

picking up
the
pieces

FAILED STATES



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Fixing Failed States

A Cure Worse than the Disease?

The bipartisan Beltway consensus that sponsored the Iraq war is in the uncomfortable and unfamiliar position of having to justify its most basic tenets. After the Washington foreign policy community all but unanimously assured Americans of the prudence and necessity of starting a war with Iraq, other articles of faith in foreign policy circles are coming under attack. Perhaps most pernicious among them is the consensus view that the United States must reconstitute its national security bureaucracy in order to develop the capacity to fix failed states.

The fetish for fixing failed states is found in Democrats and Republicans alike. Take, for one example, former national security advisers Brent Scowcroft and Sandy Berger's 2005 article in *The National Interest* titled "In the Wake of War." There, Scowcroft and Berger assure us that "action to stabilize and rebuild states emerging from conflict is not 'foreign policy as social work,' a favorite quip of the 1990s. It is equally a national security priority."

This is argument by assertion. A better-founded argument would at least go to the trouble of defining its terms. Alas, any attempt to define terms would also demonstrate the unconvincing nature of the thesis. Failed states rarely present threats to the United States, and attempting to "fix" them portends serious problems for US policy. To assess whether or not failed states pose a threat to US national security, we must first define "state failure" and then examine the historical cases that meet that definition.

Failure Is in the Eye of the Beholder

The most comprehensive and analytically rigorous study of state failure was a task force report commissioned by the Central Intelligence Agency's Directorate of Intelligence in 2000. The report's authors sought to quantify and examine episodes of state failure between 1955 and 1998. Working from their first definition of state failure (when "central state authority collapses for several years"), the authors only found 20 cases of bona fide state failure—too small a number to produce statistically significant conclusions. As a result, the authors chose to broaden the definition. After establishing those new criteria, the authors found 114 cases of state failure between 1955 and 1998.

The new methodology increased the number of failed states nearly sixfold by changing the definition of what constituted state failure. Although the authors made the change to achieve a degree of statistical significance, they contended that the new methodology was appropriate because "events that fall beneath [the] total-collapse threshold often pose challenges to US foreign policy as well." That speculative and highly subjective standard produced a list that characterized China, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Indonesia, Israel, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, and Turkey as failed states as of December 1998. A data set that includes such disparate countries does little to inform US policy toward failed states. It is less useful as a heuristic for guiding national policy than is blithely declaring that "states that begin with

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More recent efforts offer little encouragement. A 2007 update of the Fund for Peace/*Foreign Policy* magazine "Failed States Index" promises on the magazine's cover to explain "why the world's weakest countries pose the greatest danger." In what can only be described as false advertising, the article does little to prove or even argue this claim. It instead concedes that "failing states are a diverse lot" and that "there are few easy answers to their troubles." But since the concept of "failedness" tells us so little about these states, why assemble such a category at all? One could imagine any number of arbitrary distinctions that would group together less disparate states than those that receive the designation "failed." Still, with the problem diagnosed as failure, the proposal is to fix the failure. To do so requires an interventionist US stance.

"We're From the US Government, Here to Help"

Despite the vacuity of the concept of state failure, some scholars have been working from the assumption that we should embark on a policy of fixing failed states. Indeed, some students of international politics have moved far beyond advocating for the placement of state failure as the center of US national security policy. Many advocate moving away from the Westphalian system of national sovereignty that has prevailed since 1648.

Stephen D. Krasner, the current director of the US State Department's policy planning staff and a leading advocate for nation building, argued in *International Security* in 2004 that the "rules of conventional sovereignty...no longer work, and their inadequacies have had deleterious consequences for the strong as well as the weak." Krasner concluded that, to resolve that dilemma, "alternative institutional arrangements supported by external actors, such as de facto trusteeships and shared sovereignty, should be added to the list of policy options." He was explicit about the implications of those policies, admitting that "international actors would assume control over local functions for an indefinite period of time. They might also eliminate the international legal sovereignty of the entity or control treaty-making powers in whole or in part." And make no mistake, as Krasner admits: "There would be no assumption of a withdrawal in the short or medium term."

According to James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, political science professors at Stanford University, the new doctrine "may be described as neotrusteeship, or more provocatively, postmodern imperialism." Also writing in *International Security* in 2004, Fearon and Laitin protested that this imperialism should not carry the stigma of nineteenth or twentieth-century imperialism. As they argue, "[W]e are not advocating or endorsing imperialism with the connotation of exploitation and permanent rule by foreigners." On

the contrary, Fearon and Laitin explain that "postmodern imperialism may have exploitative aspects, but these are to be condemned."

While perhaps not intentionally exploitative, postmodern imperialism certainly does appear to entail protracted and perhaps permanent rule by foreigners. Fearon and Laitin admit that, in postmodern imperialism, "the search for an exit strategy is delusional, if this means a plan under which full control of domestic security is to be handed back to local authorities by a certain date in the near future." However, "for some cases, complete exit by the interveners may never be possible." In contrast, the endgame is "to make the national level of government irrelevant for people in comparison to the local and supranational levels." Thus, in Fearon and Laitin's model, the term "nation building" may not be the most appropriate description. Their ideas would more accurately be described as "nation ending," or the replacement of national governments with a supranational governing order.

Some supporters of a forward-leaning posture on failed



Opposite: President George W. Bush at a roundtable with members of the Iraq Provincial Reconstruction Team. US Provincial Reconstruction Teams remain understaffed. Above: US soldiers at Camp Taji, outside of Baghdad.

states do not share Fearon and Laitin's aversion to imperial nomenclature. Jeffrey E. Garten, dean of the Yale School of Management, took to the pages of *Foreign Policy* in 2003 to call on Washington to establish a colonial office. His call has been echoed frequently—though often couched in mushy language—ever since. And perhaps the most forthright proponent of American empire, Max Boot, has written candidly on the importance of developing a nation building capacity to repair and revive failed states in the future. Similarly, the influential journalist Robert Kaplan has written about the importance of inserting ourselves into far-flung corners of the globe to build governing capacity.

Does State Failure Threaten America?

Anti-sovereignty academics and pro-empire Beltway pundits frequently defend their arguments by making asser-

with obsessing over state failure. To the extent that a threat has ever emanated from a failed state—and Afghanistan is essentially the only example of this—addressing the failure is different from attacking the threat. At best, the attempt to correlate state failure with terrorism relies on a dubious interpretation of terrorism: that terrorism is, at its root, a result of poverty that can be eradicated by an aggressive development effort. As Alan B. Krueger and others have demonstrated, however, terrorism is a response to political grievances, not a consequence of poverty. Accordingly, using the threat of terrorism to justify nation building in failed states is inappropriate.

Fixing Failed States—An Unreasonable Proposal

Suppose the reader is unpersuaded by our argument that most failed states pose little if any threat to US national

“USING THE THREAT OF TERRORISM TO JUSTIFY NATION BUILDING IN FAILED STATES IS INAPPROPRIATE.”

tions along the lines that “weak and failed states pose an acute risk to US and global security,” as Carlos Pascual, the US State Department's first Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization, and Stephen Krasner wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in 2005. This is a rather dubious claim. The Fund for Peace/*Foreign Policy* magazine Failed States Index, for example, includes on its top 10 “most failed” states list Zimbabwe, Chad, Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, and the Central African Republic. It is difficult to imagine what threats are emerging from these countries that merit significant attention from US security strategists.

To be sure, Afghanistan in the late 1990s was both a failed state by any definition and a threat to the United States. It should serve as a pointed reminder that we cannot ignore failed states. Traditional realist definitions of power reliant on conventional military capability, size of economy, and population, must now be supplemented with a recognition that small bands of terrorists could emerge from a backward corner of the globe and strike at the heart of the United States as well.

But even here the interventionists' logic is weak. Attacking the threat that resided in failed Afghanistan in the 1990s would have had basically no effect on the health of the Afghan state. Killing Osama bin Laden and his comrades would have more substantially reduced the threat that bloomed on 9/11 than sending in US or international development personnel would have done. Attacking a threat rarely involves paving roads or establishing new judicial standards.

It is this categorical error that is at the heart of the trouble

security. The skeptic, unconcerned with tugging at threads hanging from the sweater of sovereignty, must then confront the fact that a serious commitment to successful nation building would require a fundamental reordering of the entire national security bureaucracy in the United States. What might such a reordering look like? What might it cost?

The short answer is “a lot.” The first requisite for success in addressing state failure is providing security for the nation builders in the affected areas. (While literature frequently refers to “post-conflict” environments, the distinction between “conflict” and “post-conflict” is not always so neat). Many studies have been done since the 1990s on the military requirements for stabilization and reconstruction (S & R) operations, and the figures are astonishing.

In 2004, the Pentagon's Defense Science Board (DSB) authored a study examining the troop requirements to support S & R missions. It concluded, after surveying S & R operations throughout history since Roman times, that “stabilization operations can be very labor intensive... The United States will sometimes have ambitious goals for transforming a society in a conflicted environment. Those goals may well demand 20 troops per 1,000 inhabitants . . . working for five to eight years.”

Extrapolating from the DSB's numbers to particular countries paints an alarming picture. Achieving “ambitious goals” in Iraq, for example, under the DSB framework would have required roughly 500,000 troops in Iraq for 5 to 8 years. Less populous countries such as Haiti, by the DSB's rule of thumb, would call for roughly 162,000 American troops.

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Even “less ambitious” goals are extremely burdensome: they require 5 foreign troops per 1,000 indigents. Thus, less ambitious goals in Iraq would call for roughly 125,000 US troops for 5 to 8 years; in Haiti they would call for 40,500 troops. The joint Army-Marine Corps counterinsurgency field manual, FM 3-24, largely agrees with the more demanding figure in the DSB report: “Most density recommendations fall within a range of 20-25 counterinsurgents for every 1000 residents in an [area of operations].”

The US public is unlikely to support missions requiring such deployments over long periods of time, particularly in the types of strategic backwaters that crop up perennially on lists of failed states. It is important to remember that the troop requirements above are by no means a guarantee of success; they are a rule of thumb developed from the most comprehensive study of S & R operations to date. While every mission to repair a failed state would not necessarily take place amid a full-blown insurgency, it is important to recognize the potential for violence and unrest to emerge at any moment, and to be prepared for it. Indeed, the attempts at S & R in Iraq offer useful lessons for any potential future operations.

A fundamental and unanswered question lies at the heart of the efforts of the so-called Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Iraq: are they comprised of civilians or military personnel? While the skills demanded clearly call for civilians—“agronomists, engineers, police officers [and] technicians” as described in one *Washington Post* profile—the demands that are made on them call for a military man’s time commitment and willingness to deploy into war zones. In truth the demand is for a near superhuman breadth of capacity: Arabic language speaker, war-fighter, diplomat, and possessor of disparate technical skills as described above. A July 2007 White House fact sheet characterized their duties as including “bolstering moderates, promoting reconciliation, fostering economic development, building provincial capacity.” This list of responsibilities better befits Superman than the US government.

Uncle Sam Wants You!

The PRTs are beset by a myriad of obstacles, the most important of which is the unlikely prospect of being able to staff at levels that would portend success. As US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice

reportedly lamented when describing the type of people that are needed to staff the PRTs, “No foreign service in the world has those people.”

Neither, it seems, do any government agencies—or at least, the people in them do not volunteer to work in Iraq. As of February 2007, the US Department of Agriculture was struggling to find 6—of 100,000 employees—who wanted to work in Iraq. In May, US Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez sent an “all hands on deck” email to the entire Commerce Department to request they volunteer for deployment to Iraq to work in a PRT. Just 40 of Commerce’s 39,000 employees replied to the email, and the agency refused to reveal how many of them replied “yes.”

US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker has complained about the security regulations that limit deployment—even for US State Department employees serving in the embassy itself. Crocker suggested that military standards “should be good enough for [the State Department].” Meanwhile, over 20 percent of US Foreign Service officers have already served in Iraq, and a recent report indicated that at least 40 percent of FSOs who have served in war zones have suffered from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Deploy-

COSTLY CURES

Incremental costs of US military interventions, 1991-2004

Operation	Major Combat Operations*	Stabilization and Peacekeeping*	Notes
Persian Gulf War	6.4	16.2	Total cost of invasion \$84 billion, with \$6.4 billion from US taxpayers
Bosnia	1.0	15.0	Major Combat Operations (MCO) from 1992 to 1995
Kosovo	4.5	5.9	Air war \$2.1 billion
Afghanistan	7.9	34.9	MCO September 2001 to March 2002

*Costs are given in billions USD adjusted for the 2004 fiscal year.

Defense Science Board, US Department of Defense

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ments currently last just one year, but this has significant drawbacks in terms of continuity of operations and the ability to develop enduring relationships with Iraqis who must govern the country.

Indeed, the work of the PRTs is a tragicomic story. It involves heroic individuals—both civilian and military—working within a system that is absurdly inadequate to the mission. The environment is one in which the political conditions are nearly hopeless, and the PRTs' training and skill-building are entirely out of sync with the demands being made on them. As described by the outgoing head of the Of-

war-fighter hat and put on a PRT hat, without possessing the skills that the position necessitates.

As Ginger Cruz, Deputy Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, testified in September 2007, only 5 percent of PRT team members speak Arabic. Cruz also pointed out that due to the unfavorable security environment, "movements at many PRTs are limited to one or two per day—and some to as few as one trip a week." Slightly more than 600 positions in the 25 PRTs currently operating in Iraq have been filled, slated to reach 800 by December 2007—all in a country of 25 million people. PRT training is composed of one week of security training and five days of additional training, which US Institute of Peace scholar Robert Perito described as "a series of lectures—an hour or two-hour lecture on Iraq, or an hour or two-hour lecture on Islam, or a description of what PRTs are in an hour and a half."

The Wrong Answer to the Wrong Question

This experience should demonstrate that if "fixing failed states" is to be a national security priority, we need not bolster PRTs, but rather fundamentally overhaul the entire national security bureaucracy. As Cruz puts it, "the federal government, as it is currently structured, is not well suited to perform complex interagency missions in foreign lands." As a result, the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction has called for an architecture called "Beyond Goldwater Nichols" to transform the agencies involved in post-conflict operations.

But what would be more appropriate—and far less costly—than this move would be a dramatic step in a different direction: a fundamental rethinking of the role of nation building and the relevance of state failure to US national security planning. Given that state failure, (to the extent it means anything), is not particularly useful for determining threats to US national security, nation building should not be a focus for the US military or civilian agencies.

But if we, as a nation, decide this is something we must do anyway, what we need is not more bureaucrats or even more Arabic speakers. We would instead need to transform the national security bureaucracy by recruiting people who speak multiple foreign languages, who can fight, politically crack heads in both theater and in Washington, and who are willing to be deployed indefinitely.

The last time the world saw such a group of people, they wore pith helmets and jodhpurs. They left in their wake impoverished and politically infantilized states that hardly possessed any capacity for governing. It would be tragic and counterproductive for the United States to embrace such a role in the world, and a fair-minded assessment of the dubious benefits and enormous costs of such a policy would preclude even considering it. ■



A Canadian soldier walks through an Afghan village. Afghanistan is often seen as an example of a failed state that threatened US security, thus justifying intervention.

fice of Provincial Affairs in Iraq, Ambassador Henry Clarke, PRTs must "make their own assessments of parties, ethnic groups, the whole society...Then they have to decide, from the many resources we can make available to them, which ones they need, and what to do first." As a result of staffing shortfalls, many of the PRT positions have been filled by military personnel who simply have taken off their official