
Nation Building: A Flawed Approach

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American foreign policy has always swung between an idealism born of our democracy and a severely pragmatic approach born of a realistic appraisal of our national interests. Few Presidents have been able to balance the two in the effective pursuit of an international order conducive to our values as well as our interests. It is within the context of this uneasy balancing act that “nation building” should be viewed.

The United States is one of the very few “new nations” to take the world stage in modern times. Because America is made up of so many diverse peoples working together to forge a unique country, we have always been astonishingly optimistic about the potential for “new nationhood.” During my service as Supreme Commander of NATO and, later, as Secretary of State, I heard many times from skeptical Europeans about a dangerous American innocence on this score. Steeped in a bloodier history, Europeans remain leery of experimentation with nations, especially those states that combine several different ethnic groups. Similarly, in Asia, the ancient and solidly rooted Chinese and Japanese cultures, to cite just two examples, are not receptive to the idea of “nation building” either. For them, nations grow organically, not by transplant.

Cautions from others have seldom dampened our enthusiasm for shaping the world in our own image. Nation building appeals to our own experience of establishing a new country with new institutions and our

idealistic belief in the perfectibility of society through democracy. I would suggest, however, that experience should caution us against adopting "nation building" as either an end or a means of our foreign policy for at least three reasons: 1) it rarely works; 2) it requires enormous effort and staying power; and 3) it is not the main international problem before us.

The Historical Record

The United States has attempted "nation building," defined as our creating, or helping to create, a democratic government and society, some half-dozen times. We exercised a kind of benevolent domination of Panama for years because of the Canal; earlier in this century, we tried for nearly two decades to create democracy in Haiti; we attempted the same in the Philippines. More recently, there was a long campaign to change the "hearts and minds" of South Vietnam. I do not think anyone would cite these cases as examples of successful American action abroad.

The two most outstanding successes on record are the US occupation of Germany and Japan, which resulted in genuine democracies. But these were fully functioning modern societies upon which we were able, through military victory, to force democratic political systems. The process was greatly aided by the fact that the older systems had brought obvious catastrophe on the populations. In short, lacking special circumstances, nation building seldom works.

The Cost

We have recently seen in Somalia—and I am afraid we shall see soon in Haiti—that the cost of these experiments is way out of proportion with any conceivable result. In Somalia, both the Bush and Clinton administrations, spurred on by the UN, attempted to create a new nation. Yet, thirty thousand UN troops and a very determined US military effort were defeated by a warlord with less fire power than the drug dealers in downtown Washington, DC. Initially, the American people urged intervention because they were revolted by the televised scenes of starving Somalis. Subsequently, they were equally demoralized by the scenes of dead US soldiers dragged around in the streets, and they insistently urged withdrawal. When it was over, we lost thirty men and spent nearly a billion dollars, with nothing to show.

For the peaceful invasion of Haiti we assembled two aircraft carriers and two divisions to seize a country with a police force, albeit a brutal one, that had been laid low by international economic sanctions.

We did it to restore a dubious democrat who can rule only with the help of an international force and another billion dollars in aid. Will Haiti be a democracy when all of this is over?

In short, nation building requires a vast commitment of resources over a lengthy time for very meager results, and therefore, it is most unlikely to merit the long-term support of the American people.

Nation Building—Not the Main Problem

In the post-Cold War world, the United States has a unique opportunity to help lead the way to a more secure international system, one in which democracy can flourish. But we cannot and should not attempt to remake the world in our own image. For the US to attempt to make the world safe for democracy is laudable; for us to attempt to make the world democratic is impossible. Other people must make that choice for themselves. What we can do is to show that we and our democratic allies have created our own working international system: we settle disputes peacefully among ourselves, we have achieved high levels of prosperity, and we respect individual rights. But we cannot want liberty for people more than they want it for themselves, we cannot decree nationhood for states populated by warring clans, and we cannot force upon people what they will not see as valuable in its own right.

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I am afraid that the Clinton administration's fling with nation building reflects not only the classic American excess of idealism, but a deeper flaw. Too many Americans have concluded that the demise of the Soviet Union meant the triumph of our values rather than the attractiveness of our economic system and the sterility of their own. With communism discredited, we anticipated a worldwide receptivity to our values and a shared commitment to them. So we have flirted with making the UN the international repository of democratic values, an instrument for nation building that it can never be. We have glibly assumed that those who want to prosper will inevitably be drawn to adopt democracy as well. This does a disservice to the real values of democracy which should be cherished whether we are rich or poor. Worse yet, it is an illusion. Realistically, we still live in a world where democracy and human rights, as we know them, are either misunderstood, rejected, or contested by many nations.

On balance, therefore, nation building is the wrong emphasis at the wrong time and it entails excessive costs. There is a problem with “failed states,” which were artificially kept together by the Cold War; there is a problem with rogue states, such as Iraq; finally, of course, there is a problem with the whole idea of “stability” in an age when communications, economics, demographics, and technology are bringing about such rapid change. None of these can be fixed by “nation building” or the elusive quest for stability on the erroneous assumption that there are widely shared democratic values around the globe. Alternately, we should continue to strengthen the great democratic communities that have already emerged over the last forty years. By example—theirs and ours—not through social engineering abroad, we can build a better future for all nations. ●