

Washington's Newest Bogeyman

Debunking the Fear of Failed States

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THE AMERICAN foreign policy establishment has identified a new national security problem. Over the past two decades, foreign-policy scholars and popular writers have developed the ideas that “failed states” present a global security threat, and that accordingly, powerful countries like the United States should “fix” the failed states.¹ However, the conventional wisdom is based on a sea of confusion, poor reasoning, and category errors.

Much of the problem stems from the poor scholarly standards that characterize the research on state failure. The definitions of a “failed state” are now nearly as numerous as the number of studies about the subject. That ambiguity confounds analyses that seek to correlate threats with the “failedness” of states. Nevertheless, the idea received a boost after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. Analysts concluded en masse that since Afghanistan was both a failed state and a threat, failed states were threatening. Interest in remedying state failure grew after the United States toppled the rickety structure of the Iraqi state, when it became clear that attempting to administer a failed state was difficult. Believing these difficulties can be overcome, many analysts suggest that if the United States can prevent state failure or repair failed states, it can reap gains not just in terms of international development but also in national security.

This article calls into question the validity of the concept of failed states and highlights the consequences of integrating fear of failed states into American grand strategy. Four areas are considered. First, we outline the

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theoretical and historical ideas from which the concept of state failure emerged. Second, we provide evidence of growing concern on the part of US policymakers about state failure, including structural changes in the US national security bureaucracy that aim at remedying state failure. Third, we sketch out some of the methodological problems with the research on state failure, pointing out that the very term *failed state* carries little meaning and even less policy instruction. Finally, we outline the high costs and dubious benefits of a policy focused on state building.

From Turbulent Frontier to Warmed-Over Wilsonianism

As great powers grow more powerful, they tend to define their interests more broadly.² In many cases, this can include a tendency toward threat inflation. This is as true now as it was for the British, who came to see monsters under every bed. Intent on maintaining their grip on the Empire, the British, at the height of their power in the nineteenth century, began focusing on the “turbulent frontiers” of their colonies of India, Malaya, and South Africa. Despite London’s professed reluctance toward further intervention and expansion, statesmen regularly found themselves pulled beyond their own holdings in attempts to tame rambunctious populations. As one observer put it, “It was necessary to advance our dominions farther and farther for the mere protection of what we already possessed. Feuds on the border must be subjugated as a safeguard against the infection of rebellion at home.” The effort to bring order to ungoverned areas instead of securing the Empire’s hold on its existing territories served only to further expand Britain’s perceived interests.³

Obviously, the British experience is an imperfect analogy to America’s current situation, but American strategists are exhibiting similar thinking today. The US foreign policy establishment thinks of American interests in strikingly broad terms. As early as 1980, American policymakers sounded very ambitious. That year, president-elect Ronald Reagan’s national security team concluded that “no area of the world is beyond the scope of American interest,” and that the United States should have “sufficient military standing to cope with any level of violence” anywhere in the world.⁴ This attitude was geared toward the perceived demands of the Cold War, but interestingly it did not die with the Soviet Union. In supporting cuts in military spending after the Cold War, GEN Colin Powell famously admitted from his post as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that “I’m

running out of demons, I'm running out of villains. I'm down to Castro and Kim Il Sung."⁵ The choice was clear enough: cut defense spending or find new threats.

President Clinton's administration harbored a deep ambivalence about foreign policy, as compared to domestic policy. But underpinning the administration's foreign policy was a belief that any problem in the world, regardless of scale and no matter how remote, was in principle rightly the purview of US foreign policy. The administration expanded the mission in Somalia and intervened in Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo, with its inaction in Rwanda serving as the exception that proved the rule. One reason for Clinton's expansive view of American interests was the argument, gaining currency during the 1990s, that state failure (and weak states more generally) were the next important security threat.

With America's greatest enemy overcome, the Clinton administration developed what John Bolton aptly described as an "instinct for the capillaries."⁶ It wholeheartedly embraced nation building as an important part of US national security policy. America's foreign policy thinkers joined in, cultivating concerns over failed states and drawing up proposals for repairing them throughout the 1990s. Retired diplomats Gerald Helman and Steven Ratner proclaimed in 1993 that "it is becoming clear that something must be done" about them.⁷

Following Helman and Ratner, Robert Kaplan warned about what he saw as "the coming anarchy." In a widely read and influential article in 1994, Kaplan urged Western strategists to focus on "what is occurring . . . throughout West Africa and much of the underdeveloped world: the withering away of central governments, the rise of tribal and regional domains, the unchecked spread of disease, and the growing pervasiveness of war."⁸ Kaplan went on to warn, "The coming upheaval, in which foreign embassies are shut down, states collapse, and contact with the outside world takes place through dangerous, disease-ridden coastal trading posts, will loom large in the century we are entering."⁹ Basing his case heavily on Malthusian economics and the notion that "the environment . . . is the national-security issue of the early twenty-first century," Kaplan predicted that competition for scarce resources and collective action problems of environmental degradation would precipitate conflicts.¹⁰

Notwithstanding the fact that many of Kaplan's suppositions were rhetorically overheated, his and others' contributions to the national debate over foreign policy after the Cold War pointed in an inevitable direction:

toward the idea that insecurity and instability in far-flung corners of the globe should be placed at the top of the list of US foreign policy concerns. Indeed, Kaplan's argument appeared in the comments of prominent Clinton administration officials such as Robert Rubin and Lawrence Summers, both of whom were concerned with the environmental and economic impacts of failed states. In congressional hearings, State Department official Timothy Wirth recommended the article to members of Congress saying, "Even if we wanted to be disinterested in the world, the world will always be interested in us; its problems will make their way to our shores, and become problems for us and our children. . . . This is not about pie-in-the-sky humanitarianism, it is about vital, very specific, national interests." Wirth concluded by promising to aim at "structuring a world community more hospitable to our interests and more in keeping with the values that we share with men and women of goodwill the world over."¹¹

Turbulent-frontier thinking of the sort proffered by Kaplan had an enduring effect on President Clinton. Asked in an interview with *Foreign Policy* magazine in 2009 whether the war on terror would last longer than the Cold War, Clinton responded by endorsing once again Kaplan's view that "we are, de facto, no matter what the laws say, becoming nations of mega-city-states full of really poor, angry, uneducated and highly vulnerable people, all over the world." Clinton warned that if Kaplan were right, it meant that "terror . . . could be around for a very long time."¹²

During the campaign for the presidency in 2000, Republican candidate George W. Bush seemed skeptical about the utility and necessity of nation building. Bush argued that the role of US foreign policy should be to protect the vital interests of the United States. During the second presidential debate, he took a shot at the interventionism of the 1990s, stating, "I'm not so sure the role of the United States is to go around the world and say, 'This is the way it's got to be'."¹³ Bush pointed to the high costs and dubious outcomes of nation building, concluding, "I don't think our troops ought to be used for what's called nation building. . . . I mean, we're going to have some kind of nation-building corps from America? Absolutely not."¹⁴ Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national security adviser during the campaign, famously described the Bush view thusly: "Carrying out civil administration and police functions is simply going to degrade the American capability to do the things America has to do. We don't need to have the 82nd Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten."¹⁵

After 11 September 2001, however, the Bush administration changed course dramatically. *The United States National Security Strategy* (NSS) released in September 2002 was based on the idea that failing states posed a greater threat than strong ones and made “opening societies and building the infrastructure of democracy” a central plank of America’s response to the 9/11 attacks. Part of the administration’s new security policy would be to “help build police forces, court systems, and legal codes, local and provincial government institutions, and electoral systems.” The overarching goal was to “make the world not just safer but better.”¹⁶ The reasoning of the 2002 NSS placed the Bush administration squarely in the Wilsonian tradition.¹⁷ Clearly, the president had changed his mind about the wisdom of attempting to build nations.

With Bush’s conversion to Wilsonianism came a bevy of new allies. Academics and pundits endorsed and amplified Bush’s worry that state failure was a serious security issue. For example, Lawrence Korb and Robert Boorstin of the Center for American Progress warned that “weak and failing states pose as great a danger to the American people and international stability as do potential conflicts among the great powers.”¹⁸ Francis Fukuyama, professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, flatly stated that weak and failed states constitute “the single most critical threat to US national security.”¹⁹

Once an idea of the left, the belief that failed states are threatening found a home on the political right as well. In July 2005, longtime Republican realist Brent Scowcroft co-chaired a task force on postconflict capabilities convened by the Council on Foreign Relations. Although somewhat less hyperbolic than other reports, the task force proceeded from the assumption that “[a]ction to stabilize and rebuild states marked by conflict is not ‘foreign policy as social work,’ a favorite quip of the 1990s. It is equally a humanitarian concern and a national security priority.”²⁰ The report advocated tasking the national security adviser with directing stabilization and reconstruction missions and making stability operations a top priority for the military, among other objectives.²¹

Barack Obama exhibited little disagreement with these assumptions during his run for the presidency. In an essay in *Foreign Affairs*, Obama argued in 2007 that “since extremely poor societies and weak states provide optimal breeding grounds for disease, terrorism, and conflict,” the United States must “invest in building capable, democratic states that can establish healthy and educated communities, develop markets, and generate

wealth.”²² As may be seen below, these ideas have permeated the foreign policy establishment and consequently affected US foreign policy.

The Growing Focus on Nation Building in the US Government

In July 2004 the State Department opened the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS), borrowing funds and personnel from elsewhere in the department.²³ The creation of the office was inspired by a sense of Congress resolution spearheaded by Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN) in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and cosponsored by Senators Joe Biden (D-DE) and Chuck Hagel (R-NE).²⁴ The resolution sought to develop a civilian response capability with the purpose of carrying out stabilization and reconstruction work in countries beset by conflict. This new capability would be a core mission of the State Department and the US Agency for International Development (USAID).²⁵ Explaining the bill at a March 2004 hearing, Lugar argued, “International crises are inevitable, and in most cases, US security interests will be threatened by sustained instability.”²⁶ A few weeks later on National Public Radio, Lugar said, “The sea change, really, in our foreign policy is that now it is acceptable and, in fact, desirable for Americans to talk about successful nation building.”²⁷ According to a Congressional Research Service report published at the time, the desire to create new stabilization and reconstruction capabilities was rooted in concern over the ongoing Iraq operation and the desire for greater civilian involvement in the postconflict phases of military operations.²⁸

In addition to “monitoring political and economic instability worldwide to anticipate the need for mobilizing United States and international assistance for countries or regions [in, or in transition from, conflict or civil strife],” the office is tasked with “determining the appropriate non-military [responses of the] United States.”²⁹ While the law created a legal basis for the S/CRS, Congress starved the office of funding in the 2006 foreign operations bill. Although Congress allocated \$24.1 million to staff the S/CRS, it zeroed out the \$100-million request for a “conflict response fund,” which would have created a standing corps of nation builders.

Over time, however, the office began to receive greater funding. The Obama administration’s FY 2010 budget request included \$323.3 million for the Civilian Stabilization Initiative (CSI), roughly a fourfold increase over the Bush administration’s budget for FY 2009. While Congress cut the figure down to \$150 million, including \$30 million to the USAID,

that still represented a doubling of the CSI budget in one year. For FY 2011 the Obama administration asked for \$184 million for CSI.³⁰

Despite previous setbacks, the Obama administration wants to continue the work of establishing a standing corps of nation builders. The budget proposal for FY 2011 argues for a continued effort in building up a 2,250-member Civilian Response Corps (CRC). This number includes 250 active members plus another 2,000 standby component members.³¹ The CRC cuts across at least eight federal agencies, including State, Justice, Treasury, Commerce, Agriculture, Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, and USAID.³²

As the above numbers indicate, the US government's state-building efforts are still decidedly limited. The S/CRS is playing only a very minor role in Iraq and Afghanistan. An S/CRS team deployed to coordinate US government support for the Afghan presidential elections in August 2009 and has provided modest support for similar activities in Iraq. Beyond these missions, the office's activities have been limited to planning exercises and coordinating financial support in places such as Haiti, Congo, and Bangladesh.

Similar gaps bedevil US efforts to deploy so-called provincial reconstruction teams (PRT) in Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite forceful national-security appeals for Americans to join PRTs in those countries,³³ the results have been unimpressive. As of 2008 in the 12 US-led PRTs in Afghanistan, 34 of the 1,055 personnel came from civilian agencies. In Iraq in 2008 the situation was somewhat better: roughly 450 Americans were serving in the 28 US-led PRTs, 360 of whom were from civilian agencies.³⁴ Still, this result came only after top State Department officials toyed with the ideas of forcing Foreign Service personnel to deploy to Iraq and adopting military rather than diplomatic security standards governing their deployments.³⁵ These proposals encountered significant resistance within State, indicating an apparent institutional rigidity likely to hinder any effort to develop a workable and sizeable corps of on-call nation builders.

In late 2009, Stuart Bowen, the US special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction, offered a new proposal for coordinating reconstruction and stabilization: a US Office for Contingency Operations (USOCO). According to Bowen, the new office would "solve the unity of command problems encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan . . . [and have] full responsibility for managing the relief and reconstruction component" resulting

from future US conflict by acting as the single point of contact between military and civilian reconstruction teams.³⁶ Though only a proposal, it is yet another example of the continued growth of a bureaucracy being built around the idea that America should attempt to fix failed states.

Along with changes in the State Department and other civilian agencies, the US military has made significant changes to its doctrine to protect the United States from the threat posed by the supposed state-failure/terrorism nexus.³⁷ Senior military officers have taken their cues from civilian opinion leaders who contend that the US government must improve its capacity for nation building. In particular, two new field manuals are rooted in the idea that to protect the country against terrorism, Washington will have to create effective governments in other countries.

Of particular importance is Field Manual 3-24, the US Army and Marine Corps manual for waging counterinsurgency (COIN), which was released in late 2006 to an unusual amount of attention. After being downloaded 1.5 million times within the first month from the Fort Leavenworth and Marine Corps Web sites, the manual was published by the University of Chicago Press and reviewed by the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *New York Times*, where it received an editors' choice award.

The interest is understandable. As field manuals go, it is a page-turner. The writing team went out of its way to avoid bland, jargony prose and also reached out to civilian experts on matters of substance. Georgetown University professor Colin Kahl called the new field manual "the single best distillation of current knowledge about irregular warfare."³⁸ Yale University's Stathis Kalyvas described the sweep and breadth of the document, noting that it proposed "a strategy of competitive state building combining targeted, selective violence and population control, on the one hand, with the dissemination of a credible mass ideology, the creation of modern state structures, the imposition of the rule of law, and the spurring of economic development, on the other."³⁹

The Army released FM 3-07, *Stability Operations*, two years later. Perhaps anticipating public skepticism toward a repeat of recent wars, LTG William B. Caldwell IV, commander of the US Army's Combined Arms Center, predicted: "America's future abroad is unlikely to resemble Afghanistan or Iraq, where we grapple with the burden of nation-building under fire. Instead, we will work through and with the community of nations to defeat insurgency, assist fragile states, and provide vital humanitarian aid to the suffering."⁴⁰

As demonstrated above, the assumptions underlying these doctrinal developments are consonant with the emerging consensus in Washington. The stability operations field manual asserts, for example, that “the greatest threat to our national security comes not in the form of terrorism or ambitious powers, but from fragile states either unable or unwilling to provide for the most basic needs of their people.”⁴¹

Still, the reason for focusing on counterinsurgency and stability operations is the belief, as Caldwell described it, that today’s is an “era of uncertainty and persistent conflict,” and that these conditions are likely to endure into the future.⁴² But one searches in vain for a time when the US military justified its doctrine on the assumptions that the age was characterized by certainty and abating conflict. Moreover, as journalist Thomas Ricks has pointed out, the title of the manual is inaccurate. Ricks noted that the United States did not invade Iraq or Afghanistan to provide stability, but rather to precipitate social and political change, and suggested that a more apt description of US policy in these countries would be “revolutionary operations.”⁴³

As the lead authors of the counterinsurgency manual noted in *Military Review*, the United States’ superior capabilities in conventional warfare make it likely that future opponents will be more inclined to resort to irregular methods, such as terrorism and insurgency, to achieve their political goals and prevent the United States from achieving its goals.⁴⁴ Accordingly, it is not surprising that military leaders are taking steps to prepare for waging counterinsurgency and postconflict stabilization missions. DoD Directive 3000.05 declared that stability operations constituted a “core US military mission” for the Department of Defense and placed such operations at the same priority level as combat.⁴⁵

Even budget priorities are slowly beginning to shift toward capabilities for nation building. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates argued in a 2007 speech that because it was hard to conceive of any peer competitor arising in the coming years, an increasing share of the national security budget should be dedicated to influencing political change in small, weak countries.⁴⁶ In keeping with this view, Gates has justified efforts to cut conventional platforms such as the F-22 on the grounds that they are irrelevant to today’s wars.⁴⁷ While sizeable cuts to conventional platforms do not appear on the horizon, it is clear that COIN and nation-building enthusiasts have taken a seat at the DoD table and are working to expand their shares of the budget.

Given the growing acceptance of arguments about failed states and the fact that these ideas have begun to affect US foreign policy, it is striking how ill-defined the terms of debate have been. How can we measure state failure? What are the historical correlations between the attributes of failed states and the supposed security threats they pose? Below we show that by the established definitions of state failure and a reasonable interpretation of the word “threat,” failed states almost always miss the mark.

Impressionism as Social Science

A survey of the formal studies of state failure reveals a methodological wasteland. Analysts have created a number of listings of failed states, which have, in fairness, overlapped considerably; all are populated by poor countries, many of which have been wracked by interstate or civil violence.⁴⁸ However, instead of adhering to basic social-scientific standards of inquiry, in which questions or puzzles are observed and then theories are described and tested using clearly defined independent and dependent variables, analysts began by drawing up a category—failed state—and then attempted to create data sets from which theoretical inferences could be induced.

To take one prominent case, the authors of the *State Failure Task Force Report* contracted by the Central Intelligence Agency’s Directorate of Intelligence chose to adjust their definition of “failed state” after their initial criteria did not produce an adequate data set for the quantitative tests the researchers wanted to perform. After dramatically expanding the definition, the task force produced almost six times more countries that could be coded “failed” as compared with their original criteria and then proceeded with their statistical analysis. They justified this highly questionable decision on the judgment that “events that fall beneath [the] total-collapse threshold often pose challenges to US foreign policy as well.”⁴⁹ Subsequently, the task force changed its name to the “Political Instability Task Force” and appeared to back away from the term *failed state*.⁵⁰

Beyond methodological shortcomings, the lists of failed states reveal only that there are many countries plagued by severe problems. The top 10 states in the 2009 Fund for Peace/*Foreign Policy* magazine Failed States Index include two countries the United States occupies (Iraq and Afghanistan), one country without any central government to speak of (Somalia), four poor African states (Zimbabwe, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Central African Republic), two resource-rich but

unstable African countries (Sudan and Guinea) and a nuclear-armed Muslim country, population 176 million (Pakistan). The sheer diversity of the countries on the lists makes clear that few policy conclusions could be drawn about a country based on its designation as a failed state.

In fact, what has happened is that analysts have seized on an important single data point—Afghanistan in the 1990s and 2000s—and used it to justify a focus on failed states more broadly. Because Afghanistan met anyone's definition of failed state and because it clearly contained a threat, analysts concluded en masse that failed states were threatening. When confronted with the reality that the countries regularly included on lists of failed states include such strategic non-entities as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, and East Timor, advocates of focusing on state failure routinely point back at the single case that can be justified directly on US national security grounds: Afghanistan.⁵¹

Even in Afghanistan, however, remedying the condition of "state failure" would not have eliminated the threat, and eliminating the threat—by killing or capturing Osama bin Laden and his confederates—would not have remedied the "failure." The fact that expansive claims about the significance of state failure have been used to market studies of the subject, when viewed in light of the diverse and mostly nonthreatening states deemed "failed," leaves the impression of a bait and switch.

For instance, the 2007 update of the Failed States Index promises on the magazine's cover to explain "why the world's weakest countries pose the greatest danger." The opening lines of the article declare that failed states "aren't just a danger to themselves. They can threaten the progress and stability of countries half a world away." Strikingly, then, the article does little to back up or even argue these claims. It instead shrugs that "failing states are a diverse lot" and that "there are few easy answers to their troubles." By 2009, the index was conceding that "greater risk of failure is not always synonymous with greater consequences of failure," and that the state failure-terrorism link "is less clear than many have come to assume."⁵²

Given these concessions undermining the idea that state failure is threatening, one wonders why scholars continue to study failed states at all. As seen above, the countries on lists of failed states are so diverse that it is difficult to draw any conclusions about a state's designation as failed. But the purpose, one would think, of creating a new category of states

would be to unify countries that share attributes that can inform either how we think about these states or how we craft policies toward these states. Instead, the scholarship on state failure has arbitrarily grouped together countries that have so little in common that neither academic research nor policy work should be influenced by this concept. Despite repeated claims to the contrary, learning that a task force has deemed a particular state “failed” is not particularly useful.

Start with the Conclusions and Work Backward

Existing scholarship on state failure seems to indicate that the conclusion led to the analysis, rather than vice versa. Scholars who argue that “failed state” is a meaningful category and/or indicative of threat provide a rationale for American interventionism around the globe. Given the arbitrary creation of the category “failed state” and the extravagant claims about its significance, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that research on failed states constitutes, as one analyst put it, “an eminently political discourse, counseling intervention, trusteeship, and the abandonment of the state form for wide swaths of the globe.”⁵³

The policy proposals offered by state failure theorists certainly meet this description. In 2003 retired diplomats James Hooper and Paul Williams argued for what they called “earned sovereignty”—the idea being that target states would need to climb back into the good graces of the intervening power to regain their sovereignty. In some cases, this would mean that domestic governments would perform whatever functions were allowed by the intervener, but other duties would be retained by the outside actor. “The element of shared sovereignty is quite flexible . . . as well as the time frame of shared sovereignty. . . . In some instances, it may be indefinite and subject to the fulfillment of certain conditions as opposed to specified timelines.”⁵⁴ The premise seems to be that countries will be returned to the control of their indigenous populations when the intervener decides it is appropriate.

James Fearon and David Laitin, both political science professors at Stanford University, promote a new doctrine that “may be described as neo-trusteeship, or more provocatively, postmodern imperialism.”⁵⁵ As they see it, this policy should not carry the stigma of nineteenth- or twentieth-century imperialism. “[W]e are not advocating or endorsing imperialism with the connotation of exploitation and permanent rule by foreigners.”

On the contrary, Fearon and Laitin explain, "Postmodern imperialism may have exploitative aspects, but these are to be condemned."⁵⁶

While perhaps not intentionally exploitative, postmodern imperialism certainly does appear to entail protracted and quasi-permanent rule by foreigners. Fearon and Laitin admit that in postmodern imperialism, "the search for an exit strategy is delusional, if this means a plan under which full control of domestic security is to be handed back to local authorities by a certain date in the near future."⁵⁷ To the contrary: "for some cases complete exit by the interveners may never be possible"; rather, the end-game is "to make the national level of government irrelevant for people in comparison to the local and supranational levels."⁵⁸ Thus, in Fearon and Laitin's model, *nation building* may not be an appropriate term; their ideas would more accurately be described as nation ending, replacing national governments with a supranational governing order.

Stephen D. Krasner, director of the State Department's policy planning staff under George W. Bush and a leading advocate of focusing the department increasingly on state building, believes that the "rules of conventional sovereignty . . . no longer work, and their inadequacies have had deleterious consequences for the strong as well as the weak."⁵⁹

Krasner concludes that to resolve this dilemma, "Alternative institutional arrangements supported by external actors, such as de facto trusteeships and shared sovereignty, should be added to the list of policy options."⁶⁰ He is explicit about the implications of those policies and admits that in a trusteeship, international actors would remain in control indefinitely. The intervening power would maintain the prerogative of revoking the target's sovereignty and should make no assumptions of withdrawal in the short or medium term.⁶¹

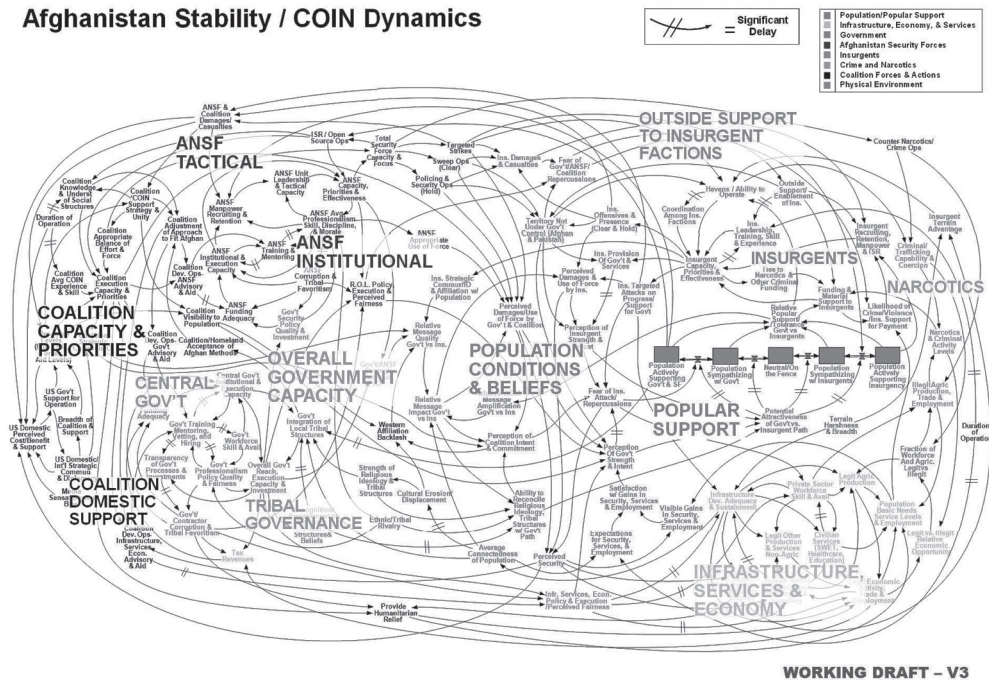
Krasner's candor about the implications of his policy views, however, was not equaled by a willingness to label them accurately. "For policy purposes, it would be best to refer to shared sovereignty as 'partnerships.' This would more easily let policymakers engage in organized hypocrisy, that is, saying one thing and doing another. . . . Shared sovereignty or partnerships would make no claim to being an explicit alternative to conventional sovereignty. It would allow actors to obfuscate the fact that their behavior would be inconsistent with their principles."⁶²

Development experts with an interest in state failure agree that seizing political control of weak states is the answer. Paul Collier, for example, writes that outside powers should take on the responsibility of providing

public goods in failed states, including security guarantees to indigenous governments that pass Western democracy tests, and the removal of guarantees coupled with the encouragement of coups against governments that fail such tests.⁶³

In part, these sweeping admonitions to simply seize politico-military control of the countries in question result from the failure to determine which of the “failedness” indicators should be addressed first or whether there is any order at all. While some studies have proposed hierarchies of objectives, starting with security and ending with development,⁶⁴ it is clear that for many analysts, the causal arrows zigzag across the diagram. Each metric is tangled up with others, forcing those arguing for intervention to advocate simultaneous execution of a number of extraordinarily ambitious tasks. David Kilcullen lists “cueing and synchronization of development, governance, and security efforts, building them in a simultaneous, coordinated way that supports the political strategy” as only one of eight “best practices” for counterinsurgents.⁶⁵ In Afghanistan, the flow chart of the December 2009 strategy seeking to repair that state looked more like a parody:⁶⁶

Afghanistan Stability / COIN Dynamics



Discussing this dilemma of interlocking objectives in the context of Afghanistan, Rory Stewart remarks that:

Policymakers perceive Afghanistan through the categories of counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency, state-building and economic development. These categories are so closely linked that you can put them in almost any sequence or combination. You need to defeat the Taliban in order to build a state and you need to build a state in order to defeat the Taliban. There cannot be security without development, or development without security. If you have the Taliban you have terrorists, if you don't have development you have terrorists, and as Obama informed the *New Yorker*, "If you have ungoverned spaces, they become havens for terrorists."⁶⁷

Not only do all bad things go together in these analyses, but it also becomes difficult if not impossible to discern which objective should be the primary focus of state-building efforts. Similarly, on the issue of state building and democracy, Francis Fukuyama informs readers that "before you can have a democracy, you must have a state, but to have a legitimate and therefore durable state you must have democracy." Acknowledging the circularity of this argument, Fukuyama offered only the rather unsatisfying concession that the two ends "are intertwined, but the precise sequencing of how and when to build the distinct but interlocking institutions needs very careful thought."⁶⁸ This is a platitude and should be cold comfort to policymakers who are being urged forward by the same experts to perform these ambitious tasks.

The High Costs of Targeting State Failure

We have argued that the "failed state" category is a vacuous construct and that the countries frequently referred to as failed states are not inherently threatening. For those whom we have not convinced, however, we now examine the historical record and attempt to examine the costs of a national security policy that placed a high priority on attempting to fix failed states. It is of course impossible to determine the precise cost of any mission beforehand. Historically, however, such operations have been extremely costly and difficult.

In a study for the RAND Corporation, James Dobbins and his co-authors attempt to draft a rule-of-thumb measure for the costs of nation building in a hypothetical scenario involving a country of five million people and \$500 per capita GDP.⁶⁹ For less ambitious "peacekeeping" missions, they calculate the need for 1.6 foreign troops and 0.2 foreign police per 1,000 population, and \$1.5 billion per year. In the more ambitious

“peace enforcement” scenarios, they figure 13 foreign troops and 1.6 foreign police per 1,000 population, and \$15.6 billion per year.⁷⁰

Curiously, though, Dobbins et al. approach this problem by deriving average figures from eight historical nation building (“peace enforcement”) missions, five of which they had coded in a previous study to indicate whether or not they had been successful. One of these (Japan) they coded as “very successful,” two (Somalia and Haiti) were “not successful,” one (Bosnia) was a “mixed” result, and one (Kosovo) was a “modest success.”⁷¹ The authors then simply averaged the costs of these missions and deemed the resulting figures to be a rule of thumb.⁷² It is unclear why future missions should be based on historical experience when the historical examples used to derive the figures produced successes, failures, and results in between.

Our methodological criticism notwithstanding, even taking Dobbins et al. on their own terms reveals how remarkably costly it is to attempt to fix failed states. Using the model laid out in Dobbins et al., we calculated the cost of nation building in three countries: Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan. A peace enforcement mission in Yemen would cost roughly \$78 billion the first year, whereas a peacekeeping mission would cost roughly \$12 billion the first year. Similar missions in Somalia, with a smaller population and a smaller per capita GDP, would only cost around \$30 billion and \$3 billion, respectively.⁷³

In the case of a larger country, like Pakistan, the costs would be significantly higher. A peace enforcement operation in Pakistan would cost approximately \$582 billion the first year, while a peacekeeping operation would cost around \$81 billion. In all these examples, the peace enforcement numbers contain very high military costs. According to Dobbins’ model, a peace enforcement operation in Pakistan would require more than two million international soldiers, costing about \$200,000 each.⁷⁴

Analysts Frederick Kagan and Michael O’Hanlon suggest that even for the minimal task of trying to tip the balance of an intra-Pakistani conflict, the “international community” would need to contribute between 100,000 and 200,000 troops (only 50,000–100,000 of whom would be US, they suggest), and this represents “the best of all the worst-case scenarios.”⁷⁵ As quickly becomes clear, intervening in any of the frequently mentioned failed states implies significant costs.

As Kilcullen observes in the context of counterinsurgency, a corps of state builders should be available to stay in the country indefinitely. He proposes that “key personnel (commanders, ambassadors, political staffs,

aid mission chiefs, key advisers, and intelligence officers) in a counter-insurgency campaign should be there ‘for the duration’.”⁷⁶ But it is unlikely that Western governments possess large pools of workers willing and well-equipped to deploy to Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or Haiti “for the duration.” Western civil services—and even most, if not all, Western militaries—are not comprised of a separate class of citizens who live their lives in far-flung locales, away from family and country, indefinitely. It is for this reason that, in addition to the structural changes highlighted above, a number of policy reports have called for radical overhauls of the national security establishment in the United States so that it can be better tailored to repair failed states.⁷⁷

Failed Thinking, Not Failed States

From new military doctrines and budget priorities, to state-building offices in the State Department, to the myriad proposals for transforming the entire US national security establishment, a long-term strategy of fixing failed states would entail dramatic change and high costs. More appropriate—and far less costly—than such dramatic changes would be a fundamental rethinking of the role of nation building and the relevance of state failure to national security planning. However, this does not appear likely. Thrust forward by the claims of threat, but unequipped with the expensive tools necessary for the task, policymakers look likely to persist in the failed approach to the subject that they have applied in recent years. If we intend to seriously embark on a plan to build nations, we must be prepared to bear heavy costs in time, money, and lives—or we must be prepared to fail.

Moreover, no matter how evenhanded the United States may attempt to be, if US personnel are on the ground in dangerous parts of the world, Americans could be forced to choose sides in other countries’ internal conflicts, and the nation could become entangled militarily when its vital interests are not at stake.⁷⁸ For instance, if our nation builders are killed in the line of duty, will there be a US military response? It seems likely that Congress and the American people would demand military retaliation, and at that point, the United States could find itself facing a choice of either a spiraling military escalation (as in Vietnam) or a humiliating retreat (as in Somalia). Both of those prospects are troubling but may emerge if policymakers pursue a strategy of fixing failed states without broad public support.

The essence of strategy is effectively balancing ends, ways, and means. Squandering scarce resources on threats that exist primarily in the minds of policymakers is one indication that, as Richard Betts has pointed out, “US policymakers have lost the ability to think clearly about defense policy.”⁷⁹ The entire concept of state failure is flawed. The countries that appear on the various lists of failed states reveal that state failure almost never produces meaningful threats to US national security. Further, attempting to remedy state failure—that is, embarking on an ambitious project of nation or state building—would be extremely costly and of dubious utility. Given these connected realities, policymakers would be wise to cast off the entire concept of state failure and to evaluate potential threats to US national security with a much more critical eye. **SSQ**

Notes

1. A very limited survey includes Gerald B. Helman and Steven R. Ratner, “Saving Failed States,” *Foreign Policy* 89 (Winter 1992/93): 3–20; Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror* (Cambridge, MA: World Peace Foundation, 2003); Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Neotrusteeship and the Problem of Weak States,” *International Security* 28, no. 4 (2004): 5–43; Stephen D. Krasner and Carlos Pascual, “Addressing State Failure,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 4 (July/August 2005): 153–63; Brent Scowcroft and Samuel R. Berger, “In the Wake of War: Getting Serious about Nation-Building,” *National Interest* (Fall 2005): 49–53; Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and John E. Herbst, “Addressing the Problem of Failed States: A New Instrument,” *Prism* 1, no. 1 (December 2009): 21–26.

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3. John S. Galbraith, “The ‘Turbulent Frontier’ as a Factor in British Expansion,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2, no. 2 (January 1960): 150–68.

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5. Quoted in Fred Kaplan, “Powell Says Cuts Can Be Made: Head of Joint Chiefs Says U.S. Is ‘Running Out of Demons’,” *Boston Globe*, 9 April 1991.

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11. Timothy E. Wirth, testimony before the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations of the Senate Committee on Appropriations, 8 March 1994.

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14. "2nd Presidential Debate between Gov. Bush and Vice President Gore," *New York Times*, 12 October 2000, 22.
15. Quoted in Michael R. Gordon, "Bush Would Stop U.S. Peacekeeping in Balkan Fights," *New York Times*, 21 October 2000, 1A.
16. George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: White House, 17 September 2002), 21, 31, 1. The 2005 *National Intelligence Strategy* asserted that "the lack of freedom in one state endangers the peace and freedom of others, and . . . failed states are a refuge and breeding ground of terrorism." Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *The National Intelligence Strategy of the United States of America*, October 2005, <http://www.dni.gov/NISOctober2005.pdf>. The 2009 "whole-of-government" counterinsurgency manual claims that state failure ultimately represents "a threat to global security." See United States Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative, *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*, January 2009, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/119629.pdf>.
17. For a useful discussion of the relationship of liberalism and Wilsonianism to contemporary American strategy, see Michael C. Desch, "America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/08): 7–43.
18. Lawrence J. Korb and Robert O. Boorstin, *Integrated Power: A National Security Strategy for the 21st Century* (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2005), 7.
19. Francis Fukuyama, comment on Center for Global Development task force's report, *On the Brink: Weak States and US National Security*, http://www.cgdev.org/section/initiatives/_archive/weakstates. For similar claims, see also *Play to Win: Final Report of the bi-partisan Commission on Post-Conflict Reconstruction* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies/Association of the US Army, January 2003), 6, accessible from <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900SID/LGEL-5JVD76?OpenDocument>.
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26. Richard Lugar, Statement at Hearing on the Stabilization and Reconstruction Civilian Management Act before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 3 March 2004.
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28. Nina M. Serafino and Martin A. Weiss, "Peacekeeping and Conflict Transitions: Background and Congressional Action on Civilian Capabilities," CRS Report for Congress, Order Code RL32862, 13 April 2005, 5.
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36. Spencer Ackerman, "Iraq Reconstruction Inspector General Urges Office to Report to State, Defense," *Washington Independent*, 3 November 2009.
37. The discussion of military doctrine draws on Justin Logan and Christopher Preble, "Fixing Failed States: A Dissenting View," in *The Handbook on the Political Economy of War*, eds. Christopher J. Coyne and Rachel Mathers (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, forthcoming).
38. Colin H. Kahl, "COIN of the Realm: Is There a Future for Counterinsurgency?" *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 6 (November/December 2007): 169–76.
39. Stathis N. Kalyvas, "The New U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual as Political Science and Political Praxis," *Perspectives on Politics* 6, no. 2 (2008): 351–53.
40. Lt Gen William B. Caldwell IV, "Foreword," in Department of the Army, FM 3-07, *Stability Operations*, October 2008.
41. FM 3-07, *Stability Operations*, October 2008, vi.
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44. Eliot Cohen, Conrad Crane, Jan Horvath, and John Nagl, "Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* (March/April 2006): 49–53.
45. DoD Instruction 3000.05, 28 November 2005, <http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/300005p.pdf>.
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48. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *State Failure Task Force Report: Phase III Findings*, 30 September 2000, <http://globalpolicy.gmu.edu/pitf/SFTF%20Phase%20III%20Report%20Final.pdf>; Department for International Development, "Why We Need to Work More Effectively in Fragile States," January 2005, <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications/fragilestates-paper.pdf>; and "The Failed States Index," *Foreign Policy* 173 (July/August 2009): 80–93.
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50. Charles Call, "The Fallacy of the 'Failed State,'" paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, San Diego, California, 22 March 2006. One of the principal authors of the index persists in using the term, still without a clear definition. See Jack A. Goldstone, "Pathways to State Failure," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 25, no. 4 (2008): 285–96.

51. See, for example, the remarks of John Herbst in Jessica Wanke, "U.S. Civilians Recruited to Help Troubled Nations," National Public Radio, 31 July 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=92752144>. More recently, a report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee noted that "several high ranking U.S. intelligence and defense officials suggested that Yemen was becoming a failed state and consequently a more important theater for U.S. counterterrorism operations. In February 2009, CIA Director Leon Panetta said he was 'particularly concerned with Somalia and Yemen. Somalia is a failed state. Yemen is almost there. And our concern is that both could become safe havens for Al Qaeda.'" See "Al Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia: A Ticking Time Bomb," *A Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations*, US Senate, 111th Congress, 2nd sess., 21 January 2010, 10, <http://foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Yemen.pdf>.

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53. Alex Gourevitch, "The Myth of the Failed State," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, 3 March 2005.

54. James R. Hooper and Paul R. Williams, "Earned Sovereignty: The Political Dimension," *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy* 31, no. 3 (June 2003): 364.

55. Fearon and Laitin, "Neotrusteeship and the Problem of Weak States," 7.

56. *Ibid.*, 12, n. 19.

57. *Ibid.*, 36.

58. *Ibid.*, 40.

59. Stephen D. Krasner, "Sharing Sovereignty: New Institutions for Collapsed and Failing States," *International Security* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 85.

60. *Ibid.*, 86.

61. *Ibid.*, 119.

62. *Ibid.*, 108. See also Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

63. Paul Collier, "Development in Dangerous Places," *Boston Review*, July/August 2009.

64. James Dobbins et al., *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007): 14–15.

65. David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 265. While there are distinctions between population-centric counterinsurgency missions and stabilization and reconstruction missions, we consider the two tasks as points on a spectrum rather than discrete categories.

66. JCS chart posted online by Richard Engel, "So What Is the Actual Surge Strategy?" *MSNBC.com*, 2 December 2009, <http://worldblog.msnbc.msn.com/archive/2009/12/02/2140281.aspx>.

67. Rory Stewart, "The Irresistible Illusion," *London Review of Books* 31, no. 13 (2009), http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n13/stew01_.html.

68. Francis Fukuyama, "'Stateness' First," *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 1 (2005): 88.

69. Dobbins et al., *Beginners Guide to Nation-Building*, 255–59.

70. *Ibid.*, 256–57.

71. James Dobbins et al., *America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2003), xx–xxi.

72. In Dobbins et al. (2007), the authors repeatedly refer to nation-building *success* but do not define the term. In the 2003 monograph, *success* is defined as "the ability to promote an enduring transfer of democratic institutions," which would seem both quite narrow and to conflate nation building with forced democratization. See *ibid.*, 2.

73. The calculations are based on population and per capita GDP numbers from the *CIA World Factbook*. Figures are rounded to nearest billion. There were slight inconsistencies between the equations presented in some of the chapters of Dobbins et al. and the final example given in

the conclusion. However, these did not significantly affect the calculated costs of the examples given here.

74. Dobbins et al. note in the context of Pakistan that “Considerations of scale . . . suggest that the transformational objectives of interventions in larger societies should be sharply restrained to account for the relatively much more modest resources likely to be available for their achievement.” Dobbins et al., *Beginner’s Guide*, 258.

75. Frederick Kagan and Michael O’Hanlon, “The Case for Larger Ground Forces,” in *Bridging the Foreign Policy Divide*, eds. Derek Chollet, Tod Lindberg, and David Shorr (New York: Routledge, 2008), 71.

76. Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerilla*, 266.

77. An incomplete list includes Clark Murdock et al., *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: U.S. Government and Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era, Phase 1 Report* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2004); Clark Murdock and Michèle Flournoy et al., *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: U.S. Government and Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era, Phase 2 Report* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2005); Defense Science Board *2004 Summer Study on Transition to and From Hostilities* (Washington: Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, 2004); Neyla Arnas, Charles Barry, and Robert B. Oakley, *Harnessing the Interagency for Complex Contingency Operations* (Washington: Center for Technology and National Security Policy, National Defense University, August 2005); Martin Gorman and Alexander Krongard, “A Goldwater-Nichols Act for the U.S. Government: Institutionalizing the Interagency Process,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 39 (October 2005), 51–58; Christopher M. Schnaubelt “After the Fight: Interagency Operations,” *Parameters* 35, no. 4 (Winter 2005/2006), 47–61; Michèle Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, “In Search of Harmony: Orchestrating ‘The Interagency for the Long War,’” *Armed Forces Journal*, no. 37 (July 2006), 36–39; Steward Patrick and Kaysie Brown, *Greater than the Sum of Its Parts: Assessing “Whole of Government” Approaches to Fragile States* (New York: International Peace Academy, 2007); Greg Kaufmann, ed., *Stability Operations and State-Building: Continuities and Contingencies* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2008); and Hans Binnendijk and Patrick M. Cronin, eds., *Civilian Surge: Key to Complex Operations* (Washington: Center of Technology and National Security Policy, National Defense University, 2009).

78. Richard K. Betts, “The Delusion of Impartial Intervention,” *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 6 (November/December 1994): 20–33. See also Christopher Preble, *The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 129–31.

79. Richard K. Betts, “A Disciplined Defense,” *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 6 (November/December 2007): 68.