



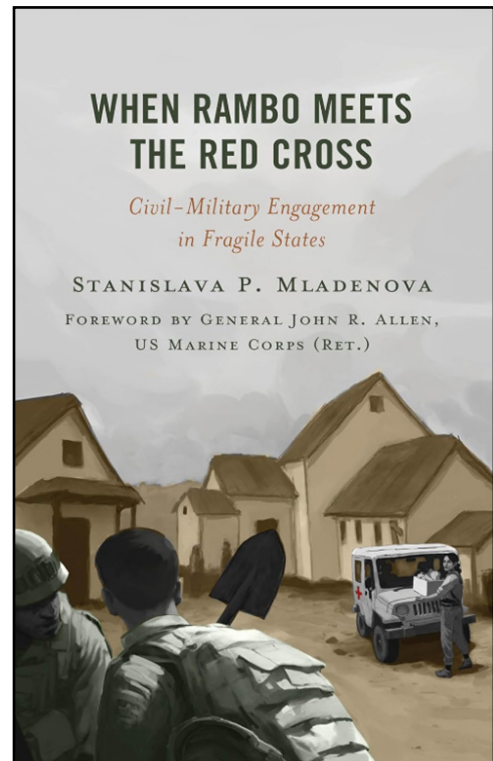
# When Rambo Meets the Red Cross: Civil-Military Engagement in Fragile States

By Stanislava P. Mladenova PhD.

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Reviewed by: Patrick Griffin

*When Rambo Meets the Red Cross* takes a critical look at the trifecta of U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF), their relationship with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and the beneficiaries of foreign aid. Stanislava Mladenova collects semi-structured interviews from actors on all three sides of the civil-military relationship to search for the answer to her central question: “Can SOF and NGOs be effective partners in low-intensity conflict?”

Mladenova features quotes from NGO members, U.S. military personnel, host-nation military, and local beneficiaries involved in gray-zone conflicts in Afghanistan, the Philippines, Lebanon, and more. To fill gaps in understanding the perception of these groups from the local populace, she also conducted a survey with 87 participants from a community exposed to civil-military and NGO projects in the Philippines.

Mladenova begins by challenging the [conventional understanding](#) of modern-day SOF, where “everyone is an operator.” She reminds the reader of [SOF’s historical roots](#) as a force used to leverage cultural and linguistic knowledge and form social relationships “to secure military advantages.” Based on what she learned from her interviews, Mladenova argues that several issues in the SOF community ultimately degrade the U.S. military’s effectiveness when conducting humanitarian and civil development projects. Some of her core findings include a pivot from soft-power to hard-power prioritization in SOF, high deployment rotation rates, and a lack of long-term strategic thinking when developing projects.



Mladenova is also critical of the ability of NGOs to remain impartial. In her interviews, she finds that project funding requirements create limitations for NGOs to truly serve vulnerable populations. She confronts the disillusion of linear warfare and lays bare the evidence that there is no clear separation between humanitarian, military, and political action in low-intensity conflict. Mladenova discovers that despite bureaucratic compartmentalization, ample opportunity exists for individual military and NGO actors to collaborate on the ground. Her book [outlines](#) how both SOF and NGOs inherently contain several factors that create an environment of “institutional convergence.”

While Mladenova writes for a wide audience of public sector, military, and NGO actors, her recommendations for improving effective civil-military coordination remain focused on the SOF community—specifically the U.S. military. Despite all the valuable insight of this book, this may be its greatest weakness. At the beginning of her book, Mladenova acknowledges that one of the largest gaps in understanding the effectiveness of civil-military and NGO coordination lies in a military-centric approach to research. However, the book does little to break from this mold. While the author collects some data from civilian recipients of NGO and military aid, most of her interviews and analysis centers on the military. Future research should do more to collect feedback, perceptions, and insight from the civilian population to better understand the effects that these organizations have on the populations they engage with.

As a Civil Affairs Officer, I found Mladenova’s recommendations highly compelling, attainable, and grounded in thorough research and analysis. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in or working in the field of humanitarian and development assistance, with a particular emphasis on those operating on the military side of the fence. Mladenova’s research is beneficial for higher-level military and governmental leadership in spearheading policy course corrections. However, in the spirit of her findings, this book truly belongs in the hands of those company-grade officers and enlisted non-commissioned officers who make up the last-tactical-mile of foreign affairs.



*Patrick Griffin is a Civil Affairs Officer in the Marine Corps Reserve and a current graduate student at Harvard Extension School, working toward a master’s degree in international relations. Patrick holds an undergraduate degree in international affairs, and his work has been published by the U.S. Naval Institute, the Modern War Institute at Westpoint, and Task & Purpose.*