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Afghanistan: A Nation-Building Mission on Crack

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|
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Despite the repeated denials by officials in both the Bush and Obama administrations, it is increasingly apparent that nation-building aspirations are a major component of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. Any lingering doubt on that score should disappear after [the revelations](#)^[3] in a recent edition of the *Washington Post*. Last year, the U.S. Agency for International Development tried to establish some rigorous standards for firms that wished to bid on land reform projects in Afghanistan. The principal requirement was that the winning bid had to incorporate specific benchmarks for the promotion of greater gender equality in that society. Those benchmarks included a 50 percent increase in the number of deeds granting women title to land, assuring “regular media coverage” regarding women’s land rights, and the provision of teaching materials to schools that would include significant sections on women’s rights.

Similar requirements existed in the program to improve municipal governments. Bids needed to have measures to develop a “gender strategy that supports the inclusion of women in municipal governance,” a commitment to “implement gender awareness courses,” and establish “leadership training for women” in municipal governance. The key goal was to have women constitute 30 percent of the work force in such governments.

This isn’t merely nation building. It’s not even merely nation building on steroids. It is nation building on crack. America’s social engineering bureaucrats actually seem to think they can impose 21st century Western standards of gender equality on a pre-industrial, tribal society based on a highly patriarchal religion. Not surprisingly, USAID has had to greatly dilute its standards for bidding on Afghan contracts, since it soon became clear that there was no chance of any firm achieving such ambitious goals. That tactical shift, in turn, has led to [allegations](#)^[4] that the Obama administration is abandoning its commitment to Afghan women.

Afghanistan would certainly be a much better place if women there enjoyed equal rights instead of occupying, as they do today, a status midpoint between male children and family pets. But it is not a proper function of U.S. foreign policy to risk the lives of military personnel and spend hundreds of billions of tax dollars in a quixotic crusade to transform other societies.

The ostensible motive for our intervention in Afghanistan was to destroy al Qaeda because of the terrorist attacks on 9/11. It is bad enough that such a limited, punitive expedition was gradually transformed—through a “bait and switch” maneuver ^[5]—into a much larger intervention on behalf of Hamid Karzai’s regime in its civil war against the Taliban. But now we’re involved in an ambitious social engineering project that has almost no chance of success. Such a utopian goal has no relevance to the genuine security interests of the American people.

The Afghanistan mission is a textbook example of how badly Washington’s approach to national security has gotten off track. It underscores the need for a new, sober debate about the proper objectives of foreign policy—and especially security policy—in a constitutional republic.

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