# Fatal Conceit

*What's wrong with nation building*

BY JUSTIN LOGAN & CHRISTOPHER PREBLE

Americans used to have a wise skepticism about nation building. As recently as the 1990s, conservatives, especially, opposed the Clinton administration's social-engineering projects in Haiti, Somalia, and the Balkans: They doubted that the U.S. military should, or could, become a tool for creating modern states where none existed. After 9/11, however, as the U.S. military drifted into nation-building operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, even previously skeptical observers found themselves endorsing the expanded missions. Today, support for Barack Obama's nation-building project in Afghanistan is widespread, even among conservatives.

Despite this new consensus, nation building remains expensive, unnecessary, and unwise. In a literal sense, nations, unlike cars or computers, aren't built: They develop organically. As Charles Tilly observed in his 1990 book *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, when the foundation of the modern nation-state was laid in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries, it was a natural outgrowth of changes in military technology and resulted from the economic requirements of fielding a national army. It was the farthest thing imaginable from what goes today by the name of "nation building"—i.e., an external effort (usually by the United States) to create a viable national government where one does not currently exist. In general, such efforts have been undertaken amid political violence, as in the case of the Clinton administration's endeavors in the Balkans and today's efforts in the mountains and valleys of Afghanistan.

Many of today's nation-building proponents are soldiers—but they resemble the military and political leaders of the 17th century much less than they do the tweedy modernization theorists of the 1950s and 1960s. They advocate using the U.S. military and civilian bureaucracies to help govern places like Afghanistan, in the hope that the result will be greater U.S. national security. They favor a counterinsurgency effort that includes distributing economic aid, establishing schools, organizing modern military and police forces, adjudicating political disputes, uprooting corruption, and reforming judicial practices. As Gen. Stanley McChrystal promised before the recent Marja offensive: "We've got a government in a box, ready to roll in."

This is the kind of ambition the Clinton foreign policy displayed in the 1990s, and it met with understandable scorn from conservative foreign-policy intellectuals. John Bolton condemned Clinton's approach as reflecting an "instinct for the capillaries"; John Hillen, a scholar at the Heritage Foundation, urged the administration to make clear that "superpowers don't do windows." Their objections could be boiled down to two, both basically conservative: They believed that the U.S. should focus on its own national interest, which did not entail remaking other societies; and they viewed such projects as unlikely to succeed in any case, because particular cultures and traditions generate institutions, not the other way around.

What has changed about the first argument is that many conservatives now wonder whether nation building may be required for U.S. national security. On the second argument, some analysts believe that the U.S. intervention in the Balkans succeeded, and thus provides a template for future operations.

To begin with the second argument, a brief look at the Balkans suggests that the wariness some expressed at the time was well-founded. In the nearly 15 years since the Dayton Accord was signed, Bosnia has been the site of the largest state-building project on earth. On a per capita basis, the multinational project there has dwarfed even the post–World War II efforts in Germany and Japan. Tiny Kosovo received higher per capita expenditure. Yet, as political scientists Patrice McMahon and Jon Western warned in *Foreign Affairs* last year, Bosnia "now stands on the brink of collapse"—partly as a consequence of persistent ethnic cleavages and the inherent difficulty of state building. McMahon and Western—who support additional efforts in Bosnia to prevent a collapse—warn that Bosnia has gone from being "the poster child for international reconstruction efforts" to being a cautionary tale about the limits of even very well-funded and focused efforts at state building.

Similarly, in surveying conditions in Bosnia and Kosovo, Gordon Bardos of Columbia University recently concluded that "it is becoming increasingly difficult to argue that we have the intellectual, political, or financial wherewithal to transform the political cultures of other countries" at an acceptable cost. If Bosnia and Kosovo—European countries less rugged than Afghanistan, and with, respectively, one-sixth and one-twelfth of its population—represent the case for optimism in Afghanistan, then the case for gloom is strong.

Some might point to the U.S.-supported counterinsurgency efforts in El Salvador and Colombia as models to be emulated in Afghanistan. However, in both cases, it was not large-scale, U.S.-boots-on-the-ground state-building operations that succeeded, but violent, enemy-centric tactics accompanied by American financial and logistical support to sitting governments. As Benjamin Schwarz, who analyzed U.S. efforts in El Salvador for the Defense Department, has made clear, the two strategically decisive events in the counterinsurgency there were the cumulative effects of indiscriminate killing by death squads supporting the government in the early 1980s, and the collapse of the insurgency's patron, the Soviet Union. Similarly, in Colombia, the game-changer was the government's focus on improving the army's officer corps and deploying a better-trained and better-armed army against the insurgents. There is little parallel between this and the nation building under way in Afghanistan.

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THE larger disconnect is on the question of whether nation building is necessary for U.S. national security. A decade ago, the mainstream consensus on the imprudence of nation building was reflected in the foreign-policy views of George W. Bush. During the 2000 campaign, Bush openly questioned the wisdom of such undertakings, and his foreign-policy adviser, Condoleezza Rice, memorably declared that the Bush administration wouldn't have "the 82nd Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten."

But Bush and Rice, along with many others, changed their minds in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. They succumbed to the tempting liberal argument that illiberal politics was the "root cause" of terrorism, and argued that using the U.S. military to spread political reform would enhance American security. This line of thinking yielded the two nation-building projects in Iraq and Afghanistan. The mission in Iraq is scheduled to end next year, but the country's medium-term prospects remain very much in doubt, and the U.S. has paid a high price in blood and treasure to achieve even the shaky equilibrium that exists today. In Afghanistan, despite the recent policy review and after nearly nine years of fighting, there remains no clear strategic end state in sight.

There was such an end state available in October 2001. What was needed in Afghanistan was not counterinsurgency and nation building, but a violent response to the terrorist attacks. However, as the U.S. routed the Taliban in Afghanistan and trained its sights on Iraq, it became clear that the problem Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had identified in Afghanistan—that there were no good targets—was true for the overall War on Terror. In December 2001, immediately after the successful overthrow of the Taliban (a feat accomplished with no more than a few hundred U.S. personnel on the ground), Charles Krauthammer published an article titled "We Don't Peacekeep," in which he argued that while U.S. military forces "fight the wars[,] our friends should patrol the peace." The Bush White House apparently disagreed, defining U.S. objectives in Afghanistan and Iraq expansively to include the establishment of viable, modern democracies, growing economies, and equitable judicial systems.

But what had changed? Why was it unwise for the Clinton administration to seek to remake nations, but wise for the Bush and, later, Obama administrations to seek to do the same? The response comes that Washington has national-security interests in Central Asia, whereas there were no such security interests at stake in the missions of the 1990s. It is undeniable that we have important interests in Afghanistan, but it is also true that an ambitious state-building project there is unnecessary, and unlikely to protect those interests at a justifiable cost. If the Obama administration is to be believed, the al-Qaeda presence in Afghanistan is fewer than 100 men, and its presence in the Pakistani tribal areas "more than 300." This is a threat we can deal with in the same way we deal with the al-Qaeda threat in Yemen, Somalia, or elsewhere: intelligence cooperation (where available), special-operations forces, and drone strikes.

Consider the following counterfactual: If everything in Afghanistan were the same today, except the U.S. did not have a large military footprint there, would anyone propose deploying 100,000 servicemen and -women to build the Afghans a government? We should doubt whether the government-building project is likely to succeed. There is little precedent for successful state building on this scale; and there are especially strong centrifugal forces in Afghanistan, including rampant illiteracy, the country's position as a plaything of regional powers (India and Pakistan), powerful identity politics, and a xenophobic culture. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that Afghanistan simply is not far enough along in the historical processes that produced national states in the past.

THE good news for Americans is that our security does not hinge on the emergence of an Afghan state. The U.S. retains the ability to prevent a Taliban takeover without a large-scale, boots-on-the-ground presence in the country. As for al-Qaeda, an extensive analysis by Columbia University counterinsurgency expert Austin Long suggests that fewer than 20,000 U.S. troops would be sufficient to deal with its forces in Afghanistan.

That modest investment, aimed at an achievable goal, would leave us room to reexamine some of the assumptions that have been embedded in U.S. thinking over the past decade, beginning with George W. Bush's expansive interpretation of America's aims in the "long war." Sounding distinctly Wilsonian, Bush declared in his 2003 State of the Union address that "our calling, as a blessed country, is to make the world better." His Second Inaugural raised the stakes even higher, setting an "ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." This Progressive streak in Bush's thought helps us understand some of the continuity we see in his successor: President Obama's foreign-affairs rhetoric is less lofty than President Bush's, but the two are in basic agreement on America's mission. Obama tells us that "extremely poor societies and weak states provide optimal breeding grounds for disease, terrorism, and conflict." He, too, wants to engage in nation building to solve those problems, and argues that America must "invest in building capable, democratic states that can establish healthy and educated communities, develop markets and generate wealth."

The problem with the nation-building impulse remains what it was in the past: This project is rooted in deeply flawed ideas about man's ability to reshape society, and exhibits the very type of "fatal conceit" that Friedrich von Hayek scorned long ago. It is incoherent to believe that the same government that can produce neither jobs nor well-educated children at home can build viable states in foreign lands with unfamiliar languages, customs, and cultures. To oppose such projects at home while supporting them abroad defies the laws of economics and basic common sense.

It is a peculiar act of hubris to try to build a nation. After all, as Edmund Burke wrote, a nation is "not an idea only of local extent, and individual momentary aggregation, but it is an idea of continuity, which extends in time as well as in numbers, and in space. And this is a choice not of one day, or one set of people, not a tumultuary or giddy choice; it is a deliberate election of ages and generations." Echoing Burke, George Will argued in 2006 that "when you hear the phrase 'nation building,' remember, it is as preposterous as the phrase 'orchid building.' Nations are not built from Tinker Toys and erector sets. They are complicated, organic growths, just as orchids are. And they are not built, either."

Not in Afghanistan; not anywhere. **NR**