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Afghanistan, Iraq & Self-Inflicted Wounds

The Strategic Lessons of Armed Nation Building

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*Small boys throw stones at frogs in jest.
But, the frogs do not die in jest. The
frogs die in earnest.*

Pliny the Elder

Iraq, Afghanistan, and Self-inflicted Wounds

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There has been a great deal of debate about the lessons that should be drawn from Iraq and Afghanistan regarding counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. The attached briefing suggests that the real lessons are far more complex. It suggests that many of the failures in the US approach to both wars came from the fact that the US and its allies approached them as exercises in counterterrorism or defeating a conventional enemy, and failed to properly assess the costs and risks of what were really exercises in armed nation building.

The US not only was unprepared for the aftermath of its initial military intervention, it lacked the tools and skill sets to understand the sheer scale of the effort required, how long a successful intervention would take, and the level of resources that would be required. The Bush Administration mixed an ideological fantasy about the ease with which democratic states could be created with denial of the problems and complexities that emerged once it intervened. The US military not only were unprepared for counterinsurgency, they lacked the civil-military capabilities to support the kind of nation-building efforts required to give victories in counterinsurgency meaning. The State Department and civil agencies that should have been partners to the military were totally unprepared to support nation building of the scale required and to do so in a conflict environment.

The result has been a set of self-inflicted wounds where the US and its allies have been far too slow to understand the level of effort needed to achieve any meaningful degree of security and stability, have been slow to adapt its military tactics to the level of civil conflicts in both nations, have been unprepared to deal with the realities of creating effective governance, and have squandered much of the money they provided in economic aid.

One key lesson of these self-inflicted wounds is that there is a fundamental difference between counterterrorism and counterinsurgency and the realities of armed nation building. One is the sheer scale of the effort required to simultaneously reshape a political and economic system while fighting a conflict. Another is the fact that the US and its allies will often be perceived as invaders and outsiders, not liberators, and be unable to deal with the ideological issues and local politics involved. Success or failure will ultimately depend on local partners for governance, for security forces, and for any form of political or ideological victory. It will also depend on the degree to which the US and its allies realize the Western values are not universal, that progress will be slow and

limited, and the outcome will have little to do with how democratic the host government will be and depend largely on the quality of governance and services in the field, and particularly in high-risk, high conflict areas.

This raises serious questions about US ability to engage in large-scale armed nation building. The US needs to make far more careful strategic choices between invasion and/or active support of a host government, and efforts to contain a security problem by strengthening neighboring states and the threat within a nation involved.

The US may have to act in some contingencies, and may well have to engage in armed nation building in the future. This briefing suggests that if this is the case, it must never again repeat the massive grand-strategic and strategic failures of the Bush Administration, which has repeated many of the mistakes of the Johnson Administration, and which already seems to rival it as the worst wartime presidency in American history. Any future intervention must recognize from the start the scale of the challenges and risks involved in armed nation building. It must admit the level of resources and time that will probably be required, and it must build on local values and capabilities.

The US will also have to build a level of competence it simply does not have today. Good intentions have never been a substitute for competence, and half-measures have never been a substitute for adequate resources in terms of men, money, and time. The US military will not only have to adapt fully to the challenges of counterinsurgency, it will have to create the capability to carry out active security missions for aid and governance efforts, create the capacity to support embedded aid efforts, and provide soldiers as a substitute for the near certain continued failure of the State Department and civil agencies to develop the skill sets required for many aspects of armed nation building.

The State Department and civil agencies must also at least try to develop the capabilities they now lack and to become better partners to the military and the host country involved. Like Vietnam and Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan show that the US cannot choose between “hard” and “soft” power when a conflict escalates to the level of armed nation building, or delay the civil effort until some form of military victory is won. It also cannot talk vacuously about “smart” power when the experience and operational capabilities required do not exist, and the State Department and civil agencies lack the operational experience and organizational capabilities to act efficiently.

Nothing about the US aid effort in either Iraq or Afghanistan to date shows that the State Department and civil agencies have adapted to the realities of armed nation building or can actually exercise anything approaching “smart” power. Far too many activities ignored

the nature of the fighting and internal struggles and civil tensions. Far too much of the aid effort is still conducted on the basis of peacetime priorities rather than the need to bring stability and security in the midst of war.

A bureaucratic “edifice” complex wastes vast amounts of money on major projects or super-embassies. There are far too few meaningful public measures of effectiveness, no efforts to relate civil efforts to military progress in the field, and a focus on national elections and US concepts of the rule of law as the expense of trying to create effective governance and services at the local level on anything like the scale required. While it is easy to talk about “transforming” this structure, the real world probabilities of being able to add the required level of “smart” to power within the State Department and civil agencies are probably vanishingly low.

This means success in politics, governance, and economics will depend -- for good or bad --largely on host country leaders at the national, regional, and local level. This means, in turn, that progress will driven and limited by the same mix of sectarian, ethnic, tribal, and religious tensions and pressures that help create the insurgencies, civil conflicts, and nation building problems the US seeks to solve.

Understanding these realities should be critical to both the initial decision to engage in armed nation building, and to the way the US proceeds in actually carrying out armed nation building *if* it takes that decision. The self-inflicted wounds of Iraq and Afghanistan are a warning that future US plans for stability, security, and nation building operation must be suitably limited and grimly realistic.

The limits to US capabilities will continue to be so severe that the US must plan from the start to rely on host country and local elements, rather than US dominated efforts. US goals must accept the fact that the end result will often fall far short of what the US would like to achieve. US risk assessments and operational plans must also be based on the reality that the US military may not continue to improve its capabilities once the current pressure from Iraq and Afghanistan is eased, and that the State Department and civil agencies will probably only be able to do their present “thing” with limited improvements in capability.

Recognizing the True Nature of the Wars We Are Fighting

- Not a war on terrorism, but ideological religious struggle that varies sharply by movement and country.
- Not a “clash between civilizations,” but struggle within Islam and Arab world that spill over into the West.
- Driven by failed governance, sectarian and ethnic differences, demographics, globalization, hyperurbanization, poorly distributed income, host of other factors.
- Still one billion dire poor by 2050.
- World in which US status as “superpower” or “unipolar world” never existed, and in which alliances, friends, correct relations as critical as ever.
- Cannot stop multipolar world from emerging: Arguably, China, EU already geoeconomic “poles.”
- *War of ideologies, national development, and alliances -- often coupled to armed nation building, not a war on terrorism or counterinsurgency*

Key Self-Inflicted Wounds

- **Try to fight the war we want, rather than the war we face**
- **Try to fight long asymmetric struggles with short term, partial and inadequate solutions.**
- **Underestimate risks, exaggerate benefits,**
- **Undervalue options like diplomacy, containment, deterrence.**
- **No real strategy for conflict termination and grand strategy**
- **Deny the scale and nature of civil tensions and conflict: Sectarian, ethnic, tribal, economic, and governance.**
- **Confuse counterinsurgency with stability operations and armed nation building.**
- **Ethnocentricity: “Democracy” versus governance and local culture, and values.**
- **Underestimate the resources required and under-react as crisis or conflict develops.**
- **Deny the seriousness of the situation as it develops to own legislature, people, and ourselves.**

Different Fights, Different Responses

- Reinforce success with aid, encouragement of reform, counterterrorism support, and military assistance.
- Build up allies to prevent spread of threats.
- Use diplomacy, incentives/disincentives, with states that are more neutral or merely friendly.
- Contain and isolate states that do not present true strategic threats; rely on collective diplomacy and regional allies.
- Attack non-state actors according to the importance and nature of the threat.
- Engage in “failed” or “broken” states only when absolutely must.
- *Create strong country teams to create effective national responses in most cases; one size will not fit all.*
- *Counterinsurgency advisory efforts linked to overall nation-building strategy.*

The Normal (Desirable Case) Fight

- Work with global and regional allies; strengthen local partner in counterterrorism capability.
- *This is the real world case in some 60 countries where Islamist extremists operate.*
- *Can reinforce local success or develop local capability at limited cost and risk.*
- Threats are largely non-state actors extreme enough to gain only limited local support. Ideological, religious, political, and cultural aspects of struggle largely managed by local allies/friends
- Do not need to engage with large-scale US deployments: Provide aid, advisors, intelligence, weapons and technology.
- Need for local reform limited. Burden of aiding governance, economy, human rights, rule of law and other reforms is limited, and can work with local governments and reformers at pace acceptable to them
- Can contain transnational flow of infiltrators, arms & explosives, money to reasonable levels.
- Limited or no resistance to US aid and support at local, regional, and international level.

The Key Test: “Failed” or “Broken” States

- **Worst cases: Key issue is whether to engage at all.**
- **If do engage, governance, economics, ideology, internal factions, will always be as important as security and counterinsurgency.**
- **Preventing, limiting, or ending civil conflict will normally be more important than counterinsurgency.**
- *No point in “winning” if cannot “hold” and “build.”*
- *Security goes far beyond counterinsurgency: Civil conflict, crime, personal security, economic hope.*
- **Winning requires an effective civil-military team, adequate resources, adequate time, and the ability to at least create an adequate national partner.**
- **High risk even if do it right; must never engage unless must.**
- **If do engage, must engage fully.**

Key Recent “Failed”/“Broken” State Cases

- Vietnam
- Lebanon
- Haiti
- Somalia
- Bosnia & Kosovo
- **Afghanistan (and Pakistan)**
- **Iraq**
- **And over the next two decades?**

What We Must Do to Win

- Fully commit to stability operations and nation-building or to accepting the consequences.
- Plan and resource for long, uncertain, complex, and high resource struggles from the start.
- Accept time frames of 5-15 years and plan and resource accordingly.
- Give governance, economics, ideology, internal factions, and broad security equal priority to counterinsurgency.
- Accept the reality that democracy, “instant change” and efforts to institutionalize US values will generally fail and be self-defeating.
- Do not fall in love with the mission, counterinsurgency.
- Do not lie to ourselves, Legislature, and people.
- Develop meaningful metrics of success; make transparent.
- Never promise success; prepare for failure from the start and accept it if it occurs.

The “War Plan” is Only a Prelude to Stability Operations & Nation Building

- Do not fight on the basis of ideological concepts, advice of exiles, or “triumph of hope over experience.”
- Create *integrated* operational concepts and plans for 5, 10, and 15 years of engagement. Be willing to fully fund or do not start.
- Prepare, staff, and deploy aid efforts in governance, economics, ideology, internal factions, and broad security to accompany advance or counterinsurgency.
- Focus on preserving or creating immediate stability; go to mid and long term development only when ready
- Making it “our war” is generally a prelude to defeat:
 - *Minimize outside role in every possible way; let local leaders, voices, actors play maximum role from start.*
 - *Let local population set goals, define “victory” and “success.”*

The “Whack a Mole” Syndrome

*“Win, Hold, Build” versus “Attrit,
Disperse, Leave”*

Wars for Control of Political, Ideological, and Economic Space

- Conflict is only one element of a much broader struggle for power.
- Fight is for factional and ideological dominance and control of region.
- As in Vietnam, tactical victory can easily become irrelevant.
 - Engage forward or don't engage.
 - Embed and partner, don't "occupy"
 - Never try to win where you and/or local ally cannot hold.
 - Must have governance, rule of law, economy.
 - Western style police forces cannot work; local security forces can.
 - Don't put bullets where you can't put dollars.
- Recognize are long wars of attrition, and those who live there do not leave.

Counterinsurgency/Counterterrorism are Only One Element of Success

- **The US effort must look far beyond warfighting against insurgents:**
 - *Only national forces can “win” and “hold” on lasting basis.*
 - *Police, paramilitary forces, and/or local security forces will be as critical from the start as local military forces.*
 - *Effective courts, crime fighting, and anti-corruption campaigns are also critical.*
 - *The local government, US aid workers, or both must offer key services and economic aid and opportunity.*
- **Offer embeds, partner units, local security, and aid workers. Training will never be enough.**
- **Preventing or ending civil conflict will often be equally or more critical than counterinsurgency.**
- **Proper treatment of coalition allies as partners is critical.**
- **Regional actors must be negotiated with; treated as critical element, even if critical or hostile.**

Adequate Forces or Do Not Engage

- **“Force multipliers” aren’t.**
- **Technology and tactics are important but are no substitute for adequate force numbers and manpower.**
- **There is no center of gravity: “kicking a sponge to death underwater.”**
- **Boots on the ground are no substitute for brains above the boots.**
- **All successes are ultimately regional and local.**
- **High technology netcentric warfare cannot defeat informal distributed networks without victory at the political as well as military level.**
- **“Effects based operations” are shaped by political as well as military impact: Civilian perceptions, casualties, security, and collateral damage critical.**
- **IS&R and precision weapons must be coupled with HUMINT.**

“Victory” Will Always be Relative

- **The metric is who controls population in terms of politics, governance, ideology, economy, day-to-day security, in given amounts of space -- not the tactical situation.**
- *Nothing is “won” or secure where cannot go unarmed or at night.*
- *Suppressing and dispersing serve no purpose unless followed by security, stability, popular support.*
- *Violent factional and ideological elements may survive for years if not indefinitely.*
- *“Broken” and “failed “ states take 10-15 years to fix.*
- *50% recidivist result even in UN peacekeeping missions after 5 years.*

*Ordinary people do not live in the
dawn of tomorrow, they live in the
noon of today.*

Key Real World Priorities for Reform

- **Accept the near-term primacy of the need to counter religious extremism; defeat hard core violent movements.**
- ***Only Arabs ultimately can win against Arabs;***
- ***Only Islam can defeat Islamic extremism.***
- **Do act to strengthen security, government services, basic economic status at the local level, particularly in high threat areas.**
- ***Focus on governance, and government presence and services, at local level.***
- ***Use aid to minimize support for extremist and insurgents, and differences by sect, ethnicity, tribe, or faction.***
- ***Make maximum use of local officials, contractors, leaders; Do not impose US standards or values.***
- **Work for longer term aid and development with strong US Embassy country teams that tailor program to country; work at pace local governments and local reformers can absorb and support.**
- **Do not give primacy to politics and democracy; treat human rights, economic development, governance, rule of law as equal priorities and pursue longer term reforms on the basis of local priorities and values.**

Governance is Critical: “Democracy” is Just a Four Letter Word

- Legitimacy is the quality of governance perceived by local factions and individuals, not how governments are chosen.
- *Can take years to create effective leaders, political parties, rule of law, checks and balances.*
- *Voting by sect, ethnicity, tribe, or faction normally makes things worse, not better.*
- *People will accept weak or failed politics, not failed governance. Keep competence in office.*
- Creating effective central, regional, and local government is key, and local government may be easiest and most important.
- Security, services, fairness, and equity are **all** critical.
- All key factions must be given hope and opportunity as soon as possible.

Aid: Dollars are As Important as Bullets

- **Need civilian partners and expertise, and aid funds.**
- **Scale of effort must suit wartime needs in dollars and time.**
- **Must provide security and embed with military. Must be able to operate even in most hostile areas.**
- **Focus and priority must be security and stability and not development until security and stability exist.**
- **Impact must be timed to deal with conflict priorities.**
- **“Feel good” and BAU efforts waste money & lives.**
- **Aid efforts must be unified internally and integrated with military operations and plans.**

Only Local Allies Can Win Hearts and Minds, Achieve Information Dominance

- The US can do much to justify its own position and actions, but cannot win at a broader level.
- The host country and regional actors will dominate the information battle and war of perceptions:
 - *The US and UK will never be Muslim states or be able to deal with underlying religious issues.*
 - *The nations in the Long War have their own cultural, social, and political values and they are not American.*
 - *Western forces and spokesman will always be seen as outsiders, if not imperialists and occupiers.*
 - *The credibility of what local governments and security forces say, not Americans, is critical to popular support.*
 - *Local conciliation and compromise are the key to sectarian, ethnic, and other factional issues.*

*Enemies become superfluous after
enough self-inflicted wounds*

Self-Inflicted Wounds in Seeking “Information Dominance”

- Impossible demands and expectations.
- Unkept promises. Exaggerated reports of progress.
- Lack of local government follow-up.
- Tactical operations that alienate the population; Bull in the China Shop
- Disregard/lack of language and culture experience.
- “Christian” and “secular” force.
- Detainments.
- Collateral damage.
- Civilian casualties.
- Worst case incidents dominate; strategic corporal.
- Conspiracy theories. Desire to export the blame.
- Primacy of local and regional media.
- PAO=Pangloss
- Ties to Israel.
- *Life is not fair, but it is real.*

Fix Flawed National Security and Alliance Structures

- Unified civil-military leadership in Washington and field with key lines of authority.
- Military must adapt to stability operations and nation building:
 - *Area specialists and language skills.*
 - *Civil military elements and military police.*
 - *Trainers, embeds, partner units.*
 - *Security for US civilians and aid efforts.*
- Civilian departments and agencies must accept full role as part of team. Create reserves and pools of experts.
- Long tours for key military and civilians.
- Minimize reliance on US and outside contractors; maximize use of locals at national, regional, and local levels.

Resources Must Be Adequate

- Realistic, long-term manpower and funding plans, not early force cuts and phony FYDPs with improvised supplementals.
- Adequate active and reserve end strength to provide years of effort with reasonable rotations.
- Aid in governance, security forces, and economic aid must be adequate, prompt, and responsive. *Dollars must match bullets.*
- Legislatures must be fully prepared and informed, people made aware of risks and asked to make sacrifices.
- Civilian departments and agencies must be funded and staffed, not cannibalized or asked to self-cannibalize.
- Unrealistic dependence on allied or outside military and economic aid is pointless.
- Commit necessary resources to build regional support.

Honest, Transparent Metrics of Success or Failure

- No denial, cheerleading, counterproductive spin.
- Actual allied force capabilities, not “trained and equipped” or “in the lead.”
- Effective national, local, and regional governance, not voting.
- Aid in terms of meeting actual requirements, providing employment and opportunity.
- Security is actual security by region, town, and neighborhood; not battles won or number of killings.
- Report real world progress in conciliation; state of sectarian, ethnic, and factional tension.
- Use polls honestly to measure local and regional attitudes.

Leadership Must be Realistic and Credible

Bush = Johnson

Rumsfeld = McNamara

Cheney & Wolfowitz = Bundy and Rostows

Feith = McNaughton

Franks & Sanchez = Westmorland

Neoconservatives = Neoliberals

Honor, Duty, Country:

The Marine, the Mall, Public Opinion Surveys, and Walter Reed