

## **What we need to know about nation-building**

by Roger B. Myerson\*

A review of *Why Nation-Building Matters: Political Consolidation, Building Security Forces, and Economic Development in Failed and Fragile States*, by Keith W. Mines

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### ***Lessons from a long career in expeditionary diplomacy***

The recent fall of Kabul is a stark reminder that policy-makers need to understand much more about the problems of nation-building. Some may try to swear off any further involvement with nation-building, but these problems cannot be ignored when failures of law and governance in weak states underlie a pressing migrant crisis on America's own borders. As the Special Inspector General on Afghanistan Reconstruction has noted, America's refusal to prepare for future stabilization missions after the collapse of South Vietnam did not prevent the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq but instead ensured that they would become quagmires.<sup>1</sup> To begin thinking more carefully about these vital problems, a good place to start is with Keith Mines's book *Why Nation-Building Matters*.

Keith Mines has participated in most of America's foreign nation-building missions since the 1980s. His first service was in the US Army, where he served as a paratrooper in Granada and taught counterinsurgency in Central America, and then he joined the US Foreign Service in 1991. In this valuable book, he discusses experiences and lessons from his long career in expeditionary diplomacy, including missions to Colombia, El Salvador, Somalia, Haiti, Darfur, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Mines has written this book as an experienced practitioner of nation-building, and I have read it as an economic theorist who shares his view that a deeper understanding of nation-building is greatly needed. In the quest for this understanding, I hope that he might agree with me that a combination of our practical and theoretical perspectives could be helpful. In particular, economists study agency theory to learn how the structure of an effective organization can depend on problems of coordinating agents who observe different information, and this theoretical perspective helps me to see broader principles in some of Mines's key insights.

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<sup>1</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *What we need to learn: lessons from Afghanistan Reconstruction* (August 2021), page xii, 96. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>

Mines has emphasized that a nation-building mission needs to rely on field officers who can closely observe the political challenges in different communities, and he has recommended that such officers should get more flexibility in spending funds to support local political development. I would argue that these are key points for understanding why a nation-building agency is needed and how it should be structured. But first, I should highlight and summarize some parts of Mines's book that I found especially insightful, in his chapters on El Salvador, Iraq, and Darfur.

### ***Rediscovering counterinsurgency in Central America after Vietnam***

In 1984, as part of an American response to insurgency in El Salvador, Mines was assigned to help train soldiers for counterinsurgency in Central America. It was a time when memories of Vietnam made US policy-makers highly averse to nation-building, but Mines's assignment put him in the one place where Americans were still focused on the challenges of nation-building. Mines's chapter on El Salvador contains a magnificent section entitled "Counterinsurgency Rediscovered" which offers a distilled summary of what he learned then from masters of the previous generation, who had experienced counterinsurgency warfare in Vietnam, Cuba, and the Philippines during the 1950s and 60s. His mentors while working on Central American counterinsurgency (including Lt. Col. Reynaldo Garcia and Col. John Waghelstein) warned against the dangers of relying on large American forces and heavy weapons to solve the political problems of another country. They taught that a nation-building intervention should involve a balanced mix of military and political support for its indigenous hosts, and America's contribution must be strictly limited so that the hosts should never forget that it is their country to win, and it is their responsibility to offer a better deal for people throughout their country.

In discussing the missions where he has served, Mines regularly reminds us that the results of any nation-building mission are likely to include a complex mixture of successes and failures. In El Salvador, the notable success in negotiating a political settlement to end the war in 1992 was followed by a profoundly disappointing failure to secure the subsequent peace, allowing criminal violence to grow in a region that has become today the source of a serious refugee crises confronting America. Conversely, although America's intervention in Somalia in 1994 conspicuously failed to forge a political settlement there, we should recognize that it did succeed in ending a massive famine in that country.

### *A key perspective on the occupation of Iraq*

Among the assignments that Mines has undertaken, one of the most important was his service as governance coordinator for Al Anbar province in 2003 during the occupation of Iraq. There he had primary local responsibility for responding to some of the toughest political challenges of the growing Sunni insurgency. His chapter on Iraq is the longest in the book, and it offers an insightful perspective on this mission.

The book's subtitle ("political consolidation, building security forces, and economic development") summarizes the mission's priorities as Mines assessed them after he arrived in Al Anbar late in the summer of 2003. He saw that job-creating economic development could offer people some hope for a better life, but economic development was impossible without basic security, and security would ultimately depend on political reconciliation of groups that could act as spoilers. So among the challenges of rebuilding Iraq, political consolidation had to come first.

The formation of a broadly representative provincial council was key to any hopes for political reconciliation. During the early months of the occupation, civil affairs officers had done what they could to recruit various local leaders and sheikhs into a provincial council, and Mines later organized a series of local caucuses to elect council members who could be more properly representative of communities throughout the province. The provincial council served as a regular channel for complaints from people in Al Anbar, but its effectiveness was frustrated by its lack of any ability to exercise authority over a budget.

A group of sheikhs proposed to organize a Civil Defense Force to protect roads and power lines in the province, if the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) would provide regular funding and equipment for tribal security forces. They were offering to do essentially what was done through the Anbar Awakening three years later, but Mines was unable to get the funding that was needed to do this in 2003. Instead, the CPA put resources into national programs for recruiting and training security forces. However, in the absence of any national political consensus, such national security forces would be seen in Al Anbar as outsiders with no local accountability, and so it is not surprising that people turned to insurgent resistance.

In the fall of 2003, the CPA head Paul Bremer began a series of monthly one-day meetings with his provincial governance coordinators. Mines describes one such meeting where there was vigorous debate about Bremer's plans for economic austerity measures, where Mines and other provincial coordinators argued that government-funded jobs programs could play a

vital role in winning support for the new regime. I would suggest that, in such debates, we can see the importance of bringing local political perspectives into central policy-making discussions. There has been much ex-post criticism of Bremer's early decisions about de-Baathification and disbanding the Iraqi army in May 2003, but what was needed was a broad debate that included locally informed officials when the decisions were made. Such policies, which would fundamentally affect political realities in every part of the occupied country, should have been formulated in consultation with provincial governance coordinators who were working to earn the trust of local political leaders throughout the country.

From this perspective, it seems severely problematic that Mines and other provincial governance coordinators were not even appointed until after these fundamental postwar policies were formulated. If America had established an effective agency for coordinating stabilization operations, this agency could have ensured that the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan would have, from the start, a team of local stabilization officers ready to monitor local political challenges and provide vital guidance for the strategic direction of these interventions.

### ***Lessons from the mission to Darfur***

The costly frustration of massive American-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq has prompted policy-makers to seek different models for how a limited American involvement might effectively support an intervention that is led by countries in the region. The most promising model for such nation-building missions may be found in Mines's chapter on Darfur.

In 2007, Mines was sent to head a field office in Darfur, where he coordinated American support for peace-keeping forces from the African Union. If American policy-makers could study just one chapter in this book, this is the one that I would recommend for them to see how a strictly limited American involvement can provide valuable support for peace-keeping mission led by countries in the region. But the chapter deserves careful study, to fully draw out the lessons from Mines's involvement in Darfur.

With authorization from a United Nations resolution, the African Union sent a peace-keeping force that was spread across Darfur in a series of outposts. Each outpost had a US-contracted military observer to help with operational planning and intelligence, and so Mines was sent to oversee a team of field agents who were well placed to monitor and respond to events on the ground throughout Darfur.

One fundamental point that Mines emphasizes in the Darfur chapter is the vital importance of stationing officers in the field to get local information on the ground where the conflict is. Even before he got to Darfur, Mines was advised that, whatever uncertainties he might have, after ten days in Darfur he would know more about the situation there than the rest of the US Foreign Service, and so he should be prepared to offer decisive leadership there. Mines's basic observation about the essential value of field presence for building a peaceful national order may be worth quoting here:

"Making peace requires hard work that goes beyond a declaration or a conference. It includes the gritty detailed tasks on the ground: reassuring, reporting, and shaping the political environment. It often goes against the interests of numerous stakeholders, and on a higher level includes directed force, sanctions and international pressure, and negotiations. But it starts with people on the ground, and the closer they can get to reality, the more effective and well-calibrated the policies will be."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps a simple peace conference could have been enough if the conflict had been between two highly disciplined organizations with clear coherent leadership, but such conditions cannot be expected from a conflict in a failed or fragile state.

In fact, among the challenges confronting Mines in Darfur were problems of banditry by former separatist fighters, and the worst offenses were actually committed by troops from the one separatist faction that had signed a peace agreement with the government of Sudan. By agreeing to peace, the leader of this faction had lost the ability to send his fighters on profitable raids against government bases, so he no longer had the resources to pay and control his troops.

Mines observes that, in Darfur, the essential first step toward ending the conflict was inducing rebel groups to form a unified organization that could negotiate with the central government to forge a new political order in Sudan. The billions that America spent to support the Darfur intervention might have been more effective if even a fraction of that amount had been invested in compensation schemes as incentives for local leaders to back a peace deal.

Thus, a second fundamental point that Mines emphasizes in the Darfur chapter is the critical value of flexible finance (or "walking-around money") for field officers to support positive political development in a distant country. A US officer in the field might readily see how the goals of peace-building could be effectively advanced by allocating money to pay and equip the forces of cooperative local leaders in Al Anbar or Darfur. But in Washington DC,

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<sup>2</sup> Mines, p 152.

where these local leaders are unknown, such an expense could seem harder to justify than a much larger allocation for training and arming the forces of recognized national allies, even when those national forces are distrusted by people in the conflict zone.

Mines notes that the US military observers formed the backbone of the peace-building force, and they worked in difficult circumstances to stop a genocide, for which they received little public recognition. But there was no regular system for keeping American officers in the field for missions like Darfur, and so as Mines and his colleagues left Darfur, they were not replaced. Thus, the Darfur mission was limited by basic issues of funding and staffing.

### ***Toward a doctrine for nation-building***

Before discussing the conclusions that Mines summarizes in the book's Epilogue, let me say something about his basic decision to use the term *nation-building* instead of the term *state-building*, which many of us have used almost synonymously. If there is a difference between the two terms, it would be that nation-building should include, not only developing the capacity of the government, but also encouraging people to identify with their nation as a whole. I was initially surprised by Mines's expressed preference for *nation-building* as the term to describe his work, since he never seemed to get involved in any kind of public relations drive to foster people's patriotic feelings. However, much of his professional service was devoted to helping to develop a trustworthy working relationship between local leaders and national leaders. I would suggest that perhaps a true basis for people's patriotic feelings could be found in their confidence that respected leaders of their communities can have a positive role in the greater nation. If so, then popular enthusiasm for national unity would depend on a generally accepted distribution of powers and responsibilities between local leaders and national leaders.

So perhaps Mines is right to prefer the term *nation-building*, if it can help to remind us of this imperative to develop the essential local foundations for a strong national political system. Then a mission to develop the capabilities of Afghan government ministries and security forces could be properly called *state-building*, but it should not be called *nation-building* without some complementary effort to ensure that respected local leaders have a constructive role in the national political system.

Such a reminder is needed. When he attended a conference in Canada shortly after his service in Iraq, it seemed to Mines that the potential importance of federalism in nation-building was getting more discussion in Canada than in the US. Mines observed that "US thinkers and

policy-makers, with a thin understanding of the complexities and options in federalism, tended to miss many of the opportunities that might have been available in getting the country to the right political end-state."<sup>3</sup> This observation seems astonishing when we consider that the United States of America was actually established by a revolution to defend the powers of provincial assemblies, and the need to maintain an appropriately balanced distribution of powers between national and local governments has remained a vital concern in American politics since the US Constitution was written. But somehow, when Americans try to support nation-building abroad, there has been a common tendency to ignore the lessons of America's own history and assume that foreigners could not have similar concerns about national centralization of power.

In the language of the American Revolution, the *people* who formed the fundamental basis for the new nation were understood to be the enfranchised inhabitants acting together in their local communities throughout the land. If this understanding had been applied in Afghanistan, the first principle of a nation-building project there should have been respect for the autonomous authority of traditional village institutions; instead, the American intervention focused on building a centralized national government that implicitly threatened them.

So we need a doctrine that lists key points to bear in mind when approaching complex missions like nation-building, and Mines's book includes a valuable Epilogue in which he summarizes lessons that he would include in a doctrine for nation-building. Mines emphasizes that the first priority for nation-builders must be to support the development of a political compact that can bring people together in the nation. This settlement should address the local concerns of people in all parts of the nation, and economic reforms should not be pushed before the political compact is consolidated.

Mines also lists the development of effective security forces as an essential priority. But I would suggest that perhaps there should be more emphasis on the question of to whom these forces will be accountable. Without clear accountability, even newly trained security forces can be as abusive as in any authoritarian regime, as Mines saw in Haiti. However, accountability for security forces can be defined only in the context of a political settlement. So again we should recognize the priority of the political compact, but with a broader understanding that it should include decisions about the allocation of control over police and military forces. Where local groups do not fully trust the national authorities, some locally accountable police forces might be

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<sup>3</sup> Mines, page 282.

needed. This point may have sufficiently general applicability to belong also in a basic doctrine for nation-builders.

Finally, Mines discusses the need for an agency to provide standby capability for future nation-building missions, with a cadre of trained and experienced local stabilization officers who would be prepared for the challenges of helping a failed state to consolidate a new political compact and reconstruct effective government. Compared to what America invests in maintaining large magnificently-equipped military forces which are prepared for conflict anywhere in the world, preparations for the challenges of post-conflict political reconstruction have been negligible.

But we should emphasize here that the critical importance of flexible finance for local officers in a nation-building mission has fundamental implications for how a nation-building agency should be structured. To induce positive political change, its field officers must identify key local leaders and offer them appropriate incentives to cooperate in forging a national political compact. For this purpose, the effectiveness of foreign assistance depends on its local political conditionality, so that local leaders should understand that they and their supporters can benefit from foreign assistance only if they cooperate with a wider program of national political reconstruction. In a typical project for international economic development, we might measure results by counting the number of people who have observably benefited from our assistance. But when the goal is political development, it is essential to understand which local groups are benefiting and what they and their leaders have done to support national reconciliation, and such local political conditions are very hard for anyone outside the country to assess.

So there are fundamental reasons why a nation-building agency may need to operate under different kinds of fiscal controls from other agencies of the US Federal Government. A basic principle for structuring operations in most Federal agencies is that American tax-payers' money should be spent only with regular controls that can assure for meaningful accountability to the American people through their elected political representatives. But in foreign nation-building missions, the ultimate goal is to support the development of a government that is accountable to its people, not to America. For American assistance to support this development, the criteria for distributing assistance must depend on conditions that can be understood by the local recipients, but not necessarily by people in America. Thus, when America's political leaders have decided that a mission to help rebuild a failed state would be in America's interest, the budgeted resources for the nation-building mission should be managed by a team of field



officers and supervisors who, by their selection and training, can be trusted to spend the money appropriately according to local conditions in remote communities of the failed state, where normal controls of the US Federal Government would be very difficult to apply.

The possibility of future nation-building missions is not just an abstraction. Even today, the United States is challenged by a continuing flood of refugees from Central America who are desperate to escape from crime and oppression in their home countries. The problem of reducing this migration is a first-order political issue for the current US Administration, but the problem is unlikely to abate until these countries develop legal and political institutions that can protect their citizens. Governance reforms have been resisted by small but powerful local groups that have a stake in the oppressive status quo. Increased economic assistance to these countries will not induce the reforms that are needed, unless the assistance is supervised by field officers who can direct the aid to benefit key local leaders when they support these reforms. So the migrant crisis today should be seen as a nation-building problem, and this reviewer would be more confident of an effective mission to address it if experts like Keith Mines were directing the mission.

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