

THE POST-CONFLICT GAP IN AMERICAN MILITARY STRATEGY

by Roger B. Myerson

Abstract: For an effective deterrent against terrorist attacks, military power must be complemented by some capability for political reconstruction in failed states that could become bases for global terrorism. Democratic state-building has seemed more difficult than imperial conquest because international support reduces national leaders' incentives to negotiate broad political coalitions that include local leaders from every community. A capacity to effectively support democratic state-building can be developed by applying basic lessons from America's own history of decentralized federal democracy.

A vulnerable gap

In recent decades, America's armed forces have prevailed in virtually every kind of military contest into which they have been sent, but in the aftermath of these victories we have repeatedly seen frustrations and failures in the subsequent political reconstruction. From this experience, many have concluded that America should simply avoid any future state-building missions. Presidential candidates who proclaim an urgent need for new investments in American military power have generally avoided even discussing this critical gap in state-building capacity. But a more prudent conclusion may be that America needs to invest in developing better capacity for post-conflict political reconstruction.

It is wishful thinking to plan for conflict only in regions where a suitable government already exists and is ready to take power. Nations do not get to choose what kinds of military challenges they will face. If American ground forces can operate only in countries where a well-organized friendly government is ready to take power, then adversaries in other parts of the world will know that they are beyond America's reach. Hard experience in recent years has shown that areas of ungoverned instability can become sources of global threats.

Some have argued that, if America is attacked by terrorists who are based in an ill-governed region, the response should be a military retaliation which devastates the terrorists' bases but makes no attempt to occupy territory.¹ However, with no attention to post-conflict political reconstruction, such a military retaliation could ultimately enable the surviving terrorist leaders to consolidate power in the region, winning popular support by posing as stalwart defenders against American invasion. Indeed, a basic motivation for terrorist actions can be to provoke such crude military responses that drive people to seek protection from militant leaders.

¹ Such a strategy of retaliation without occupation has been advocated by Anna Simons, Joe McGraw, and Duane Lauchengco in *The Sovereignty Solution* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011). A crucial gap in their argument can be glimpsed on page 132, where they assert that "Americans' hope should be that, in the wake of such devastation, those most capable of asserting authority and taking control will quickly rise to the occasion and then prevail." They fail here to consider the fearful possibility that the terrorists who provoked the American attack could expect to take power after it.

America and its allies now face deadly enemies who believe that they could find greater political opportunities in the chaotic aftermath of an American military intervention. Deterrence fails when adversaries think that they would actually benefit from being attacked. Thus, American military power can fail as a deterrent unless it is matched with some capability to bring order into failed states when they become bases for global terrorist organizations.

The possibility of state-building

A defeatist argument that state-building is impossible has served to keep military-preparedness debates focused on force levels and battlefield weapon systems, which can be more profitable for military contractors. But this argument cannot be right. The military theorist Carl von Clausewitz recognized war as the continuation of political action with other means, and successful military missions have indeed achieved political goals throughout history.

Of course, we may have different political goals today. In past history, wars were regularly fought with the political goal of defending or expanding a government's territorial domain. In recent decades, America and its allies have intervened instead with the professed goal of supporting the establishment of a sovereign democratic state. But if armies throughout history have been able to impose exploitative foreign rule on conquered populations, it would seem that a victorious army today should face less resistance to achieving the more benign goal of establishing an independent popularly elected government.

It is right and appropriate that America should maintain this goal of supporting independent democratic governments in any future military interventions. The alternative, installing neo-colonial authoritarian regimes in the aftermath of American military interventions, would ultimately provoke strong global opposition against America's military superiority. We just need to learn how to do democratic state-building.² To find the key, we must first understand what can make democratic state-building more difficult than imperial conquest.

Local foundations for a political machine

In a classic study of counterinsurgency, David Galula emphasized that the essential goal of counterinsurgency warfare is to build a political machine from the population upward, and he also observed that political machines are generally built on patronage.³ Successful stabilization will depend on the new regime developing a political network that distributes power and

² See also "Standards for state-building interventions" at <http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/std4sb.pdf> or "Rethinking the fundamentals of state-building" at <http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/prism2011.pdf>

³ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: theory and practice* (Praeger, 1964), pp 69, 136.

patronage throughout the nation. As the US Counterinsurgency Field Manual has suggested, winning "hearts and minds" may actually mean convincing people that they will be well rewarded and well protected when they serve as local agents in the regime's political network.⁴

The effectiveness of a government depends, not on its general popularity, but on its ability to command the active efforts of supporters and agents who enforce the government's authority throughout the nation. Against threats from a violent insurgency, the government's active supporters must be motivated by a confidence that their loyal service can indeed earn them long-term rewards and protection from the government.

If a community were occupied by an army that planned to impose permanent imperial rule, then its officers could offer promises of long-term rewards and protection to any local leader who served the new regime. But in a mission of democratic state-building, a popularly elected government is expected to take sovereign power from the occupying army, and so its officers cannot make any long-term promises to local supporters. Such promises can be made only by leaders of the new government.

Thus, if a state-building intervention is to establish a government that can stand on its own, its political leaders must develop networks of supporters that are wide and strong enough to defend the regime against those who would take power from it. If there are communities where the regime lacks any local supporters, then these communities can become a fertile ground for insurgents to begin building a rival system of power with encouragement from disaffected local leaders.

The hard work of negotiating with local activists to build an inclusive national political network can be expensive and tedious for a national leader. If foreign military support could enable a national leader to retain power without making so many promises to recruit supporters in remote communities, the leader might prefer to do so. Thus, foreign support can perversely encourage a national leader to keep the benefits of power narrowly concentrated in a smaller circle of supporters, neglecting remote areas, and such narrowness of support can perpetuate the regime's need for foreign counterinsurgency support. This is the paradox which can make democratic state-building more difficult than imperial conquest.

Encouraging a broad constitutional distribution of power

Once we understand the problem, we can begin to search for a solution. Foreign support

⁴ U.S. Army & Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual FM 3-24* (UChicago Press, 2007), Appendix A-26.

may increase national leaders' desire to concentrate power more narrowly around themselves, but the distribution of power in a democracy can be regulated by constitutional rules. In particular, constitutional provisions that devolve a substantial share of power to locally elected officials of municipal and provincial governments can help to ensure that every part of the country has some popular local leaders who have a real stake of power in the regime.

Thus, a state-building mission can have a greater chance of success if it encourages a federal distribution of power across national and local levels of government, so that the new regime will indeed be a political machine with roots in every community. Too often in recent state-building interventions, however, American policy-makers have instead focused only on supporting and developing the capabilities of the national government from the top down.⁵

In 2002, America supported the creation of a centralized presidential government in Afghanistan, a country which had a long tradition of decentralizing substantial power to traditional tribal leaders. In subsequent years, Americans paid a heavy price to support the regime. When power became concentrated in the capital, there were many rural districts where nobody felt any personal political stake in the government, and so its authority could be maintained only with support from foreign forces. In an account of the struggle for one district in Afghanistan, Carter Malkasian described a successful counterinsurgency strategy in which the essential key was to offer some real authority to selected local leaders.⁶ But with no constitutionally protected autonomy for local governments, such locally negotiated political settlements could be nullified by manipulation in the capital, and hard-won gains were lost.

In Iraq, the counterinsurgency successes in the Sunni-majority provinces after 2006 depended on local leaders' expectations of achieving some share of power in locally elected provincial governments. But after America disengaged from Iraq's provincial politics, there was a breakdown of federal power-sharing in the Sunni provinces. Then, as constitutional alternatives failed them, local leaders were left feeling that they could only use an alliance with murderous fanatics in ISIS to counter the national government in Baghdad; thus the way was opened for ISIS's advance into Iraq in 2014. The international response to this invasion was

⁵ Policies of building state power from the top down have sometimes been justified by concerns that local politics could be dominated by small unrepresentative cliques or warlords, but this risk can be countered by the participation of national political parties in local democracy. From the first organizational meetings, local elections should involve representatives from two or more parties that have made a commitment to democracy. Local political bosses should know that, if they lose popular support, they could face serious challengers who are supported by a rival national party. With such national political safeguards, local democracy can provide an antidote to warlordism.

⁶ Carter Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 178.

delayed by an understanding that foreign support for the national government in Iraq could reduce its incentive to offer essential political assurances to local Sunni leaders. A more timely and effective response could have been provided if, as a condition for assistance to the national government in Baghdad, America and its allies had insisted on their right to offer some proportional assistance also to the legitimately elected provincial governments in Al-Anbar and Ninawa provinces. A long-term international promise to support democratic local leadership in Iraq's Sunni provinces, as an integral part of continuing international assistance for constitutional government in Iraq, could do more against ISIS than any campaign of aerial bombardment.

Somaliland, since its separation from Somalia in 1991, offers an example of successful state-building that contrasts starkly with the repeated failures of internationally sponsored state-building in Somalia.⁷ The state in Somaliland was established by a series of negotiations among local leaders from every part of the country, without international support. In these negotiations, the participants' status as local leaders always depended on their maintaining broad popular approval in their respective communities. But in Somalia, once a leader became part of the internationally sponsored state-building process, he could expect external recognition and subsidies that reduced or eliminated his need for broad popular backing. Such leaders in Somalia then built weak states that could not govern without foreign support. The contrast between Somalia and Somaliland shows that international sponsors of state-building can do more harm than good when they support leaders whose positions do not depend on some form of local political recognition. But local accountability might not be through formal elections. Although the Somalilanders ultimately chose to introduce popular elections for positions of local authority in their constitutional system of government, the foundations of their state were initially organized by leaders whose positions depended on traditional clan institutions.

A civilian mission

Post-conflict political reconstruction does not utilize expensive weapons systems, and so it may not be a profitable priority for many defense contractors. But it requires some investment in staffing units that would be ready to go anywhere in the world, to form provincial reconstruction teams that could support the organization of effective local governments against threats of violent insurgency. The Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations in the State Department could be a natural institutional home for these units, as their members would need

⁷ See Mark Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland* (London: Progressio, 2008), and Mary Harper, *Getting Somalia Wrong?* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

the kind of deep analytical understanding of politics and government that is regularly demanded in diplomacy. But they would also need a broad mix of financial, managerial, and linguistic skills, along with basic military training to operate in an area of conflict.⁸

There are at least two reasons for suggesting that support for post-conflict reconstruction should be the responsibility of civilian agencies, even though its vital mission would be complementary to the military. First, the armed forces need to focus on maintaining their ability to prevail over any adversary in any battlefield, and asking them to also prepare for political missions would be a distraction from their core military function. Second, an agent whose job is to support political reconstruction must become proficient at recognizing dysfunctional political systems and intervening to repair them. For the sake of America's civilian-led political system, it would be better to separate such a job from control of the world's most powerful weaponry.

In the United States government, USAID also maintains a capability to support local public goods and services in poor countries, but its effectiveness depends on recipient governments being confident that they can invite USAID's assistance without fearing that its staff could become agents for political change. The mission of post-conflict reconstruction mission is explicitly one of encouraging political change in the recipient country, and so it would probably be incompatible with the mission of USAID.⁹

Deterrence based on America's true strength

The history of America's own political development clearly demonstrates our basic point that strong democratic governments are built on a balanced distribution of power between national and local leaders.¹⁰ For over a century before America's first national presidential election in 1788, elected governments at the municipal and provincial levels exercised substantial local powers within the British Empire. In the Revolution from 1776, Americans instituted an interim constitution (the Articles of Confederation) in which power was principally distributed to the thirteen locally elected provincial assemblies. This decentralization of power admittedly created difficulties for financing the revolutionary war effort, but decentralization also gave the American Revolution a broadly distributed political strength that was essential to its ultimate success. In 1776, every community had at least one respected leader – its local

⁸ See Carter Malkasian and Gerald Meyerle, *Provincial Reconstruction Teams* (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2009), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB911.pdf>

⁹ A reconfiguration of USAID's mission is suggested by Max Boot and Michael Miklaucic, "Reconfiguring USAID for State-Building," Council on Foreign Relations Policy Memorandum #57 (2016), at http://cfr.org/USAID_memo

¹⁰ See "Strength of American federal democracy" at <http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/amerfed.pdf>

assembly representative – who had a substantial vested interest in defending the new regime.

It is sometimes argued that America's efforts at state-building have suffered from a naive assumption that foreigners would welcome democracy like Americans. But we may suggest instead that the actual problem was a failure to recognize that people everywhere may be like Americans in having local political issues that are as vital to them as their national politics. It might be helpful for Americans to imagine what might happen if, after some terrible disaster, a foreign army helped to re-establish order in America but then centralized all power in a national presidential government, without bothering to restore any of America's autonomous state and municipal governments. Such disregard of local politics in state-building, even with benign intent, would surely incite local insurgencies in disaffected regions throughout the country.

The suggestion here that America should develop strategies and capabilities for state-building is not an argument for Americans to intervene wherever people might wish to have a more democratic government. We have argued only that America's preparedness for military missions must include some capacity for post-conflict political reconstruction. People may argue for investments in military capabilities without intending that these capabilities should actually be used, except in situations that everyone should hope to avoid. Preparations for conflict should always be aimed at deterring conflict and thereby avoiding it, if at all possible.

But deterrence of threats requires a credible ability to intervene with force if necessary, wherever the threats may be, and military planners need to worry about all aspects of a potential intervention. Victory in battle accomplishes nothing if it only creates a zone of destruction and alienation in which the enemy can find even greater political opportunities. So if post-conflict political reconstruction has been the weak part of America's strategic capabilities, then there is compelling reason for America to invest first in strengthening this capability. By learning the lessons from recent interventions, as well as from America's own history, American military and diplomatic units can develop a capacity to effectively support democratic political reconstruction. The result would be a stronger America and a better world.

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