

By Marina Ottaway

NATION BUILDING

Once, nations were forged through “blood and iron.” Today, the world seeks to build them through conflict resolution, multilateral aid, and free elections. But this more civilized approach has not yielded many successes. For nation building to work, some harsh compromises are necessary—including military coercion and the recognition that democracy is not always a realistic goal.

“Nation Building Is a Quagmire”

Not necessarily. Nation building is difficult, but it need not become a quagmire as long as the effort has clear goals and sufficient resources. Compare Somalia and East Timor: The United States and the United Nations stumbled into Somalia without a plan. As a result, what began as a humanitarian mission to feed people starved by rival warlords became a misguided attempt at ad hoc nation building as U.S. troops sought to capture Somali warlord Mohammed Farah Aidid. The United States extricated itself from that quagmire by leaving Somalia to its fate in 1994, and the United Nations later did the same.

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In East Timor, by contrast, the international community followed a plan and was not dragged into a situation it could not control. Right from the start, the United Nations sought consensus for nation building by organizing an unprecedented plebiscite on independence from Indonesia. Learning from the mistakes of the Balkans and elsewhere, peacekeepers (led by Australia) were authorized to use deadly force against pro-Indonesia militias who sought to disrupt East Timor’s bid for autonomy through a campaign of violence, looting, and arson. At the time of this writing, the East Timorese have democratically elected a new government, which has hired more than 11,000 civil servants and retrained former guerillas as soldiers for the country’s nascent defense force. East Timor is still a construction site, but it is not a quagmire.

“Nation Building Is About Building a Nation”

No. Nationhood, or a sense of common identity, by itself does not guarantee the viability of a state. In Haiti, for example, citizens already share a common identity, but the state has collapsed nevertheless. Other states are so deeply divided along ethnic (Bosnia), religious (Northern Ireland), or clan (Somalia) lines that forging a common identity is currently out of the question. The international community cannot hope to make Muslims, Croats, and Serbs in Bosnia forget their differences, nor can it compel Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland to bridge the religious gulf.

Even successful states are less homogeneous than they claim. Many European countries, such as France and Spain, grudgingly have recognized the existence of regional cultures. In the United States, the notion of the melting pot has been debunked, particularly as a new wave of immigrants from the developing world has

shunned outright assimilation by forming a mosaic of hyphenated Americans. And contrary to the mythology inherited from 19th-century Europe, historical evidence reveals that the common identity, or sense of nationhood, that exists in many countries did not precede the state but was forged by it through the imposition of a common language and culture in schools. The Gauls were not France’s ancestors until history textbooks decided so.

Thus, the goal of nation building should not be to impose common identities on deeply divided peoples but to organize states that can administer their territories and allow people to live together despite differences. And if organizing such a state within the old internationally recognized borders does not seem possible, the international community should admit that nation building may require the disintegration of old states and the formation of new ones.

“Nation Building Is a Recent Idea”

Absolutely not. Take a look at how the political map of the world has changed in every century since the collapse of the Roman Empire—that should be proof enough that nation building has been around for quite a while. Casting a glance at the 19th and 20th centuries will reveal that the types of nation building with the most lasting impact on the modern world are nationalism, colonialism, and post-World War II reconstruction.

Nationalism gave rise to most European countries that exist today. The theory was that each nation, embodying a shared community of culture and blood, was entitled to its own state. (In reality, though, few beyond the intellectual and political elite shared a common identity.) This brand of nationalism led to the reunification of Italy in 1861 and Germany in 1871 and to the breakup of Austria-Hungary in 1918. This process of nation building was successful where governments were relatively capable, where powerful states decided to make room for new entrants, and where the population of new states was not deeply divided. Germany had a capable government and succeeded so well in forging a common identity that the entire world eventually paid

for it. Yugoslavia, by contrast, failed in its efforts, and the international community is still sorting out the mess.

Colonial powers formed dozens of new states as they conquered vast swaths of territory, tinkered with old political and leadership structures, and eventually replaced them with new countries and governments. Most of today’s collapsed states, such as Somalia or Afghanistan, are a product of colonial nation building. The greater the difference between the precolonial political entities and what the colonial powers tried to impose, the higher the rate of failure.

The transformation of West Germany and Japan into democratic states following World War II is the most successful nation-building exercise ever undertaken from the outside. Unfortunately, this process took place under circumstances unlikely to be repeated elsewhere. Although defeated and destroyed, these countries had strong state traditions and competent government personnel. West Germany and Japan were nation-states in the literal sense of the term—they were ethnic and cultural communities as well as political states. And they were occupied by the U.S. military, a situation that precluded choices other than the democratic state.

“Only War Builds Nations”

Not quite. The most successful nations, including the United States and the countries of Europe, were built by war. These countries achieved statehood because they developed the administrative capacity to mobilize resources and to extract the revenue they needed to fight wars.

Some countries have been created not by their own efforts but by decisions made by the international community. The Balkans offer unfortunate examples of states cobbled together from pieces of defunct empires. Many African countries exist because colonial powers chose to grant them independence. The British Empire created most modern states in the Middle East by carving up the territory of the defeated Ottoman Empire. The Palestinian state, if it becomes a reality, will be another example of a state that owes its existence to an international decision.

Such countries have been called quasi states—entities that exist legally because they are recognized internationally but that hardly function as states in

practice because they do not have governments capable of controlling their territory. Some quasi states succeed in retrofitting a functioning country into the legalistic shell. The state of Israel, for example, was formed because of an international decision, and Israel immediately demonstrated its staying power by waging a successful war to defend its existence. But many quasi states fail and then become collapsed states.

Today, war is not an acceptable means of state building. Instead, nation building must be a consensual, democratic process. But such a process is not effective against adversaries who are not democratic, who have weapons, and who are determined to use them. The world should not be fooled into thinking that it is possible to build states without coercion. If the international community is unwilling to allow states to be rebuilt by wars, it must provide the military muscle in the form of a sufficiently strong peacekeeping force. Like it or not, military might is a necessary component of state building.

“Nation Building Is Not a Task for the 82nd Airborne”

Maybe not, but it’s certainly a task for a strong military force with U.S. participation. Current White House National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice had a point when she quipped during the 2000 presidential campaign that the 82nd Airborne has more important tasks than “escorting kids to kindergarten.” But no one ever said that the primary task of U.S. troops should be babysitting. If the international community does not want to give war a chance by allowing adversaries to fight until someone prevails, then it has to establish control through a military presence willing to use deadly force. And if nation building is in the interests of the United States (as the Bush administration has reluctantly concluded), then the United States must participate in imposing that control.

It is not enough just to participate in the initial effort (in the war fought from the sky), because what

counts is what happens on the ground afterward. Newly formed states need long-term plans that go beyond the recent mission statement outlined by one U.S. diplomat: “We go in, we hunt down terrorists, and we go out as if we’d never been there.” Even if the United States succeeds in eliminating the last pockets of the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan, Americans could face another threat in a few years. And although warring armies are no longer active in Bosnia, the country would splinter apart if international troops went home.

The United States does not have to take the central role in peacekeeping operations, but U.S. participation is important because the country is the most powerful member of the international community. Otherwise, the United States sends the message that it doesn’t care what happens next—and in doing so, it undermines fragile new governments and encourages the emergence of feuding factions and warlords.



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“The International Community Knows How to Build Nations but Lacks Political Will”

It has neither the will nor the way. Many of the nation-building methods used in the past are inconceivable today, but the international community has yet to find effective substitutes. For instance, the first step colonial powers took when engaging in nation building was “pacification,” invariably a bloody undertaking described by the British writer Rudyard Kipling as “the savage wars of peace.” In today’s gentler world of nation building, such violent means are fortunately unacceptable. Instead, peacemakers usually try to mediate agreements among rival factions, demobilize combatants, and then reintegrate them in civilian life—a theoretically good idea that rarely works in practice.

Political will for state reconstruction is also in short supply nowadays. That’s hardly surprising, given that countries expected to help rebuild nations are the same ones that until recently were accused of neoimperialism. Sierra Leoneans today welcome the British peacekeeping force with open

arms and even wax nostalgic about the old days of British rule. But they revolted against British colonialism in the 1950s, and not so long ago, they condemned it as the root cause of all their problems. Should we be surprised that the British are, at best, ambivalent about their role?

And even when the international community demonstrates the will to undertake nation building, it’s not always able to figure out who should shoulder the burden. The international community is an unwieldy entity with no single center and lots of contradictions. It comprises the major world powers, with the United States as the dominant agent in some situations and as a reluctant participant in others. In Afghanistan, for instance, the United States wants to have complete control over war operations but refuses to have anything to do with peacekeeping. Meanwhile, the multilateral organization that by its mandate should play the dominant role in peacekeeping and state reconstruction—the United Nations—is the weakest and most divided of all.

“NGOs Play a Key Role in Nation Building”

Yes, but only when a functioning state exists. Large international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as Oxfam or CARE, are vital in distributing humanitarian assistance in collapsed states. They go into high-risk, lawless regions where international agencies and bilateral donors are unwilling to operate. But these organizations can also become part of the problem. In Somalia, for instance, protection money paid by international NGOs to gain safe passage for food and medical supplies financed the purchase of weapons by warlords and contributed to the escalation of violence.

To operate effectively, international and national NGOs need the stability that only states can provide. These organizations must also coordinate their activities with states so as not to undermine reconstruction efforts. For example, NGOs

can play an essential role in administering health-care in countries where the government has little outreach, but they can also create havoc if they insist on operating independently of the central government and of each other. That’s what happened in Mozambique during the 1980s, when NGOs diverted funds from the public sector and fragmented the national health system.

In Afghanistan right now there is considerable tension between the central government (which has little capacity to deliver humanitarian relief and services but feels that it should coordinate the effort) and international NGOs (which have greater capacity and experience). For the time being, NGOs are the most effective channel for delivering aid, but if government institutions are not allowed to take more long-term responsibility, nation building will fail.

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“Nation Building Should Be Limited to Strategically Important States”

Only if anyone can determine which ones they are. “No sane person opposes nation-building in places that count,” writes conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer. “The debate is about nation-building in places that don’t.” But this type of reasoning eventually forced the United States to fight a war in Afghanistan, a country deemed so unimportant after the Soviets departed that it was left to become a battleground for warlords and a safe haven for al Qaeda. In 1994, the United States abandoned strategically insignificant Somalia, too, only to start worrying after September 11, 2001, whether that country had also been infiltrated by terrorist networks.

For most countries, strategic significance is a variable, not a constant. Certainly, some countries, such as China, are always significant. But even countries that appear of marginal or no

importance can suddenly become crucial. Afghanistan is not the only example. In the days of the Cold War, countries or regions suddenly became prominent when they were befriended by the Soviet Union. “SALT,” then National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski declared in 1980, “was buried in the sands of the Ogaden”—referring to the cooling of U.S.-Soviet relations when the countries were dragged in to support opposite sides in a war between Ethiopia and Somalia. A few years later, the Reagan administration sent people scrambling for small-scale maps of Lebanon by declaring that Souk el-Gharb, an obscure crossroads town, was vital to U.S. security.

The lesson by now should be clear: No country is so insignificant that it can never become important. So, by all means, let us focus our efforts only on strategically important countries, as long as we can predict which ones they are. (Good luck.)

“The Goal of Nation Building Is a Democratic State”

Let us not indulge in fantasy. It is politically correct to equate state reconstruction with democracy building. Indeed, the international community has a one-size-fits-all model for democratic reconstruction, so that plans devised for Afghanistan bear a disturbing resemblance to those designed for the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This model usually envisages a negotiated settlement to the conflict and the holding of a national conference of major domestic groups (the *loya jirga* in Afghanistan and the Inter-Congolese Dialogue in the DRC) to reach an agreement on the structure of the political system, followed by elections. In addition to these core activities, the model calls for subsidiary but crucial undertakings, beginning with the demobilization of former combatants and the development of a new national army, then extending to reforming the judiciary, restructuring

the civil service, and establishing a central bank—thus creating all the institutions deemed necessary to run a modern state.

This model is enormously expensive, requiring major commitments of money and personnel on the part of the international community. As a result, this approach has only been implemented seriously in the case of Bosnia, the only country where the international community has made an open-ended commitment of money and power to see the job through to the end. Six years into the process, progress is excruciatingly slow and not even a glimmer of light is waiting at the end of the tunnel. But elsewhere in the world, including Afghanistan, the international community prescribes this model without providing the resources. The most obvious missing resource in Afghanistan is a robust international peacekeeping force.



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The issue here is not simply political will. The resources are just not available. Consider the list of current nation-building projects: Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, the DRC, and Burundi. Plus, Somalia is again on the international radar screen. If an agreement is reached, nation-building efforts will begin in Sudan. And should the Bush administration succeed in dislodging Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, the reconstruction of Iraq might be forthcoming. Meanwhile, the international community has yet to cough up the nearly \$400 million it pledged to fund the budget of the nascent Afghanistan government.

Consequently, the international community has to set more modest goals for nation building and then tailor those goals to each country's reality. Unpleasant compromises are inevitable. If the inter-

national community is not going to disarm Afghanistan's warlords, it will have to deal with them in other ways because they will not just disappear on their own. It has to make at least some of them less dangerous and disruptive by using aid to co-opt them into the government. If nations do not want to occupy Somalia and impose state structures on warring clans, they should consider helping the regional governments that have emerged to fill the void, beginning with Somaliland. In some cases, such as in the DRC, the international community should either accept the disintegration of the country or allow nondemocratic leaders to use force to put the state back together. These are all unpalatable choices. But those who believe that the international community knows how to turn collapsed states into democracies should think again. **FP**

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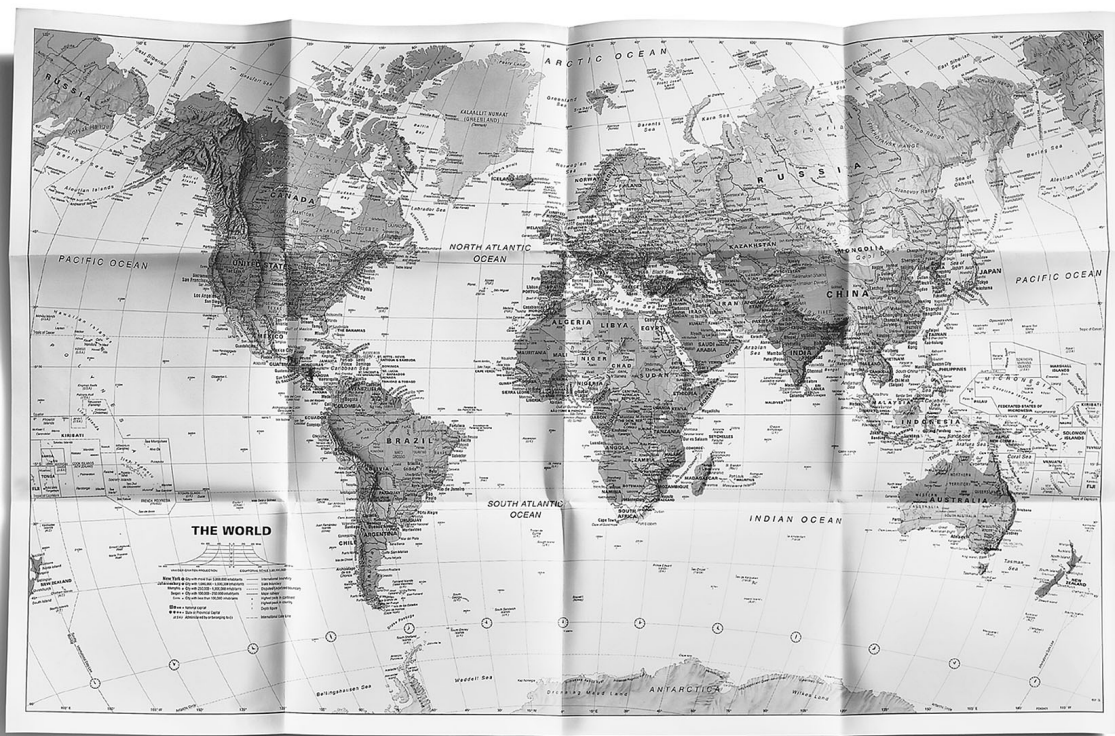
Robert D. Kaplan's *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dream of the Post Cold War* (New York: Vintage, 2001) provides a somewhat apocalyptic view of what a future without nation building may hold and should convince even skeptics that the international community cannot avoid the task. For dismal views of state disintegration in Africa, see Karl Maier's *This House Has Fallen: Midnight in Nigeria* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000) and Michela Wrong's *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001).

Max Boot puts modern-day peacekeeping in historical context by chronicling the United States' 200-year history of undeclared, small wars abroad in *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). Images of nation building as a quagmire are largely influenced by accounts of Somalia, such as Michael Maren's *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity* (New York: Free Press, 1997). For a detailed view of the challenge of nation building, the reports of the **International Crisis Group's** (ICG) Balkans program, available on its Web site, are unparalleled. In "True Believer" (FOREIGN POLICY, March/April 2001), Gareth Evans, ICG's president and former Australian foreign minister, offers his views on when the international community should intervene in civil conflicts. Go to the **United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor** Web site for an account of nation building in East Timor.

On the role of war in nation building, see *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), edited by Charles Tilly. Robert Jackson's *Quasi-states: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) is the best account of the problems of states established by international fiat. On the role that nongovernmental organizations play in nation building, see Joseph Hanlon's *Mozambique: Who Calls the Shots?* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). Marina Ottaway and Anatol Lieven offer a skeptical perspective on the future of a democratic state in Afghanistan in "Rebuilding Afghanistan: Fantasy versus Reality" (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002).

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