

June 10, 2010

This is the print preview: [Back to normal view](#) »

## Malou Innocent

Foreign Policy Analyst at the Cato Institute

Posted: June 10, 2010 12:10 PM

# Surprise! Playing God in Afghanistan Will Take Longer Than Once Thought

It should come as no surprise that it will take longer than expected to reconstruct 30 years of destruction in Afghanistan.

This week, top U.S. and NATO commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, said the campaign to secure Kandahar, a key Taliban stronghold, will require more time than originally planned. The most astonishing part of Gen. McChrystal's admission was that it took him so long to reach it. There is good reason to be skeptical that the U.S.-led coalition can reduce violence, eradicate corruption, and build a capable Afghan government that can take over the fight before U.S. troops drawdown next summer.

While the West may tend to underestimate the potential of the Afghan people, and blame them for the mission's present failings, many of these problems reflect more the inherent complications of nation-building than an issue of the Afghans themselves. For sure, most Western officials and analysts (including myself) would say that country's amalgam of disparate tribal and ethnic groups, many of whom have historic grievances against the others, hampers stabilization and reconstruction efforts. However, as Assistant Professor of Economics at West Virginia University Christopher Coyne points out in his book, *After War: The Political Economy of Exporting Democracy*, "while we know what a successful reconstruction entails, we lack an understanding of how to bring about the desired end."

In any country, not just Afghanistan, the values, customs, traditions and belief systems of a foreign people goes beyond a foreign policymakers' ability to control. After all, for every West Germany or Japan, there is a Somalia or Vietnam.

As my colleague and I mentioned last year in our paper, *Escaping the Graveyard of Empires*, merely increasing our knowledge of Afghanistan's local politics will not guarantee success; presuming we can simply learn what ethnicities and communities can be "peeled off" from militants does not necessarily mean we will reach the ends we seek or yield the outcomes we want.

We have difficulty predicting behavior and tinkering with communal identities right here at home, how can we succeed in creating incentives that will make the people of occupied countries prefer our systems and way of life over and above their own. After nearly a decade at war in Afghanistan, after billions of international investment, funding and training its military, enforcing Western rule of law, and foreign values and customs, NATO and the United States have collectively failed, and in the process, have demonstrated the failure of nation-building.

As an anonymous blogger recently wrote about the mission after attending the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) conference at its Afghanistan/Pakistan Center of Excellence:

"If we were trying to build a house, and that house kept falling apart, we could just plausibly conclude that our house-building effort suffered from a problem implementation-shoddy workmanship, inadequate resources, and things like that. However, without evidence to the contrary, we could just as plausibly conclude that we had sloppy blueprints....I'm leaning towards that sloppy-blueprints explanation of how the Afghan conflict is going right now."

Unfortunately, however, people in Washington are too afraid to admit that we don't have all the answers. But if, as some people say, rebuilding Afghanistan is necessary for U.S. security, I say, sometimes the necessary is the impossible.

*### Malou Innocent is a foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C.*

**Follow Malou Innocent on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/IndianBrownAle](http://www.twitter.com/IndianBrownAle)**