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The Perils of Nation-Building, Part 2

by Doug Bandow

Giving up on expansive nation-building ambitions is the only sensible course of action, for there are few successful models upon which to draw for Iraq.

America's obvious successes are Germany and Japan, yet neither looks like Iraq: both comprised ethnically homogenous populations, possessed democratic traditions, and sported an educated, professional class. The U.S. effort was widely viewed as legitimate by all major international players and the two countries' neighbors, which had suffered the most at their hands.

While many Germans and Japanese seemed to hold the same mixture of feelings evident in Iraq — relief at foreign liberation but resentment at foreign occupation — they had no illusion that American rule would be brief. Not so in Iraq. Abu Eslam Saqir, a spokesman for the Iran-friendly Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, said,

We wanted the international community, including Americans, to help us get rid of Saddam's dictatorship, not impose their will on our nation.

Most important, Germany and Japan were real nations. Iraq is not and has never been one. It consists of three provinces of the old Ottoman Empire and owes its current borders to British nation-builders. The cultural and political gulf among Kurds, Shias, and Sunnis is enormous. Moreover, the first two groups are drawn to allied peoples outside Iraq.

All things considered, Iraq looks more like several countries where American attempts at nation-building have been far less successful — disastrous even. In Somalia, for instance, the United States thrust itself into the bloody conflict among competing warlords in the name of delivering humanitarian relief. Local combatants successfully manipulated Washington to take sides. The attempt to seize warlord Mohammed Aideed led to a vicious firefight in Mogadishu that killed 18 U.S. Rangers and as many as a 1,000 Somalis in 1993. The United States withdrew

and the local combatants eventually wore themselves out. Today Somalia has achieved some degree of peace if not unity, without America's help.

In 1994 the Clinton administration used the threat of a U.S. invasion to force junta leader Raoul Cedras from power in Haiti. Washington installed Jean-Bertrand Aristide in his stead. Aristide, however, though more popular than Cedras, was no less authoritarian. Attempts to restore the economic infrastructure, train a police force, and promote democracy have largely come to naught. With great fanfare the United States managed to replace a military dictatorship with a presidential one.

The 1995 Dayton accord led to a nation-building exercise that continues in Bosnia, a purely artificial country. Never before independent, Bosnia is made up of three warring groups, two of which want to join coreligionists in neighboring states. It exists today only because of foreign military occupation that has lasted more than eight years. Bosnia is still ruled by a European "high representative" who interferes with local elections, censors the media, and makes national policy. He has chosen the currency and national anthem. Corruption is rife, particularly in the Muslim conclave, which receives the most foreign aid.

A recent report from the Balkan think tank the European Stability Initiative concludes that the latest high representative, Paddy Ashdown, displays a "bewildering conception of democracy politics." By essentially exercising dictatorial powers, he is acting like a "European raj" whose policy "echoes the liberal imperialism of the past," warns the ESI. There is no reason to believe that such rule is ever going to turn Bosnia into a real country.

The experience in Kosovo is even worse. After going to war to stop ethnic cleansing, the United States presided over the territory while its erstwhile allies, the Kosovo Liberation Army, murdered hundreds of Serbs, ethnically cleansed nearly a quarter of a million Serbs, Jews, Gypsies, and non-Albanian Muslims, and despoiled Orthodox religious sites. Violence remains a serious problem as KLA members have taken over organized crime and formed the quasi-state's police force. Yet the West holds Kosovo in an autonomous limbo that satisfies no one: the Albanians want independence, while the Serbs want to reassert Belgrade's control. After being empowered by Washington, the transformed KLA mounted attacks to the north in Serbia and to the east in Macedonia.

Examples in the Middle East and Muslim world look no better. Two decades ago many Shia Muslims in Lebanon greeted Israeli troops in Lebanon as liberators. The Shiites had little affinity with Palestinian guerrillas who had dominated their territory and turned it into a target for Israeli military retaliation. But war raged among Muslim sects while Israel allied itself with contending Christian militias. Eventually residents hated occupation by Israel even more than by the PLO, and the Shia Hezbollah movement proved to be as deadly a foe as the PLO for Israel.

Lebanon offered no better an experience for America. In 1958 a temporary U.S. military intervention seemed to help stabilize the government. In 1983 the United States jumped into the

ongoing Lebanese civil war on the side of the minority Christian government, which ruled little more than Beirut. Washington turned itself into a combatant, bombarding Muslim villages, and was rewarded with bomb blasts that killed 16 Americans at the U.S. embassy and 241 Marines at their airport barracks. President Ronald Reagan proclaimed that the attacks demonstrated that America was “accomplishing its mission.” Indeed, “we are more resolved than ever” to persevere, he declared. But Washington quickly redeployed its forces on ship and sailed away.

Rebuilding Afghanistan

Today Afghanistan is turning ugly. Although Washington expeditiously defenestrated the Taliban government and its al-Qaeda allies, two years of occupation have left Hamid Karzai as more mayor of Kabul than president of Afghanistan. Bloody factional fighting is rife throughout the country.

As yet Karzai does not even trust his safety to Afghan bodyguards. In order to extend his power, U.S. forces are increasingly intervening in local squabbles, bombing contending warlords, for instance. “It’s all tribal now,” declares Whitney Azoy, a former U.S. diplomat. “The U.S. military is being used for these personal vendettas, and they don’t have the experience in this region to realize it.”

Yet American action no longer goes unchallenged. With some regularity American soldiers are being ambushed and occasionally killed in southern Afghanistan. There are increasing attacks on aid workers and tourists as well. In October special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad warned that the Taliban “may be planning even larger attacks, more spectacular attacks.” While most Afghans remain pleased at their liberation from Taliban rule, many are chafing at America’s continued control: Washington carries out searches and detentions on its own authority and was widely criticized for the war in Iraq. America won no friends when it arrested Naeem Koochi, an influential tribal leader, on his way to Kabul to meet with government officials and then transferred him to Guantanamo Bay over the protests of the Karzai government. Public demonstrations greeted the accidental killing of four Afghan soldiers by U.S. forces in Kabul. Continuing accidents, mistakes, and harshness are likely to further wear out America’s welcome.

Nor has the West bought dramatic reconstruction progress with the \$800 million spent in 2002 by various aid agencies. Observes Scott Baldauf, South Asia bureau chief for the *Christian Science Monitor*,

Despite some positive signs in Afghanistan over the past year — children going to school, homes being rebuilt, wells being dug — there is much about postliberation Afghanistan that hasn’t changed during President Hamid Karzai’s first months of power. Businessmen complain about harassment by corrupt policemen and thuggish soldiers. All but the bravest women still wear sky-blue burqas, their only

protection from the hungry eyes of gunmen. Some villages are so far away from doctors or medical clinics that preventable diseases like polio and measles are making a comeback.

He is not alone in his assessment. Writes Marc Kauffman in the *Washington Post*,

Virtually every significant system in the country is broken. The military is splintered by factionalism, the police force is untrained, the justice system is dominated by religious conservatives who have more in common with the Taliban than with Karzai, and tax collection is largely ineffective. Even the driving rules are in disarray.

One cannot help but think of the Soviet experience: Moscow quickly occupied Afghanistan and faced only modest opposition to start. A decade later it withdrew in the midst of disaster. Baldauf worries, “For all the appearances of stability, Afghanistan is tottering at the edge of civil war. It needs only a nudge.” His driver proclaims, “The only thing that keeps this country from going back to the Taliban are those B-52s.”

Rebuilding Iraq

None of these experiences means that nation-building can never work in a non-Western country. But they do suggest that nation-building is an enormously difficult enterprise in anything but the narrowest circumstances — ones not present in Iraq. Evident Iraqi enthusiasm at the fall of Saddam Hussein created an illusion, in the mind of the Bush administration at least, of enthusiasm at the prospect of a sustained U.S. occupation. But the fact that Iraqis hated Saddam Hussein did not mean that they loved Americans or looked forward to U.S. rule, something even more evident as an apparent mix of defeated Ba’athists, radical Islamists, and discontented nationalists attack U.S. troops daily and radical clerics assert control in Baghdad and elsewhere, control that will not be easily wrested away.

Having invaded Iraq, Washington has committed itself to rebuilding that nation. However, history suggests that that effort is very likely doomed. America’s basic foreign-policy objective should be to safeguard its people from attack, not to inaugurate an Iraqi New Deal. That means getting out of Iraq and bringing U.S. troops home without worrying about whether Iraq holds together, who rules Baghdad, and how the country’s politics are practiced. And it means getting out quickly, so as to stop wasting the lives of young Americans and to avoid creating both a permanent grievance and target for America’s many enemies in the region.

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