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## South Sudan: Another U.S.-Sponsored, Nation-Building Fiasco

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U.S. foreign-policy bureaucrats have become inordinately fond of both regime-change wars and nation-building missions since the end of the Cold War. Almost all of those crusades have turned out badly—in some cases, spectacularly so.

The latest example is South Sudan, which became independent after seceding from Sudan in 2011 with strong U.S. encouragement and support. A Council on Foreign Relations study conceded that “the United States was a lead facilitator of South Sudanese independence . . . providing diplomatic support and humanitarian aid. Prior to the outbreak of the civil war in 2013, the United States supported and advocated for the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), which became the new country’s government.”

Washington’s goal was to see a new, democratic country that no longer had to endure the repressive rule of a pro-Islamist government in Khartoum—and would be a reliable supplier of oil to the world market. Instead, U.S. policy appears to have helped create another Libya, afflicted by bloody chaos. Barely 30 months after South Sudan’s July 2011 independence referendum, full-scale civil war erupted. The feuding factions supposedly reached a settlement in February 2020, but new, more decentralized fighting has now broken out.

In addition to the widespread ineptitude of Washington’s would-be nation builders in conducting their various crusades, there is a stunning degree of inconsistency, if not hypocrisy. That is especially true regarding the issue of secession. Washington’s long-standing default option was one of opposition, believing that the fracturing of existing states injects dangerous instability into the international system. Such an assumption was dominant throughout the Cold War. The administrations of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon refused to support Biafra’s bid to create a new country in Nigeria’s southeast, even though there were important religious, ethnic, and economic factors distinguishing the region from the rest of Nigeria. The United States strongly opposed the Kurdish separatist movement in southeastern Turkey. American officials dismissed secessionist guerrillas in Spain’s northern Basque region as little more than terrorists.

With the end of the Cold War, the consistency in U.S. policy evaporated. U.S. leaders greeted the dissolution of the Soviet Union with satisfaction and looked on with benevolent indifference as the Czech and Slovak regions of Czechoslovakia executed their “velvet divorce.” When Yugoslavia slowly unraveled, Washington’s policy was one of brazen hypocrisy. U.S. officials were supportive as Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia all exited the Yugoslav federation, but were adamant that the discontented Serb minority in Bosnia could not secede from that newly minted country. The Clinton administration’s opposition was so intense that it led to NATO airstrikes on Bosnian Serb military positions to create the conditions for a dictated peace settlement that preserved Bosnia’s nominal (albeit dysfunctional) unity.

A few years later, though, the administration had no problem blessing Montenegro's independence from what was left of Yugoslavia and launched a major air war to compel Serbia to relinquish one of its provinces: Kosovo. George W. Bush's administration even helped orchestrate international recognition of Kosovo's formal independence in 2008. As Cato Institute senior fellow Doug Bandow recently observed, the only consistent feature of U.S. policy on secession in the Balkans appeared to be "that the Serbs were supposed to lose" in all scenarios.

The consistency of U.S. policy on secession has not been much better in Africa. Washington has continuously refused to recognize Somaliland's independence from Somalia, even though Mogadishu's writ over the region has been nonexistent for more than two decades. Conversely, the Obama administration was eager to support South Sudan's bid for independence. The results of the latter decision, though, have been appalling. South Sudan's six-year civil war left 380,000 dead and millions displaced. President Salva Kiir and rebel leader Riek Machar finally reached a deal to form a unity government in February, with Machar becoming the new vice president.

But the (relative) peace did not last long. As in Syria and Libya, other places where the United States has meddled in complex, murky quarrels, South Sudan's chaos is not just the product of a power struggle between two factions. The latest round of violence confirms that the causes of instability are far more amorphous. Recent fighting in one interior state, Jonglei, gives a hint of the complexity. Armed conflict erupted between traditional rivals, the Murle and Lou Nuer communities. But local sources stated that, for reasons not entirely clear, members of a third group, the Dinka Bor community, then teamed up with the Lou Nuer for an attack on the Murle.

*Antiwar.com* writer Jason Ditz provides a succinct verdict on Washington's South Sudan policy. "US-backed independence was supposed to mean a stable, oil-rich nation and instead has produced a nation of constant war and a government that's mostly been at war with itself from its founding."

Such a tragic outcome echoes the results of U.S. interference in places such as the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. U.S. officials need to abandon their arrogant assumption that Washington has the blueprint for peace, freedom, and stability in alien societies that they do not begin to comprehend. Even if those officials operate with the best of intentions, the outcomes too often have been calamitous. South Sudan is the latest example, and it needs to be the last.

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