

The Imperial Lure: Nation Building as a US Response to Terrorism

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The concept of nation building has a long pedigree in US foreign policy. It was an identifiable feature of Washington's dealings with the colonial empire it acquired in the Spanish-American War, especially with regard to the Philippines. The United States also conducted a nation-building mission lasting nearly two decades in Haiti—from 1915 to 1934.

Throughout the Cold War, nation building was less prominent, because US foreign policy had a strong realist orientation. US policy makers focused on containing and neutralizing tangible threats to America's security. Most of Washington's military interventions during the Cold War had a hard-edged strategic justification, namely, preventing the Soviet Union or its allies and clients from establishing communist control in regions that were considered important to America's well-being. Yet even during the Cold War there was from time to time a softer, more idealistic component to US policy. Although the term *nation building* did not come into vogue until the latter stages of the Cold War, a number of US military ventures during that era had characteristics that resembled the concept.

That was true, for example, in Vietnam. Even as US forces were escalating their combat role to prevent North Vietnam from conquering its noncommunist South Vietnamese rival, President Lyndon B. Johnson offered a carrot to Hanoi. In a speech at Johns Hopkins University in April 1965, the president proposed funding a Mekong Valley development project to bring substantial

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economic benefits to all Vietnamese—provided that Hanoi cease its “aggression” against the south.¹ The project was to be merely the first stage of stabilizing Southeast Asia and bringing North Vietnam into the US-led international community.

Johnson’s peace bid failed, but it was not the end to Washington’s nation-building agenda in Southeast Asia. Throughout the prolonged conflict, the United States also tried to shape the political environment in South Vietnam. Washington insisted on (more or less) competitive elections and played a large role in writing South Vietnam’s constitution.

Nation building was even more clearly a feature of US policy in the interventions in Lebanon and Grenada in the early 1980s. In the former, the United States intervened to facilitate a withdrawal of Israeli forces that had launched an offensive to the outskirts of Beirut and to dampen the Lebanese civil war that had raged for nearly a decade. In the case of Grenada, US forces ousted a communist regime, restored order to the island, and orchestrated a transition to democracy.

Once the Cold War ended, American policy makers showed an increasing fascination with nation building.² Washington’s humanitarian relief intervention in Somalia quickly underwent a transformation into a United Nations–orchestrated effort to reconstitute Somalia as a viable country. As in the case of Somalia, the 1994 Haiti intervention was a pure case of nation building, since not even the most imaginative proponents of US action could portray the disorder in that country as a security threat to the United States. Nation building also was a large, if not dominant, motive in the US-led wars in Bosnia and Kosovo.³ Given the growing appeal of nation building as a strategy during the 1990s, it is not surprising that it quickly became—and remains—a major feature of Washington’s war on terror in the twenty-first century.

1. Lyndon B. Johnson, “Peace without Conquest,” speech delivered at Johns Hopkins University, 7 April 1965, www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/honor/filmmore/ps_peace.html.

2. For a comprehensive assessment of US nation-building missions in the initial post-Cold War decade, see Gary T. Dempsey and Roger W. Fontaine, *Fool’s Errands: America’s Recent Encounters with Nation Building* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2001).

3. For a critique of the former, see Ted Galen Carpenter, “Jackboot Nation Building: The West Brings ‘Democracy’ to Bosnia,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (2000): 1–22.

September 11 Gives Nation Building a Big Boost

Washington's post-Cold War flirtation with nation building received a huge boost with the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. Ironically, George W. Bush, who as the GOP nominee for president had sharply criticized the concept, would become its most ardent practitioner. Moreover, even those Republicans who had scorned Bill Clinton's nation-building interventions in Haiti and the Balkans now seemed born-again disciples of Woodrow Wilson.

Almost immediately after the 9/11 attacks, an assortment of foreign policy experts and political figures claimed that those events underscored the need for the United States to incorporate nation building into its national security strategy as a means of combating terrorism. Their chief exhibit was Afghanistan. They argued that Afghanistan had become a failed state after the Soviet withdrawal, and with the takeover by the Taliban in the mid-1990s the country became a safe haven for al Qaeda. Therefore, to prevent more 11 September disasters, the United States had to make certain that no other Afghanistans developed.

Taken to its extreme, such logic implied that a failed state anywhere in the world posed a potential lethal threat to America's security. That view had its roots in the assumptions and policies of Wilson and his followers in later decades. During the Vietnam War, Secretary of State Dean Rusk expressed the Wilsonian view succinctly when he argued that the United States "is safe only to the extent that its total environment is safe."⁴

A similar attitude gained great currency in the post-9/11 period. Brookings Institution scholars Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, both former National Security Council officials during the Clinton administration, insisted that "we must intensify our efforts to resolve conflicts around the world, and especially in the Middle East." It was equally imperative to "intensify support for democracy and promote economic development—especially in areas like Central Asia, the Arab world, and northern Africa."⁵ Derek Chollet, an aide to former ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke, made a similar case,

4. Quoted in Ivan Eland, "The Empire Strikes Out: The New Imperialism and Its Fatal Flaws," Cato Institute *Policy Analysis* no. 459 (November 2002): 9.

5. Ivo Daalder and James M. Lindsay, "Is the United States Destined to Repeat Its Cold War Mistakes in Battling Terrorism?" *San Jose Mercury News*, 1 October 2001.

arguing that nation building should be “a legitimate and fundamental part” of US foreign and military policy. “If the United States does not put serious resources behind such efforts now,” Chollet warned, “it’s only planting the seeds for future crises.”⁶

Jessica Stern, an expert on terrorism at Harvard University, made the linkage between dysfunctional states and terrorism even more explicit. “We have a stake in the welfare of other peoples and need to devote a much higher priority to health, education and economic development, or new Osamas will continue to arise.”⁷ Joe Biden, at the time the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and at this writing its ranking minority member, adopted the same theme. He argued that an American-led nation-building mission in Central Asia was the long-term solution to the terrorism problem, and that the effort should focus on changing the economic and social climate of Afghanistan and its neighbors with something akin to the early Cold War Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Europe.⁸

Even before the 9/11 attacks, RAND Corporation counterterrorism expert Ian Lesser recommended an extremely broad approach to shape the political and economic environment around the world to eliminate the conditions that he believed generated terrorism.

The failure of regimes to provide for peaceful political change and the phenomenon of economies unable to keep pace with population growth and demands of more evenly distributed benefits can provide fertile ground for extremism and political violence affecting US interests. For this reason, the United States has a stake in promoting political and economic reform as a means of reducing the potential for terrorism.⁹

Enthusiasm within the foreign policy community for nation building as a remedy for terrorism has not declined markedly in the years since the 9/11

6. Derek Chollet, “Wise US Would Make Nation-Building a Priority,” *Baltimore Sun*, 18 October 2001.

7. Jessica Stern, “Being Feared Is Not Enough to Keep Us Safe,” *Washington Post*, 15 September 2001.

8. “Biden Says Up to \$15 Billion Needed for Afghan Aid,” Reuters, 13 January 2002.

9. Ian O. Lesser, “Countering the New Terrorism: Implications for Strategy,” in *Countering the New Terrorism*, ed. Ian O. Lesser et al. (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1999), 134.

attacks. In January 2003, a task force report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies concluded that “as a superpower with global presence and global interests, the United States does have a stake in remedying failed states.”¹⁰

Even the bruising experience of the reconstruction mission in Iraq has not dissuaded some advocates of nation building. Lawrence J. Korb and Robert O. Boorstin, scholars at the Center for American Progress, proclaimed in early 2005 that “weak and failing states pose as great a danger to the American people and international stability as do potential conflicts among the great powers.”¹¹ In July 2005, a Council on Foreign Relations task force chaired by former national security advisors Brent Scowcroft and Sandy Berger argued that action to “stabilize and rebuild states marked by conflict is not ‘foreign policy as social work,’ a favorite quip of the 1990s. It is equally a humanitarian concern and a national security priority.”¹²

As former Cato Institute foreign policy analyst Gary Dempsey pointed out, “The idea of ‘shaping the international environment’ is not new; it was a catchall phrase developed by the Clinton administration in the mid-1990s to shoehorn international social work and nation building into its national security strategy.”¹³ Dempsey was correct that the concept largely originated with a liberal Democratic administration and its followers. Yet conservative Republican president George W. Bush has enthusiastically incorporated the ideas of his liberal predecessors.

From Nation Building to Advocacy of Imperialism

For some advocates of nation building in the post-9/11 setting, it was but a small step to embrace a benevolent imperialism for the United States. One of the first to openly advocate an imperial policy was Max Boot, a senior fel-

10. Commission on Post-Conflict Reconstruction, *Play to Win* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies/Association of the US Army Report, 2003), 1, www.csis.org/isp/pcr/playtowin.pdf.

11. Lawrence J. Korb and Robert O. Boorstin, *Integrated Power: A National Security Strategy for the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2005), 7.

12. Council on Foreign Relations Task Force, *In the Wake of War: Improving US Post-Conflict Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2005), 6.

13. Gary T. Dempsey, “Old Folly in a New Disguise: Nation Building to Combat Terrorism,” Cato Institute *Policy Analysis* no. 429 (March 2002): 8.

low at the Council on Foreign Relations. The 11 September attacks, he concluded, were the result of “insufficient American involvement and ambition” in the world. The solution “is to be more expansive in our goals and more assertive in our implementation.”¹⁴ Boot cited the British Empire in the nineteenth century as the proper model for a post-9/11 US foreign policy to defeat terrorism: “Afghanistan and other troubled lands today cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets.”¹⁵

Another early advocate of an overtly imperial policy was Sebastian Mallaby, an editor at the *Washington Post*. Mallaby asserted that “the logic of neoimperialism was too compelling” to resist. “The chaos of the world is too threatening to ignore, and existing methods for dealing with that chaos have been tried and found wanting.”¹⁶ To meet the threat of terrorism spawned by failed states, he called for an “imperialist revival” in which orderly societies, led by the United States, would “impose their own institutions on disorderly ones.”¹⁷

Two years later, Francis Fukuyama wondered whether “there is any real alternative to a quasi-permanent, quasi-colonial relationship between the ‘beneficiary’ country” and the intervening power or powers.¹⁸ In autumn 2003, Jeffrey E. Garten, dean of Yale University’s School of Management, openly called on Washington to organize a colonial service.¹⁹

The Bush Administration Embraces Nation Building

During the 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush expressed little enthusiasm for nation building and even less for imperialism, stating on one

14. Max Boot, “The Case for American Empire,” *Weekly Standard*, 15 October 2001. See also Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

15. Boot, “Case for Empire,” 28–9.

16. Sebastian Mallaby, “The Reluctant Imperialist: Terrorism, Failed States, and the Case for American Empire,” *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 2 (2002): 6.

17. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

18. Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 104.

19. Jeffrey E. Garten, “Wanted: A US Colonial Service,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 138 (September/October 2003).

occasion that the United States needed a more “humble” foreign policy. Condoleezza Rice, who would become Bush’s national security adviser in his first term and secretary of state in his second, scorned the entire concept of nation building: “Carrying out civil administration and police functions is simply going to downgrade the American capability to do the things America has to do. We do not need to have the 82nd Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten.”²⁰

The attacks on 11 September clearly changed the Bush administration’s attitude. By the time the administration issued its National Security Strategy document in September 2002, it was ready to proclaim that America’s strategy was to “extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent.”²¹

Not only did the administration and its Republican allies in Congress loyally endorse Bush’s postwar nation-building mission in Iraq, the entire attitude about the overall concept has changed dramatically since 2000. Steven D. Krassner, director of the State Department’s policy planning staff now argues that “weak and failed states pose an acute risk to US and global security.”²² Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, admits candidly that there has been a major shift in GOP thinking—and indeed in the thinking of the entire country—on the topic of nation building. In an interview on National Public Radio, he concluded that the “sea change, really, in our foreign policy is that now it is acceptable and, in fact, desirable for Americans to talk about successful nation building.”²³

The Latest Nation-Building Crusade: Bush in the Middle East

The centerpiece of the Bush administration’s nation-building strategy has been the mission in Iraq. Although the administration and its supporters cited Iraq’s alleged arsenal of weapons of mass destruction as the principal justification for launching the invasion of that country, their ambitions clearly

20. Quoted in Michael R. Gordon, “Bush Would Stop US Peacekeeping in Balkan Fights,” *New York Times*, 21 October 2000.

21. White House, “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” September 2002, iv, whitehouse.gov.

22. Steven D. Krassner, “Addressing State Failure,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 4 (2005): 153.

23. National Public Radio, “Weekend All Things Considered,” 21 March 2004.

went beyond deposing Saddam Hussein and eliminating a plausible security threat. In a speech to the American Enterprise Institute on 26 February 2003, the president stressed the more idealistic component: “The current Iraqi regime has shown the power of tyranny to spread discord and violence in the Middle East. A liberated Iraq can show the power of freedom to transform that vital region, by bringing hope and progress into the lives of millions. America’s interests in security, and America’s belief in liberty, both lead in the same direction: to a free and peaceful Iraq.”²⁴

Later in the speech, Bush expressed even greater enthusiasm and determination about the goal of nation building in Iraq.

We will ensure that one brutal dictator is not replaced by another. All Iraqis must have a voice in the new government, and all citizens must have their rights protected. Rebuilding Iraq will require a sustained commitment from many nations, including our own. . . . America has made and kept this kind of commitment before—in the peace that followed a world war. After defeating our enemies, we did not leave behind occupying armies, we left constitutions and parliaments.²⁵

The president has been true to his word. The US mission in Iraq is well into its third year, with no end in sight. America has spent more than \$200 billion on the venture and sacrificed the lives of more than two thousand military personnel. Even though the security environment in that country remains dire, and the Iraqi insurgency seems as strong as ever, the president and his advisors have never wavered in their goal to reshape Iraq into a model democracy.

It is increasingly clear, however, that the Bush administration’s nation-building policy in Iraq is merely one component of an ambitious project to politically transform the entire Middle East. That goal is consistent with the principles that President Bush expressed in his second inaugural address when he affirmed that “it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in the world.”²⁶

24. White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “President Discusses the Future of Iraq,” 26 February 2003, whitehouse.gov/new/releases/2003/02/print/20030226-11.html.

25. *Ibid.*

26. White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Text of the President’s Inaugural Address,” 20 January 2005, whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/01/print/20050120-1.html.

Bush's bold statement symbolizes what Fred Barnes, executive editor at the neoconservative *Weekly Standard*, has described as a "shake-up-the-world view."²⁷ The rationale for the administration's policy is not merely that it would be humane to bring the blessings of democracy to the Middle East (and other regions). That is certainly one element, but the president and his foreign policy team also believe that democracy promotion is the most effective antiterror strategy and will, therefore, enhance America's security. "We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands," the president stressed in his inaugural address.

In a speech to the National Defense University on 8 March 2005, Bush reiterated the argument that strengthening democracy was the only hope of stemming terrorism and protecting America's security. "It should be clear that the advance of democracy leads to peace, because governments that respect the rights of their people also respect the rights of their neighbors," he said. "It should be clear the best antidote to radicalism and terror is the tolerance kindled in free societies."²⁸

That vision, anticipated in the National Security Strategy document of September 2002 goes far beyond repairing failed states. Many of the countries in the Islamic world may be misgoverned, but they are functioning states, and in most cases are reasonably stable. Bush has embraced the most extreme version of nation building. In his view, even fully functioning authoritarian states must be transformed into democratic, pluralistic ones. There is little daylight between his policy agenda and the agenda of the most aggressive humanitarian imperialists.

The question then arises: Even in the unlikely event that democratic governments take root in the inhospitable cultural and political soil of the Middle East, what will be the probable characteristics of those regimes? Of course, no one can be certain about either the short-term or long-term consequences of such a volatile process, but the nature of public opinion in the Middle East offers some hints—and rather sobering hints—about the likely near-term results. The condition of public opinion in that region casts grave doubt

27. Fred Barnes, "The Bush Shake-up-the-World View," *Wall Street Journal*, 22 March 2005.

28. Quoted in Jim VandeHei, "Bush Calls Democracy Terror's Antidote," *Washington Post*, 9 March 2005.

on the thesis that nation building and forcible democracy promotion are the solutions to the threat of terrorism directed against the United States.

The Ominous Nature of Middle East Opinion

Public opinion surveys in the Middle East taken over the past two years reveal a massive reservoir of hostility toward US policies. It cannot be emphasized enough that the original source of that hostility was largely a reaction against Washington's policies, not American culture or values. Michael Scheuer stressed that distinction in his seminal book, *Imperial Hubris*, but he is not the only expert to debunk the myth that the radical Islamic terrorist threat arose from a reflexive hatred of American liberty. Even the *9/11 Commission Report* conceded that hostility in the Islamic world was directed at specific US policies.²⁹ Likewise, the Pentagon's *Defense Science Board Task Force Report on Strategic Communication* issued in September 2004 concluded bluntly: "Muslims do not 'hate our freedom,' but rather, they hate our policies."³⁰ Unfortunately, that may be changing; there are now signs that the anger at the United States is becoming less discriminating.

Indications of that trend could be found in a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in March 2004, which assessed public opinion in Turkey, Morocco, Jordan, and Pakistan (as well as five European countries), and a six-nation survey of Arab countries (Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt) conducted by Zogby International in June 2004.³¹ Both studies found widespread opposition to US policies and a lack of trust in Washington's motives. The trends also were not encouraging, since the extent of opposition was greater than in previous surveys.

29. For an analysis of the report, see Ted Galen Carpenter, "Missed Opportunities: The 9/11 Commission Report and US Foreign Policy," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (2005): 52–61.

30. Department of Defense, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication*, September 2004, 40, www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/2004-09-Strategic_Communication.pdf.

31. The Pew Center for the People and the Press, "A Year after the Iraq War: Mistrust of America in Europe Ever Higher, Muslim Anger Persists," 16 March 2004, people-press.org/reports/pdf/206.pdf; and Zogby International, "Impressions of America, 2004: How Arabs View America, How Arabs Learn about America," June 2004, www.asusa.org.PDF/Impressions_of_America04.pdf.

The Pew survey, for example, found that 66 percent of respondents in Morocco, 51 percent in Jordan, and 58 percent in Pakistan believed that Washington was using the war on terror as a pretext for other objectives. When asked what America's real motives were, large percentages cited such goals as controlling Middle East oil, protecting Israel, and trying to dominate the world. For example, more than 70 percent of Jordanians cited each of the first two motives, and 61 percent cited the third motive. When asked to rate Osama bin Laden, 45 percent of respondents in Morocco had a favorable opinion, as did 55 percent in Jordan, and 65 percent in Pakistan. When asked to rate George W. Bush, the favorable results were 8 percent, 3 percent, and 7 percent, respectively.

The Zogby survey revealed similar results. For example, 85 percent of respondents in Saudi Arabia, 86 percent in Lebanon, and 86 percent in the UAE considered US policies toward Arabs as unfair. When asked what their first thought was when they hear the word *America*, 49.5 percent in Saudi Arabia answered either "unfair foreign policy" or "imperialistic"—far more than for any other characteristic. In Jordan, the figure was 47.5 percent, in Lebanon 31.0 percent, in the UAE 37.5 percent, and in Egypt 32.0 percent. Even worse, most of the other responses were neutral to negative in nature. When asked what the United States could do to improve its image in the Arab world, the top three answers were: stop supporting Israel, get out of Iraq, and change overall US Middle East policy.

America's reputation fared just modestly better when the Pew organization conducted its survey in June 2005.³² Favorable opinion of the United States had risen to 42 percent in Lebanon (in all likelihood as a result of Washington's quiet support of the anti-Syrian Cedar Revolution). In Pakistan, though, the positive rating had barely moved (from 21 percent to 23 percent), in Jordan it had risen from an appalling 5 percent to a still anemic 21 percent, and in Turkey it actually declined from 30 percent to 23 percent. Although respondents laid most of the blame at the door of President Bush, a significant minority said that the problem was "with America in general." For those who had negative views of the United States, that was the response

32. The Pew Center for People and the Press, "US Image Up Slightly, But Still Negative," 23 June 2005, pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/247.pdf.

of 29 percent in Pakistan, 32 percent in Lebanon, 36 percent in Turkey, and 37 percent in Jordan.

Support levels for key US policies, including the war in Iraq and the war on terror, have declined over the past year. Support levels for the latter were 31 percent in Lebanon, 22 percent in Pakistan, 17 percent in Turkey, and 12 percent in Jordan. Holding the January 2005 elections for the national assembly in Iraq actually caused favorable opinion of the United States to go down. In Pakistan 29 percent had a less favorable view of the United States because of those elections while only 10 percent had a more favorable view. In Turkey the figures were 45 percent versus 15 percent, and in Lebanon they were 50 percent versus 19 percent. When asked whether they worried about the United States becoming a threat to their country, 71 percent of the respondents in Pakistan, 65 percent in Turkey, 67 percent in Jordan, and 59 percent in Lebanon answered in the affirmative.

In short, attitudes toward the United States in the Middle East are disturbingly negative. When that is combined with the pervasive evidence of mounting public enthusiasm for conservative or radical brands of Islam, the prospects for the emergence of Western-style democracies in the region are not favorable. The very strong showing of Hamas-backed candidates in municipal elections on the West Bank and Gaza and similar impressive showings by Islamic fundamentalist candidates in Saudi Arabia's local elections are harbingers. Even in the elections for Iraq's national assembly, parties with a pronounced Islamist orientation fared best. If democratic systems accurately reflect public sentiment, the prospects for the election of pro-American governments—much less pro-American secular governments—are meager.

One might hope that the Bush administration wins its high-stakes gamble to promote the emergence of liberal, secular, pro-American democracies in the Middle East. But that is not the way to bet. If democracy sweeps the Middle East anytime soon, it is more likely to bring to power populist, Islamist, anti-American regimes. In short, democratic nation building in the Middle East might actually create new arenas for terrorists to gain the protection of friendly regimes.

The Fallacy of Nation Building as an Antiterrorism Strategy

The strategy of nation building to combat terrorism may have a facile appeal, but it is based on a curious mixture of naivete and arrogance. As Gary Dempsey observed:

The thinking today is that, with enough money, bureaucratic administrators, and military force of arms, outsiders can impose modern economic and democratic state structures on any country in the world. And if a country is composed of antagonistic groups, then it is the duty of the West to ensure that they live together until they like it.³³

Developments in Iraq suggest that attempting nation-building missions in unreceptive cultures is likely to be counterproductive as an antiterrorism strategy. Iraq has become a magnet for disgruntled radicals throughout the Islamic world, and the country has served as a training ground for terrorists to perfect their murderous craft. The Iraq intervention has exacerbated, not alleviated, the problem of terrorism.

Nation building also puts an enormous burden on the American public. The mission in Iraq has already exacted a fearsome toll in both blood and treasure. It also has strained America's all-volunteer military to the breaking point. Indeed, if a serious security threat arose somewhere else in the world, Washington might be hard-pressed to respond effectively—especially if the contingency required a response with a large number of ground forces.

Nation building is both unnecessary and impractical as a security strategy. Depending on the definition (and scholars vary widely) there are as many as two dozen "failed states" today in the international system. Yet most of them pose no plausible menace to America's security. Afghanistan was the exception, not the rule, when it became an incubator for a serious security threat to the United States.

If one accepts the logic of nation builders that any failed state (or even broader, any grossly misgoverned state) poses an unacceptable security risk, the magnitude of the task becomes overwhelming. Trying to transform as many as two dozen failed states would require a military vastly larger than America's current force. It would also require a huge colonial service and the

33. Dempsey, "Old Folly in a New Disguise," 14.

expenditure of hundreds of billions of dollars per year. Such a strategy would create strategic and economic exhaustion and ultimately lead to national ruin. It is a strategy that should appeal only to masochists.

Finally, nation builders succumb all too easily to the temptation of imperialism. The very act of trying to reshape another society assumes the superiority of the intervening power's political, social, and economic systems. It is a very small step from that attitude to making the case for an overtly imperial policy. There is evidence that at least some members of the Bush administration have already crossed that line. In an usually candid moment, a senior foreign policy adviser to the president bluntly told author Ron Suskind: "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality."³⁴

That official's attitude epitomizes the ancient Greek concept of hubris. In Greek mythology, such overweening pride was invariably the prelude to a disastrous fall. If their doctrine is not repudiated, America's would-be nation builders may be setting up the American republic for that outcome.

34. Quoted in Ron Suskind, "Without a Doubt," *New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004.