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S U M M A R Y

The record of past U.S. experience in democratic nation building is daunting. The low rate of success is a sobering reminder that these are among the most difficult foreign policy ventures for the United States. Of the sixteen such efforts during the past century, democracy was sustained in only four cases ten years after the departure of U.S. forces. Two of these followed the total defeat and surrender of Japan and Germany after World War II, and two were tiny Grenada and Panama. Unilateral nation building by the United States has had an even rougher time—perhaps because unilateralism has led to surrogate regimes and direct U.S. administration during the postconflict period. Not one American-supported surrogate regime has made the transition to democracy, and only one case of direct American administration has done so. Importantly, many of the factors that experience shows are most crucial to success are absent in Iraq. To heed the lessons of its history and raise the odds of success, the United States should support a multilateral reconstruction strategy under U.N. auspices centered on bolstering political legitimacy and sharing economic burdens. ■

Lessons from the Past: The American Record on Nation Building

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The real test for the success of the U.S. preemptive war against the regime of Saddam Hussein is whether or not Iraq can now be rebuilt after the war. Few national undertakings are as complex, costly, and time consuming as reconstructing the governing institutions of foreign societies. Even a combination of unsurpassed military power and abundant wealth does not guarantee success, let alone quick results. Historically, nation-building attempts by outside powers are notable mainly for their bitter disappointments, not their triumphs.

Among great powers, the United States is perhaps the most active nation builder. Since its founding, the United States has used its armed forces abroad on more than 200 occasions. To be sure, most U.S. military interventions abroad have consisted of major wars (such as the two world wars), peace-keeping missions (as in Bosnia today), proxy wars (as in Nicaragua and Angola in the 1980s), covert operations (such as the coup in Chile in 1973), humanitarian interventions (as in the Balkans in the 1990s), the rescue of American citizens, the defense of its allies under attack (as in Korea in

1950), and one-time retaliatory strikes (such as the bombing raid against Libya in 1986).

To distinguish ordinary military interventions from nation-building efforts, we apply three strict criteria. First, the practical effect, if not the declared goal, of U.S. intervention must be a regime change or the survival of a regime that would otherwise collapse. Regime change or survivability is the core objective of nation building, because an outside power such as the United States must overthrow a hostile regime or maintain a friendly indigenous regime to be able to implement its plans. It is worth noting that the primary goal of early U.S. nation-building efforts was in most cases strategic. In its first efforts, Washington decided to replace or support a regime in a foreign land to defend its core security and economic interests, not to build a democracy. Only later did America's political ideals and its need to sustain domestic support for nation building impel it to try to establish democratic rule in target nations.

The deployment of large numbers of U.S. ground troops is the second criterion of nation building. As the case of Guatemala in



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1954 demonstrates, a regime change may occasionally be accomplished without the deployment of U.S. ground forces. But nation building generally requires the long-term commitment of ground forces, which are used either to depose the regime targeted by the United States or to maintain a regime that it favors. In many cases, U.S. ground troops are needed not only to fight hostile forces in target countries but also to perform essential administrative functions, such as establishing law and order.

The use of American military and civilian personnel in the political administration of target countries is the third and quintessential criterion of nation building. As a result of its deep involvement in the political processes of target countries, the United States exercises decisive influence in the selection of leaders to head the new regimes. Washington also restructures the key political institutions of a target country (such as rewriting the constitution and basic laws) and participates in the nation's routine administrative activities (such as public finance and delivery of social services).

On the basis of these three criteria, we characterize 16 of more than 200 American military interventions since 1900, roughly 8 percent, as attempts at nation building through the promotion or imposition of democratic institutions desired by American policy makers (table 1, see page 4).

The American Record on Nation Building

The most striking aspect of the American record on nation building is its mixed legacy in establishing democratic regimes. Table 1 shows the sobering results. Of the sixteen target countries listed in the table, two were unambiguous successes, Japan and West Germany, both defeated Axis powers in World War II. Two other target countries, Grenada and Panama, may also be considered successes. However, Grenada is a tiny island nation with 100,000 inhabitants, and Panama's population is less than 3 million. Nation building generally is less challenging in small societies.

Conversely, American nation-building efforts failed to establish and sustain democracies in the other eleven (excluding Afghanistan) cases. Three years after the withdrawal of U.S. forces, democracy was considered to be functioning in only five of the eleven cases; ten years after the departure of U.S. forces, democracy had been sustained in only four. We judge a regime to be democratic or authoritarian on the basis of a widely used index provided by the Polity IV dataset. In that ranking, a fully democratic regime gets a score of ten, whereas a fully authoritarian regime is assigned minus ten. In our analysis, regimes scoring three or below (for example, today's Iran receives a three) are considered nondemocratic. If we apply this yardstick, the United States's overall success rate in democratic nation building is about 26 percent (four out of fifteen cases).

The failure to sustain a democratic regime in a target nation can produce disastrous consequences for its citizens. In Cuba, Haiti, and Nicaragua, for example, brutal dictatorships emerged from the wreckage of botched nation-building efforts. These societies remained mired in misrule and widespread poverty. In Cambodia, a genocidal regime gained power after the departure of U.S. troops and perpetrated one of the worst crimes against humanity in history. The U.S. defeat in Vietnam ushered in a communist regime that forced millions to flee their native land.

Of the sixteen cases of U.S. nation building, twelve were pursued unilaterally. Two (Afghanistan and Haiti) were authorized by the United Nations. In these two difficult undertakings, U.N. resolutions provided the United States not only with helpful allies but also with international legitimacy. One case, the rebuilding of West Germany, was undertaken after the Allied victory in World War II, whereas the U.S. occupation of Japan was multilateral in form but unilateral on the ground. American unilateralism in nation building has been made possible by the preponderance of U.S. power. Except when taking on powerful states such as Germany and Japan, the United States has

faced few external constraints in imposing its will on other societies.

However, since the end of the Cold War, the United States has seemed to be more willing to assemble multilateral support for humanitarian interventions and for rebuilding failed states. In the case of Haiti in 1994, President Bill Clinton obtained authorization from the U.N. Security Council. The ensuing nation-building efforts in Haiti, although ultimately unsuccessful, were supervised by the United Nations. Another

1973). What is most notable about the use of interim surrogate regimes in nation building is its record of complete failure—none of the target countries ruled by surrogate regimes had made the transition to democracy ten years after the withdrawal of U.S. forces. One possible explanation is that, in building these interim regimes, the United States facilitated the rise of the military, a key state institution, as a potent political power. Later on, strongmen seized control of the military to advance their personal ambitions. Another likely explanation

Historically, nation-building attempts by outside powers are notable mainly for their bitter disappointments.

case is the ongoing nation-building project in Afghanistan. Even though American military intervention was decisive in toppling the Taliban, the Bush administration ceded to the United Nations the primary responsibility for rebuilding Afghanistan. In Bosnia and Kosovo, two cases of multilateral humanitarian intervention (not regime change), post-conflict nation building is also being carried out under U.N. auspices.

There is a clear connection between unilateralism and the way targeted nations have been governed in the period immediately following American military intervention. Of the sixteen cases of U.S. nation building, seven can be classified as instances of interim rule by American-supported surrogate regimes, which are characterized by their nearly total dependence on Washington. They were headed by individuals picked by or acceptable to the United States. American military support was crucial to their survival. Such virtual American protectorates included the regimes in Panama (1903–1936), Nicaragua (1909–1933), Haiti (1915–1934), Cuba (1917–1922), South Vietnam (1964–1973), the Dominican Republic (1965–1966), and Cambodia (1970–

is that these surrogate regimes lacked indigenous legitimacy and, after American withdrawal, had to resort to repression to maintain their power.

In the other nine cases of nation building, the United States adopted a variety of approaches to interim administration. In Cuba (1898–1902 and 1906–1909), the Dominican Republic (1916–1924), and Japan (1945–1952), Washington imposed its direct rule. In West Germany (1945–1949), the United States opted for a multilateral administration. In Grenada (1983), Panama (1989), and Haiti (1994–1996), Washington quickly turned power over to democratically elected local leaders. In Panama and Haiti, the United States was able to do so mainly because of the availability of legitimate leaders who had actually won contested elections *before* the United States–led regime change. The only instance of an interim administration under a U.N. mandate is Afghanistan since the overthrow of the Taliban regime. The record on these different approaches to interim administration is uneven. Direct American administration worked in Japan but not in Cuba or the Dominican Republic.

Handing power to legitimately elected local leaders proved successful in Grenada and Panama but not in Haiti. And multilateral administration enabled West Germany to quickly regain its self-rule but remains a work in progress in Afghanistan.

What Makes Nation Building Work?

In all likelihood, the low overall success rate for U.S. nation building understates the difficulty of such efforts in *underdeveloped* societies. Of the fourteen cases of U.S. nation building in such countries, only two (Panama in 1989 and Grenada) were successful, a success rate of just 14 percent. In retrospect, success or failure in nation building depends on three critical variables: the target nation's internal characteristics, a convergence of the geopolitical interests of the outside power and the target nation, and a commitment to economic development in the target nation.

Target Nation's Internal Characteristics

Nation building is political engineering on a grand scale. Some nations, such as Haiti, may have social and political attributes (such as deep ethnic fissures, religious animosities, and high levels of inequality) that make them inherently resistant to political engineering by outsiders. Societies that have a relatively strong national identity (such as Japan and Germany), a high degree of ethnic homogeneity, and relative socioeconomic equality are more suitable targets for nation building. In such societies with a high level of internal cohesion, occupying foreign forces are less likely to be dragged into domestic power struggles or manipulated by dueling groups to settle long-standing grievances.

By contrast, ethnically fragmented countries, such as Iraq, pose extraordinary challenges to nation builders because, lacking a common national identity, various ethnic

Table 1. United States-led Nation-Building Efforts since 1900

| TARGET COUNTRY | POPULATION | PERIOD | DURATION (YEARS) | MULTILATERAL OR UNILATERAL? | TYPE OF INTERIM ADMINISTRATION | DEMOCRACY AFTER 10 YEARS? |
|---------------------------|--------------|--------------|------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Afghanistan | 26.8 million | 2001–present | 2+ | Multilateral | U.N. administration | ? |
| Haiti | 7.0 million | 1994–1996 | 2 | Multilateral | Local administration | No |
| Panama | 2.3 million | 1989 | < 1 | Unilateral | Local administration | Yes |
| Grenada | 92,000 | 1983 | < 1 | Unilateral | Local administration | Yes |
| Cambodia | 7 million | 1970–1973 | 3 | Unilateral | U.S. surrogate regime | No |
| South Vietnam | 19 million | 1964–1973 | 9 | Unilateral | U.S. surrogate regime | No |
| Dominican Republic | 3.8 million | 1965–1966 | 1 | Unilateral | U.S. surrogate regime | No |
| Japan | 72 million | 1945–1952 | 7 | Multi-unilateral ^a | U.S. direct administration | Yes |
| West Germany | 46 million | 1945–1949 | 4 | Multilateral | Multilateral administration | Yes |
| Dominican Republic | 895,000 | 1916–1924 | 8 | Unilateral | U.S. direct administration | No |
| Cuba | 2.8 million | 1917–1922 | 5 | Unilateral | U.S. surrogate regime | No |
| Haiti | 2 million | 1915–1934 | 19 | Unilateral | U.S. surrogate regime | No |
| Nicaragua | 620,000 | 1909–1933 | 18 | Unilateral | U.S. surrogate regime | No |
| Cuba | 2 million | 1906–1909 | 3 | Unilateral | U.S. direct administration | No |
| Panama | 450,000 | 1903–1936 | 33 | Unilateral | U.S. surrogate regime | No |
| Cuba | 1.6 million | 1898–1902 | 3 | Unilateral | U.S. direct administration | No |

^a The United States won World War II as part of the Allied victory over Japan, but the United States assumed exclusive occupation authority in Japan after the war.

groups, particularly those long oppressed, tend to seize the rare opportunity of outsiders' intervention to seek complete independence or gain more power. This can trigger national disintegration or a backlash from other ethnic groups, with the outside powers caught in the middle.

Equally important is the state capacity of the target nation. This capacity includes the organizational effectiveness and discipline of its military, bureaucracy, and judiciary. Stronger state capacity in a target country obviates the need for the intervening state to perform the most rudimentary functions of government—usually thankless tasks for outsiders with scant knowledge of complex local conditions. In Cuba, for instance, the United States drafted laws for local governments and the judiciary, pacified labor strife, settled election disputes, and managed the nation's public finance. In Haiti, U.S. forces oversaw public health, controlled the treasury, supervised routine government affairs, and suppressed local rebellions. Such deep and extensive involvement reduced nation builders to quasi-colonial rulers and helped foment local resentment.

In contrast, the United States relied primarily on the indigenous bureaucracies in Japan and West Germany to perform these routine governmental functions. This had obvious advantages but required a deep compromise on regime change. In both Germany and Japan, the United States curtailed the purge of the militaristic old regime's loyalists and left most civil servants and business elites untouched. In Japan, for example, out of 2.5 million cases investigated, only 40,000—fewer than 2 percent—of the politicians, bureaucrats, and businesspeople with ties to the old regime were purged from power. After the occupation, many of these disgraced elements of the old regime regained their political rights; in the first post-occupation Diet election, they accounted for 42 percent of the winning candidates.

It is worth noting that whereas a strong, indigenous state capacity is almost always a requirement for success, building this capacity

may be a challenge beyond the capacity of even the most well-intentioned and determined outsiders. Effective state institutions historically evolve organically out of a nation's social structure, cultural norms, and distribution of political power. Therefore, political engineering by outsiders seldom succeeds in radically altering the underlying conditions responsible for the state's ineffectiveness. Even a lengthy commitment does not guarantee success. For example, the United States was engaged in nation building in Panama for 33 years, in Haiti for 20 years, in Nicaragua for 18 years, in Cuba for (cumulatively) 11 years, and in the Dominican Republic for 8 years.

Finally, previous experience with constitutional rule is a crucial variable. Nation building in target countries that have had periods of constitutional rule—characterized by the effective rule of law and binding limits on the government's power—is more likely to succeed. The importance of such an experience of constitutionalism, however brief, is that political behavior in these societies is more likely to be subject to the most fundamental rules of governing. Political conflicts get settled through established institutional procedures. Both Germany and Japan had had brief histories of constitutional rule. In contrast, none of the states where American efforts have failed have had that experience.

Convergence of Geopolitical Interests

Outside powers have a greater probability of success if their broad geopolitical interests dovetail with those of *both* the elites and the people in the target nation. Three conditions must be met. First, the commitment of the outside power must be sustained by a compelling strategic interest. In the case of Japan and West Germany, American resolve was bolstered by the need to contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Second, this strategic interest should be broadly aligned with the national interests of the target country. Third, there should also be a consensus on such shared strategic interests within the society of the target nation. In

Japan and West Germany, the public in both countries agreed with their leaders' policy of allying with the United States to resist the spread of communism. Popular acceptance of nation building by outsiders becomes unsustainable if the local population perceives the occupying foreign power as advancing its own interests or the interests of domestic ruling elites. The United States's disappointing record on nation building is due, in large part, to ill-considered decisions to ally with unsavory elites in Latin America and Southeast Asia. Such alliances of political expediency were ultimately rejected by the people in the target nations as illegitimate.

Commitment to Economic Development

Successful nation building requires not only political commitment but also enormous economic resources. In West Germany, the generous aid provided under the Marshall Plan was a critical factor in revitalizing the econ-

as Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and South Vietnam had no indigenous capacity to make productive use of U.S. assistance.

The Challenge Ahead in Iraq

The challenge of postwar Iraq represents, without doubt, the most ambitious American nation-building project since Vietnam. The internal characteristics of Iraqi society will severely test Washington's resolve, skill, and patience in pursuing its declared goal of political transformation (see table 2). With a population of 24 million, Iraq is larger than any of the Latin American countries where the United States has attempted nation building.

More worrisome than Iraq's population size are its deep ethnic and religious divisions as compared with other countries. The long-running ethnic and religious hostility among Iraq's dominant ethnic groups, the Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, will greatly complicate the U.S. effort, because each one has a strong

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omy. In Japan, economic recovery benefited considerably from U.S. aid channeled through the efforts to fight the Korean War. In Latin America, however, the United States typically failed to deliver substantial economic aid following its military interventions. To the contrary, in many instances, it took advantage of the target countries economically through sweetheart deals for American corporations.

More important than the absolute amount of U.S. aid, however, is whether such aid could help launch a self-sustaining economic development process in the target nation. Japan and West Germany, which were both highly educated, economically developed societies before American occupation, faced little difficulty in using U.S. aid to rebuild their economies. By contrast, countries such

as Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and South Vietnam had no indigenous capacity to make productive use of U.S. assistance. More worrisome than Iraq's population size are its deep ethnic and religious divisions as compared with other countries. The long-running ethnic and religious hostility among Iraq's dominant ethnic groups, the Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, will greatly complicate the U.S. effort, because each one has a strong incentive to exploit the American presence to advance its own agenda. Washington will find itself perpetually tested and judged for evenhandedness on a whole array of local issues for which there is *no* good, or even fair, answer. For example, an early test will be whether to return the Kurds to Kirkuk, Iraq's major oil production center, from which they were expelled by Saddam. Outside efforts to bridge such ethnic and religious divisions through reconciliation have a poor track record—as has been demonstrated in the former Yugoslavia.

More problematic will be cleansing the new Iraqi state of elements loyal to Saddam's ruling Baathist regime. This regime resembled a Leninist party-state, in which the state and the party are one and the same. In this

unique political structure, the ruling party's organization is built into the institutions of the state, such as the police, bureaucracy, and judiciary, as well as the military. Thus, a thorough de-Baathification would eviscerate the existing Iraqi state, at least for the short term. This would require the United States-led occupation authorities to perform nearly all critical governmental functions in Iraq.

The rebuilding of Iraq's state capacity, involving the recruitment and training of new law enforcement officials, civil servants, and judges, will almost certainly take longer than the optimistic time frame of one to two years suggested by some Bush administration officials. The alternative would be to retain many low- and mid-level elements of the existing Baathist party-state and use them to run postwar Iraq. This could relieve the occupying American forces of routine administrative tasks. But such a policy of expediency would create its own problems—most seriously, its adverse impact on the Shiite and Kurdish populations, because nearly all members of the Baathist regime are Sunnis.

The most challenging task will be to align U.S. strategic interests with those of the Iraqi elite and public. The Kurds' strategic interest in separation conflicts with the Bush administration's stated policy of protecting Iraq's territorial integrity. Other ethnic groups' receptivity to an American presence is at best unclear. The United States could find it almost impossible to persuade the Sunnis and Shiites that their long-term strategic interests overlap with those of Washington. Despite the administration's best efforts to project a vision of its long-term goals for Iraq, Washington's real agenda remains under deep suspicion in the region.

The long-term prospects for nation building in Iraq would likely be enhanced if the effort were managed by the United Nations, which has been supervising similar postconflict reconstruction in many countries, such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, East Timor, and the Kosovo region of the former Yugoslavia. To be sure, a multilateral approach to nation building does not guarantee success; nation building

Table 2. A Checklist for United States-Led Nation Building in Iraq

| FACTORS IN A TARGET COUNTRY FAVORABLE FOR NATION BUILDING | SITUATION IN IRAQ |
|--|--|
| Strong national identity | Ethnic fragmentation |
| Effective state capacity | Weak state capacity after de-Baathification |
| Previous experience with constitutionalism | None |
| Elite interests aligned with the United States | Questionable |
| Popular interests aligned with the United States | Questionable |
| Ability to absorb economic assistance | Questionable |
| International legitimacy under multilateral interim administration | Questionable legitimacy of U.S. direct administration and likely U.S. surrogate regime |

within the U.N. framework brings its own set of problems and challenges. At the initial stage, coordination is likely to be poor, and lines of authority will be unclear. But the benefits of a multilateral approach would outweigh the drawbacks. Economically, such an approach would spread the costs of rebuilding Iraq more widely. And politically, this approach would help heal the wounds caused by the acrimonious dispute between the United States and many nations before the war. In all likelihood, a United Nations-led rebuilding effort would be viewed as more legitimate, especially in the Middle East. Suspicions about Washington's ulterior motives in Iraq would be at least partly dispelled.

To be sure, some in the administration appear committed to a United States-led effort. They should reconsider their position in light of the sobering lessons from American nation building during the past century. Aside from an overall low rate of success, such unilateral undertakings have led to the creation and maintenance of surrogate regimes that have eventually mutated into military dictatorships and corrupt autocracies. Repeating these mistakes in Iraq, especially after President Bush's declaration of American resolve to build democracy there, would be a tragedy for the Iraqi people and a travesty of American democratic ideals. ■

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