on that list, it was hard to ever get off that list. It is a tough place in terms of business ethics and I think there was very little, if any, vetting of people's business ethics. There was—I think—no real cost control in the sense that people didn't ask themselves and ask local Iraqis and other contractors working with us, "Hey is this really what we should be paying for this project?" I think the military easily got overcharged by five or six times of what they should have over the course of seven or eight years in Iraq.

Q. To what extent were your Iraqi counterparts and the people you were seeing on a regular basis consulted or given an opportunity to participate in the planning of your activities and expenditures at the PRT level?

A. We did our best to include them to the greatest extent possible. But we ran into some real problems. For instance, we ran into our provincial council chairman who tried to, on a number of occasions, to get us to give the provincial council the money to work with their contractors who said they could do everything much more cheaply than we were paying. He probably could, but this was also probably a way of taking care of cronies and relatives. So I was a little leery of letting them be too involved, although, we did not do things unilaterally because we felt that was counterproductive—to shove projects down people's throats. I think most PRTs followed that same path.

Q. How did you handle the situation of the provincial council chairman wanting to be the funnel for the funding?

A. This is an irrigation pumping project that involved that and it involved a local sheik who he didn't care for. It was a bit of a rival. We sort of back-doored that project using another arm of the military that would help us out, who wasn't directly connected with our base, because we felt that it was an important project. This is a place where people would know what we were doing and never came back to bite us. On other projects—the provincial council chair wanted us to do some orphanage projects—turns out it was in a building that was being used by the local police and was in a terrible state of disrepair and we just walked away from that project. It was dissolved. Again, there were no repercussions for that. A lot of this was people would ask for ten times the price and ten times the project hoping to get one tenth of what they asked for.

Q. So some of the requests were exaggerated one way or another? And your response was expected?

A. Yeah, I think the response was expected. You can always use that nice phrase *Insha'Allah*—we will try to get it done—but there was a little bit of a formulated game involved in this.

Q. Were there any other actors that we have not mentioned involved in the planning process? Like international organizations or NGOs or other countries' representatives?

A. Not really in our province. There was a French NGO – that was in a odd way, funded by USAID – that was doing some well projects and some other projects around the province that were pretty much independent. There was actually one very positive actor. There was an AID

program called Local Governance Program III and this was two AID contracted guys embedded in the provincial council, teaching them how to do a website, teaching them how to keep a provincial gazette, mentoring the provincial council nuts-and-bolts of governance. That was a wildly successful program, really good.

Q. What other lessons learned could you mention in terms of planning and the activities that you carried out in cooperation with others there on the ground?

A. The embassy was too absent from our daily lives. I would always tell people I felt closer to Washington at my last post in Asia than I did to Embassy Baghdad that was 125 miles away from Al Kut in Wasit province. You know I think that was a missed opportunity for embassy people to get out, see what was going on, interact, to be involved. I made numerous pleas for people to come see us. Halfway through the year, the embassy implemented an embassy "ring route" (passenger transportation) via fixed wing aircraft – a Dash 8 (Bombardier make) aircraft. A perfectly good airplane that came in three times a week and it was still like pulling teeth to get anybody to come from the embassy.

Q. How well did your training prepare you for what you were going to experience there on the ground? I gathered that you served earlier in Afghanistan, so perhaps that was part of your training as well.

A. Yeah, that was a very different experience, because I went in as a management officer at Embassy Kabul. What that experienced helped me with was prepare myself for dealing in an even more military-intensive environment on the PRT. I know I enjoyed working with the military and I think I was glad I had that background. In terms of actual training? I thought that this "crash-bang" (Foreign Affairs Counter Threat) course that they give everybody going out to these postings is unnecessary, at least the driving safety portion of it. I felt the general Iraq familiarization course, with a retired military guy teaching the course, who was very good. The PRT course was not very useful. I think things in Iraq in these sorts of environments – Iraq, Afghanistan, you know – three months is equivalent to a year anywhere else in terms of change, in turn over. Just what you're teaching people at FSI now about PRTs and Afghanistan – I guess they are not teaching anymore about PRTs in Iraq, probably not as much – it is already going to be dated. By the time people get to the PRT it is a year and a half out of date and probably not really useful. It was okay in term of a very general overview, but in terms of any kind of specifics, not very good in retrospect. And Arabic language! It is crazy to send these people out to these places without at least some language training. I took an FSI distance learning language course that was reasonably helpful. But people have to have more language training.

Q. Is there anything that might have improved the FSI training and made it more valuable, given the fact that situations are changing so rapidly?

A. The general Iraq familiarization course was very good and very useful. The specific PRT training course was less useful. How would that have been better? You know I think they emphasized the program— the last couple of days we were busy creating a work plan and I already mentioned that these work plans that the embassy had us doing were out of date and not very useful by the time I got there. Ironically, I believe the course is being taught now by one of

the planning people who was working in the Office of Provincial Affairs, so I fear that there is probably still an emphasis on too much planning and not enough doing. Let me be more specific. I think the more discussion about specifically the projects you would be doing, the levels that which you would be working with people, what to expect in terms of interacting with Iraqis or Afghans, that sort of training for PRT people is more useful than how you put together a work plan.

Q: What were the operational elements that worked particularly well and what were the major impediments to accomplishing your mission in your day-to-day activities in the PRT?

A. I worked very well with our military partners, and by that I mean the ones not embedded with the PRT but the battalions, squadron commander, lieutenant colonel, particularly the second one I worked with. He really "got" the whole civilian-outreach thing and was nothing but one hundred percent helpful. He put a large number of his people at our disposal. I think the military movement teams that worked with us were fabulous. The reservists who worked with us, and they were mostly reservists, who worked with us in the PRT were generally good -- with the exception of one of my deputy team leaders who was completely incapable of doing the job and who departed the position early. I found that my training and experiences as a human resources officer was absolutely invaluable to doing my job.

Q. How was the hand over when you took over from the previous team leader?

A. That worked actually fairly well. The previous team leader was a very different guy than me; I'm probably much more collaborative. I don't like necessarily being the big cheese, the boss and the top-down guy. He was more that guy, but nevertheless I think although we both acknowledged we were different people and I think the hand over went very well. I think the concept of having at least a few days overlap between team leaders was and is a good idea. I think that went well.

Q. *How about your hand over to your successor – how did that go?*

A. Well there really wasn't one, because I was the last official team leader. I handed it off to the political officer and that went well. I was all about transition and draw down from the time I got there. I think my team saw that, and we talked about it a lot and we circulated various plans and ideas, so I think the draw down was very organic and natural when it happened. I think our PRT was way ahead of the game in terms of doing this correctly. I think one of the things we did particularly well— you know it's funny in the State Department nobody gets fired—everyone is an "A" student and nobody wants to think of the fact that people have to go either because they are not doing a good job. Even with contractors, I found it quite astounding that some of the other team leaders when I mentioned that I got rid of some of the Iraqi-American contractors who were just not bringing any value-added, they couldn't quite believe that I had done that. Well I said, "These are contractors." All you have to do is an evaluation, you just say, "It's not working out, I'm sorry you're leaving". I think some of the team leaders probably should have been more aggressive about taking the same path, especially towards the end.

Q. You turned over a number of your responsibilities, presumably those particularly relating to

governance and rule of law, to the political officer. How about the agricultural projects?

A. The AG (agricultural) projects were the only areas where I felt the cooperation from the Embassy -- from the Foreign Agricultural Service -- was stellar. They were the only ones who visited us on a regular basis. They were aware of what we were doing; they were involved with some of our contacts, three of whom went recently to the U.S. on an AG (agricultural) program. So that, frankly, is the only area where I have real confidence that there is going to be longer-term follow up.

Q. Did you feel overall that your team had the necessary skill sets in terms of professional skills and personal qualities to achieve the mission?

A. My team did. I thought that when we got there we were top heavy with engineering people and, once we got rid of most of the engineering staff, I think things like lines of communication and responsibility were much clearer.

Q. How about in the area of cultural sensitivity, was that ever a problem?

A. Not really with our group. Our group was pretty good. We did not have any major issues with the civilians. Sometimes with the military folks who saw things much more black-and-white we had some minor issues. We had an issue where we went to the university to do a program that had been poorly organized by the NGO that was responsible for it. We ended up standing around the middle of campus and a spontaneous student protest broke out – Sadrist students chanting – and we decided to get out of there. As we were leaving a student threw a piece of a brick at one of our lieutenants, it grazed the back of his head and he needed a couple of stitches but nothing serious. The U.S. military wanted us to trot out the governor and the provincial council chair and the university rector to say they're sorry publicly. I tried desperately and eventually succeeded in counseling them that this was only going to give this relatively minor issue a lot of life. But it was a real eye opener. The military just isn't used to being in this light – in addition to the fact that they see things as being black-and-white, which does not always work well in a cross-cultural environment. They can't understand why people don't like them. It is a real advantage being with the State Department – people don't like us all the time. So when you run into obstacles of people who are indifferent or don't like you it just doesn't affect you as much as it does for many of these people in the military, particularly at the enlisted and non-commissioned officer level.

Q. Were there any lessons to be learned from the logistical side in the way that you were supported? You mentioned that the Embassy didn't pay much attention to you in terms of coming by or being in touch with you regularly. But were you lacking in material support – on the communication side and otherwise?

A. No. It was actually pretty adequate all things considered. I think we had some internet connectivity issues towards the end because they were installing some sort of — they call it "the blue code." I guess it was one of these things where it was a mandatory filters that they had to put on. It was in my opinion kind of a foolish choice, to bother with this six to eight months before PRTs were closing. The government has all sorts of requirements, some of them which

are really serious, some of which you could probably look the other way and let go. That would be the only way where I thought they made a poor choice in trying to implement that at the 11th hour – basically slowing down our internet, which one of our major outlets there in addition to being necessary for our work.

Q. In closing let ask you if there any other comments you want to make? Any ideas that you want to share about your experience with the PRT, how it worked and how it could have been made more effective or how other PRTs in other countries could be made more effective?

A. What a great management/leadership experience! [But] our system is bad when it comes to vetting people for assignments like this. I think that old adage about playing nicely with others is particularly important in a high pressure, kind of "out there" assignment like a PRT. It's not a place to send screw-ups, it's not a place to send people looking to rehabilitate bad careers. I think it's important to be choosy even when there are assignments where you are maybe a little desperate about "will I get this job filled?" So I think that is important, I think the people who can deal with the pressure, who have got a good sense of humor, who are versatile, who like working with the military, who can function well in a environment where State is a tiny minority, all of that is important and I think that improves the effectiveness of your PRT.

I don't know whether this is what you are after, but I thought the financial incentives were quite good and certainly worthwhile. I thought the system did a horrendously poor job of taking care of many of us with follow on assignments. I'm very happy with my follow on, ultimately, but I spent an inordinate amount of time during my tour chasing a follow on assignment. I mean time that was robbed from me focusing on PRT-related stuff. That is not something specific to Iraq tours; I think that speaks more to the general breakdown in our assignments process.

A more general observation, not PRT specific – I think we are at a real crossroads in these sorts of assignments. I think there are those of us -- a third or a quarter of the Foreign Service -- who have done them. And I think there are a lot of people who haven't, don't want to, don't want to be reminded that there are those of us out there who've done them, don't feel like they should be disadvantaged in any way because they haven't done them, or don't want to do them. I sense there is a what I like to call AIP (Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan) fatigue out there and even a little hostility towards those of us who have done these assignments. I'm not necessarily advocating — because I know there are some people who aren't that good at doing these assignments and I don't want to advocate that we should all be given our absolute priority assignments and our top two choice assignments and instant promotion—but I think this is a stated top priority goal of the Secretary of State and reiterated by the DG (Director General) and that is not always reflected in the way the system reacted to those of us who've done these assignments.

Q. Any other comments?

A. I would do it again.

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