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REFLECTIONS

Does Nation Building Work?

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JAMES L. PAYNE

In plunging into war, hope generally triumphs over experience. The past—the quiet statistical tabulation of what happened when such plunges were taken before—tends to be ignored in the heat of angry oratory and the thump of military boots. At the outset, it is easy to believe that force will be successful in upholding virtue and that history has no relevance.

Lately, this confidence in the force of arms has centered on nation building—that is, on invading and occupying a land afflicted by dictatorship or civil war and turning it into a democracy. This objective has been a major theme of the U.S. government’s recent actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the policy is not likely to be limited to those countries. The U.S. government now enjoys a military preeminence in the world, and the temptation to deploy its armed forces to repair or transform other regimes is likely to prove attractive again in the future.

Moreover, the idea of invading countries to “fix” them has recently gained considerable support in the academic and foreign-policy community. Among the first to advocate the assertive use of U.S. military forces around the world were William Kristol and Robert Kagan. In a 1996 article in *Foreign Affairs*, they urged the United States to adopt a posture of “benevolent global hegemony.” This means “actively promoting American principles of governance abroad—democracy, free markets,

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respect for liberty” (27). To John Quincy Adams’s advice that America should not go “abroad in search of monsters to destroy,” they mockingly replied, “But why not?” (31). In their endorsement for foreign-policy activism, Kagan and Kristol have been joined by a number of policy wonks, journalists, and academics, a group that has come to be known as “neoconservatives.”

In their enthusiasm for nation building by force of arms, neither the theorists nor the practitioners have examined the historical experience with this kind of policy. They are aware that a historical record exists, but they do not take it seriously. In a speech two weeks before the invasion of Iraq, President George W. Bush pointed to other interventions that had been successful:

America has made and kept this kind of commitment before—in the peace that followed a world war. After defeating enemies, we did not leave behind occupying armies, we left constitutions and parliaments. We established an atmosphere of safety, in which responsible, reform-minded local leaders could build lasting institutions of freedom. In societies that once bred fascism and militarism, liberty found a permanent home. There was a time when many said that the cultures of Japan and Germany were incapable of sustaining democratic values. Well, they were wrong. (Bush 2003)

Although this reference to Germany and Japan demonstrates an interest in the past, it is disappointingly selective. Yes, Germany and Japan would seem to be success stories for the idea that a U.S. army of occupation can leave behind an enduring democracy. But these cases are not the only pertinent ones. U.S. military forces have gone into troubled countries dozens of times through the years, but without the same results. They went into Cuba three times and tried to set up a democracy—in 1898, again in 1906, and again in 1917. Each time, after the troops left, civil war and dictatorship followed, and what has apparently found a “permanent home” in Cuba is not liberty but Fidel Castro’s dictatorship.

Kristol and Kagan are equally selective in their use of the historical record. In the *Foreign Affairs* article in which they advocate a muscular foreign policy, they approvingly cite the case of Haiti, where, they observe, “the United States completed the withdrawal of 15,000 soldiers after restoring a semblance of democratic government” (1996, 21). Again, the method of historical comparison is used carelessly. If Kristol and Kagan wish to claim that the U.S. military invasions succeed in establishing democracy, they are obliged to review all the cases of intervention. A disinterested analyst does not point to one case that appears to support the policy and ignore the cases that do not support it. In fact, even the Haiti case contradicts their thesis. Haiti appeared to represent a success story only during the brief period in 1996, when Kristol and Kagan were writing their article. Shortly afterward, it sank back into violent anarchy, the condition in which it remains today.

In pondering the policy of nation building, then, we need an overall picture of how such efforts turn out. Before government leaders roll the dice of war, invading a country in the hope of establishing a democracy, they ought to know what their odds are.

The first step is to compile a list of cases. I focus here on the strongest, military version of nation building, illustrated by the case of Iraq: the use of ground troops to support a deliberate effort to establish a democracy. I leave aside many cases of lesser military involvements, such as episodes in which the United States sent only military aid or military advisors, funded rebel movements, or used only air power or sea power. If these lesser interventions fail, one can always say that the democratic power did not make a serious effort. The insertion of ground troops, however, manifests a high level of seriousness. It generally gives the occupier sweeping powers, including the ability to replace government officials, to establish political bodies such as legislatures, and to hold elections. My definition of *nation building* also requires that the invading country make “a deliberate effort to establish a democracy.” Thus, I leave aside purely peacekeeping missions, punitive missions, and countries with U.S. military bases, but with no significant U.S. role in local politics.¹

Who Are the Nation Builders?

Most discussions about spreading democracy focus on the United States as the nation builder, but other countries have also attempted this kind of project. Generations ago, many European nations, both as colonial powers and as the managers of trusteeships, were deeply involved in invading and administering foreign lands. Can the record of their accomplishments or failures be included in assessing the validity of the nation-building policy?

The problem is that colonialism, for most of the European nations, did not involve an effort to promote democracy. Countries such as Spain, Portugal, France, and Belgium were not themselves especially democratic, and in any case they were not self-consciously proud of being democracies. They were not interested in promoting self-government, and they viewed colonies as lands to be ruled and exploited, perhaps eventually annexed.

Great Britain, however, was an exception. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, the British had embraced the idea of spreading democracy (or “self-government,” as they usually put it) to the territories under their control. Furthermore, the British had a self-conscious pride in their political institutions. Like Americans, they saw their government as a wonderful and wisely evolved system, worth spreading to

1. For example, despite the heavy U.S. military involvement in Kuwait, especially the 1991 liberation of the country from Iraq, the United States has played no active role in trying to shape Kuwaiti politics. Another such “politically neutral” intervention is the British involvement in Oman. The British had troops there from 1951 to 1971, and they played a role upholding the emir against rebels, but they made no effort to shape local politics in a democratic direction.

less-fortunate lands. Several generations ago the British, not the Americans, were considered the leaders in nation building. Their far-flung empire was presumed to have given them a wealth of experience in democratic tutelage. When the League of Nations was establishing trusteeships in the 1920s, Britain seemed the natural authority to guide places such as Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq to self-government.

My selection of cases of attempted nation building, then, includes both British and American efforts. My time frame embraces interventions and colonies begun after 1850. Study of this 150-year period enables us to include most of the former British colonies, except the very oldest (such as the United States, Canada, Australia, India, Pakistan, and a number of small Caribbean political entities established in the eighteenth century). In order for a country to qualify here as a complete case of nation building, troops must have left it (or be uninvolved locally, if based in the country) so that we may determine whether in the absence of military support a stable democracy continued to exist. For this reason, we cannot use ongoing involvements such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The case of South Vietnam cannot be used because the U.S. troop withdrawal coincided with the North Vietnamese conquest of the country; hence, there was no opportunity to find out whether the South Vietnamese democracy would have thrived on its own.

The application of my definition identifies fifty-one instances of attempted nation building by Britain and the United States over the past 150 years. In each episode, the democratic power placed land forces in the area, made a conscious effort to affect local politics in the direction of promoting democracy, and then left. The question is, How often did it succeed?

Success involves more than holding an election and setting up a government. Nation building implies *building*—that is, constructing a lasting edifice. The nation builders concur in this notion of durability. Their idea is not just to hold elections, get out, and have the country revert to anarchy or dictatorship. As President Bush said, the aim in Iraq is to create “lasting” institutions of freedom. To call the nation-building effort a success, therefore, we need to confirm that the military occupation of the target country resulted in the establishment of a democracy that lasted at least several decades.

To identify results in these terms, I inspected the political history of each country after the troop withdrawal. I looked for events betokening the collapse of democratic rule, including the suppression of opposition leaders or parties; major infringements of freedoms of speech, press, and assembly; violent transfers of power; murder of political leaders by other leaders; or significant civil war. I required large and multiple failures along these lines as evidence of democratic failure. A few arrests of opposition leaders, a few assassinations of ambiguous meaning, a simple military coup, the resignation of an executive in the face of massive street demonstrations—none of these by itself was enough to disqualify the country as a democracy. If numerous free and fair elections were held, this outcome was taken as strong evidence that democracy survived. Elections that were one-sided and to some degree rigged by the incumbents

Table 1
Nation-Building Military Occupations by the
United States and Great Britain, 1850–2000

| U. S. Occupations | |
|----------------------------|---------|
| Austria 1945–55 | success |
| Cuba 1898–1902 | failure |
| Cuba 1906–1909 | failure |
| Cuba 1917–22 | failure |
| Dominican Republic 1911–24 | failure |
| Dominican Republic 1965–67 | success |
| Grenada 1983–85 | success |
| Haiti 1915–34 | failure |
| Haiti 1994–96 | failure |
| Honduras 1924 | failure |
| Italy 1943–45 | success |
| Japan 1945–52 | success |
| Lebanon 1958 | failure |
| Lebanon 1982–84 | failure |
| Mexico 1914–17 | failure |
| Nicaragua 1909–10 | failure |
| Nicaragua 1912–25 | failure |
| Nicaragua 1926–33 | failure |
| Panama 1903–33 | failure |
| Panama 1989–95 | success |
| Philippines 1898–1946 | success |
| Somalia 1992–94 | failure |
| South Korea 1945–61 | failure |
| West Germany 1945–52 | success |
| British Occupations | |
| Botswana 1886–1966 | success |
| Brunei 1888–1984 | failure |
| Burma (Myanmar) 1885–1948 | failure |
| Cyprus 1914–60 | failure |
| Egypt 1882–1922 | failure |

Table 1
(continued)

| | |
|----------------------------------|---------|
| Fiji 1874–1970 | success |
| Ghana 1886–1957 | failure |
| Iraq 1917–32 | failure |
| Iraq 1941–47 | failure |
| Jordan 1921–56 | failure |
| Kenya 1894–1963 | failure |
| Lesotho 1884–1966 | failure |
| Malawi (Nyasaland) 1891–1964 | failure |
| Malaysia 1909–57 | success |
| Maldives 1887–1976 | success |
| Nigeria 1861–1960 | failure |
| Palestine 1917–48 | failure |
| Sierra Leone 1885–1961 | failure |
| Solomon Islands 1893–1978 | success |
| South Yemen (Aden) 1934–67 | failure |
| Sudan 1899–1956 | failure |
| Swaziland 1903–1968 | failure |
| Tanzania 1920–63 | failure |
| Tonga 1900–1970 | success |
| Uganda 1894–1962 | failure |
| Zambia (N. Rhodesia) 1891–1964 | failure |
| Zimbabwe (S. Rhodesia) 1888–1980 | failure |

were taken as a negative sign, but they did not, in themselves, disqualify the country as democratic.

The results of applying these classification principles to the political outcomes in the fifty-one cases of intervention are shown in table 1. Overall, the results indicate that the military intervention left behind a democracy in fourteen cases, or 27 percent of the time. Our first conclusion, then, is that nation building by force is generally unsuccessful. A president who went around the world invading countries in order to make them democratic would probably fail most of the time.

The Worldwide Trend Against the Use of Force

In assessing the effectiveness of nation-building efforts, we need to be careful not to confuse conjunction with cause. That some military interventions have been *followed*

by democracy does not mean that the interventions *caused* the democracy. As I have explained elsewhere (Payne 2004), there is a worldwide movement against the use of force, and this trend promotes democratic development. Rulers are becoming less disposed to use violence to repress oppositions, and government critics are less inclined to resort to armed force against rulers. The result of this broad, historical trend is that countries are becoming democracies on their own, without any outside help. After all, most of the democracies in the world have come about in this way, by internal evolution. No one invaded Britain or Holland or Finland or Costa Rica to turn them into democracies, and the same holds for many other countries. This trend has to be kept in mind in evaluating the “success” of a nation-building effort.

For example, we might be tempted to praise the British occupation of Malaysia for “bringing” democracy to that country. In the same period, however, Thailand, which had not been occupied, also joined the camp of democratic nations. In fact, in the Freedom House survey of political rights and civil liberties, Thailand ranks ahead of Malaysia (Karatnycky 2002, 730). It is quite possible, then, that Malaysia would have become as democratic as it is today without British intervention.

South Korea presents an interesting lesson in the effectiveness of democratic tutelage. Beginning in 1945, when the U.S. troops landed after World War II, the United States was heavily involved in guiding political decisions in South Korea. This political involvement essentially ceased after 1961, and the South Koreans were allowed to go their own way politically. That way proved to be a military dictatorship under General Park Chung-Hee, which lasted until his murder by other officials in 1979. Thereafter followed two coups, a violent uprising in Kwangju, and many bloody street demonstrations. By 1985, however, the suppression of civil liberties had been greatly relaxed, and competitive elections were held. Since that time, South Korea can be called a democracy (albeit a noisy one with plenty of corruption). So here is a case in which sixteen years of tutelage under the Americans brought failure with regard to the establishment of democracy, but the country evolved to democracy on its own twenty-five years after U.S. involvement in local politics ceased.

In deciding whether nation-building efforts work, therefore, it is not enough to show that some occupations are followed by democracy. The key question is: Does democracy emerge more frequently in the occupied countries than in nations evolving on their own? Because of the difficulty of defining a proper control group, this question cannot be given a definitive answer. It is clear, however, that once autonomous democratic development is taken into account, the apparent nation-building successes, meager as they are to begin with, are themselves probably only spurious proof of the nation builders’ claims.

For example, at first glance, it might seem that the U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965 brought democracy to that country. But consider the larger trend in Latin America. Almost all the countries in this region were not democracies at the start of the twentieth century, but almost all have evolved to a democratic politics now. It is quite possible, then, that the Dominican Republic would have become a democracy on its own. Indeed, some observers believe that this change

was already under way in 1965 (Wiarda 1989, 436). Moreover, they believe the U.S. intervention aborted a middle-class democratic revolution that was on the verge of succeeding (U.S. officials feared—on perhaps flimsy evidence—that it would be taken over by Castro Communists). Thus, one can with justice say that the United States did not “bring” democracy to the Dominican Republic in 1965. It was already coming, and the U.S. action merely delayed its arrival by a year or two.

Is There Expertise in Nation Building?

Another way to assess the effectiveness of nation building is to examine the time dimension. If nation building were an effective therapy, then it should follow that the longer it is applied, the more certain its success will be. To use the medical analogy, the nation-building “doctors” will be more likely to cure the patient if they can apply their vital therapy over a longer period of time. The idea that longer military occupations are more effective in creating democracy is widely believed. Among those who take this position is Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations and formerly the director of policy planning for the State Department during the invasion of Iraq. Haass asserts that “[i]t is one thing to oust a regime, quite another to put something better in its place. Prolonged occupation of the sort the United States carried out in Japan and West Germany after World War II is the only surefire way to build democratic institutions and instill democratic culture” (2005).

Are “prolonged” occupations really more effective? The facts contradict this claim. The United States has been involved in many occupations much longer than the seven years in West Germany, but it has failed in most cases. The United States occupied and administered Haiti from 1915 to 1934. Those nineteen years of control proved not to be a “surefire” route to democracy, but merely an interlude in a violent and chaotic politics that continues to this day. Other cases of long U.S. interventions that failed to establish democracy include Nicaragua (1912), thirteen years; Nicaragua (1926), seven years; the Dominican Republic (1911), thirteen years; and Panama (1903), thirty years.

The British experience confirms the point. Numerous former British colonies had sixty, seventy, and more years of occupation and administration, yet failed to sustain democracy after the British left. For example, Zimbabwe, much in the news today because of dictator Robert Mugabe’s extreme actions, experienced ninety-two years of British administration. Other long-occupied countries that failed to sustain democracy after the British left include Nigeria (ninety-nine years), Sierra Leona (seventy-six years), Ghana (seventy-one years), and Burma (sixty-three years).

That long occupations so often fail to establish stable democracies indicates that something is seriously wrong with the medical model of nation building. The “doctors” apparently do not have an effective therapy. Indeed, a close look reveals that they have no therapy at all. The dirty little secret of nation building is that *no one knows how to do it*. Huge amounts of government and foundation money have been

poured into this question, and, in response to the dollars, the scholars and bureaucrats have produced only reams of verbose commentary. Even after all these efforts, no concrete, usable body of knowledge exists, no methodology of how “to build democratic institutions and instill democratic culture,” as Haass puts it.

There are no experts on nation building. The people who end up doing the so-called nation building are simply ordinary government employees who wind up at the scene of the military occupation. Many times they are military officers with no background in politics, sociology, or social psychology (not that it would help them, in any case). For the most part, these government employees see their mission as that of trying to get themselves and the U.S. forces out of the country without too much egg on their faces. They have no clearer idea of how to “instill democratic culture” than does the proverbial man on the street.

Pursuing an “Undefined Goal

A look at some specific examples of nation building illustrates the intellectual vacuum. The U.S. invasion of Panama in 1989 is credited as a nation-building success. Was this positive outcome the result of the expert application of political science? One of the nation builders, Lieutenant Colonel John T. Fishel, has written a book on the Panama experience that paints quite a different picture. Fishel was chief of policy and strategy for U.S. forces in Panama, and his job was to figure out how to implement the mission statement. The orders looked simple on paper: “Conduct nation building operations to ensure democracy.” Fishel quickly discovered, however, that the instruction was meaningless because democracy was an “undefined goal.” It seemed to him that it was not the job of military officers to figure out how to implement this undefined objective, but, as he observes with a touch of irritation, “there are no U.S. civilian strategists clearly articulating strategies to achieve democracy.” Worse, “[t]he fact that there was no clear definition of the conditions that constitute democracy meant that the Military Support Group and the other U.S. government agencies that were attempting to assist the Endara government had only the vaguest concept of what actions and programs would lead the country toward democracy” (1997, 84). In practice, the goal of “ensuring democracy” boiled down to installing Guillermo Endara, the winner of a previous election, as president, supporting him as he became increasingly high-handed and unpopular, and then stepping away after his opponent was elected in 1994. Not exactly rocket science.

One sign of how ill-prepared military invaders are to carry out the complex tasks that “building democracy” might entail (if anyone knew what those tasks were) is their inability to carry out the simpler tasks of effecting an occupation in a rational and orderly way. For example, in the Panama invasion, the U.S. deployed troops on the outskirts of Panama City and failed to move any units into the center. As a result, looters and thugs took over downtown Panama City, a “predictable” chaos, says Fishel. “The critical question,” he asks, “is how the intelligent and experienced senior U.S.

military leadership failed to see the obvious and take action” (1997, 58). Were the military planners trying to tell us something when they gave the invasion and nation building in Panama the code name BLIND LOGIC?

Joseph Stalin: Nation Builder?

Austria presents an instructive example of what nation building has actually amounted to on the ground. In my tabulation (table 1), Austria is classified as a case of successful nation building: U.S. troops occupied the country from 1945 to 1955, and a democracy was established. A closer look reveals, however, that the U.S. political role was minimal and rather unhelpful at that.

At the end of the war, Austria was occupied jointly by the Soviet Union and the Western powers. The Soviets brought Karl Renner, the elderly and respected Austrian socialist leader, to Vienna to head a provisional government. Renner’s provisional government declared the establishment of the Democratic Austrian Republic on April 27, 1945. The United States refused to recognize this government, fearing that the Soviets were up to no good in having fostered it. Finally, six months later, when it became obvious that the provisional government was popular and functioning, the United States recognized it.

Austria thus presents an ironic lesson in how “nation building” unfolds. The United States—the democratic power—stood in the way of local leaders who were attempting to establish a democratic regime, and the Soviet Union—the world’s leading dictatorship—unintentionally acted as midwife for it. Obviously, in Austria no democracy needed to be “built.” The democratic leaders there were strong enough to establish a democracy on their own, and they did so in spite of the occupying “nation builders.”

The pattern was similar in Italy. Local Italian leaders overthrew Mussolini in 1943, and Italians set up the democratic government that followed. The main allied contribution was some unhelpful meddling by Britain’s Winston Churchill, who was obsessed with the rather undemocratic goal of preserving the unpopular Italian monarchy. To this end, Churchill blocked the respected antimonarchist leader Count Carlo Sforza from becoming prime minister in 1944. This action weakened the fledgling democratic regime, which lost the support of Sforza’s followers. In the end, however, Italian democrats overcame Churchill’s interference. A national referendum voted out the monarchy in 1946, and Sforza made it into the cabinet in 1947. The Americans, clueless about Italian politics, did not meddle at all. As Italian historian Gianfranco Pasquino explains, “the Americans did not have a specific policy for Italy, or any clear-cut design for the shaping of the Italian political system” (1986, 60).

These cases show that the advocates of nation building need to go back and take a close look at what really happened in the postwar political evolution of the defeated powers. In the lore of nation building, it is supposed that American “experts” carried out sophisticated social engineering that made these countries become democracies

against their will. For example, the editors of a four-volume survey of nation building, Larry Diamond, Juan Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, declare that “[d]emocracy was imposed on Germany, Italy, and Japan, and surprisingly took hold and endured” (1989, xi). This interpretation is not grounded in the facts. As just noted, it is pure invention that the United States “imposed” democracy on Italy. I do not have space here to review the cases of Germany and Japan, where the United States played a large domestic role. It is an open question, however, whether on balance that role was helpful or harmful for democracy. Many historians, political scientists, and journalists at the time concluded that it was destructive. For example, in September 1949, *Commentary* ran an article entitled “Why Democracy Is Losing in Germany” that decried the inept, counterproductive policies of the U.S. military administration (Gurland 1949).

“Making This Up As We Go Along”

The recent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq further illustrate how haphazard and unfocused nation building is in practice. Neither of these efforts has followed any plan, design, or theory for establishing a democracy. In invading Afghanistan, the Bush administration gave little thought to political arrangements that might follow military victory over the Taliban. Less than three weeks before the attack, President Bush asked national-security advisor Condoleezza Rice, “Who will run the country?” It was a moment of panic for her because she had not given the issue any thought (Daalder 2003, 112).

A year and a half later, with the invasion of Iraq, the administration had apparently gained nothing in nation-building expertise. Although the military campaign was a success, the occupation and its administration have been characterized by naïveté and improvisation. In the early stages of the invasion, the U.S. government had neither a policy to check looting nor the forces to do so—policymakers had apparently forgotten the lesson of Panama—and the result was a ravaging of local infrastructure, the rapid formation of gangs of thugs and paramilitary fighters, and a loss of local support for the U.S. effort. The civilian administration was first put in the hands of retired Lieutenant General Jay Garner, who was two weeks late getting to Baghdad and who naively expected to find a functioning government in the country. After one month, the hapless Garner was fired, and Paul Bremer was appointed his replacement as chief administrator. Two months after the invasion, Lieutenant General William Wallace, the Fifth Corps commander, described the nation-building “technique” that U.S. officials were applying in Iraq: “We’re making this up here as we go along” (qtd. in Daalder 2003, 153).

Trying to establish democracy through military occupation is not a coherent, defensible policy. There is no theory on which it is based; it has no proven technique or methodology; and no experts know how to do it. The record shows that it usually fails, and even when it appears to succeed, the positive result owes more to historical

evolution and local political culture than to anything the nation builders might have done.

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