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The Reluctant Imperialist: Terrorism, Failed States, and the Case for American Empire

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# The Reluctant Imperialist

Terrorism, Failed States, and the Case for American Empire

*Sebastian Mallaby*

Lawrence Summers, the dominant professor-politician of the Clinton years, used to say that the United States is history's only nonimperialist superpower. But is this claim anything to boast about today? The war on terrorism has focused attention on the chaotic states that provide profit and sanctuary to nihilist outlaws, from Sudan and Afghanistan to Sierra Leone and Somalia. When such power vacuums threatened great powers in the past, they had a ready solution: imperialism. But since World War II, that option has been ruled out. After more than two millennia of empire, orderly societies now refuse to impose their own institutions on disorderly ones.

This anti-imperialist restraint is becoming harder to sustain, however, as the disorder in poor countries grows more threatening. Civil wars have grown nastier and longer. In a study of 52 conflicts since 1960, a recent World Bank study found that wars started after 1980 lasted three times longer than those beginning in the preceding two decades. Because wars last longer, the number of countries embroiled

in them is growing. And the trend toward violent disorder may prove self-sustaining, for war breeds the conditions that make fresh conflict likely. Once a nation descends into violence, its people focus on immediate survival rather than on the longer term. Saving, investment, and wealth creation taper off; government officials seek spoils for their cronies rather than designing policies that might build long-term prosperity. A cycle of poverty, instability, and violence emerges.

There is another reason why state failures may multiply. Violence and social disorder are linked to rapid population growth, and this demographic pressure shows no sign of abating. In the next 20 years, the world's population is projected to grow from around six billion to eight billion, with nearly all of the increase concentrated in poor countries. Some of the sharpest demographic stresses will be concentrated in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the Palestinian territories—all Islamic societies with powerful currents of anti-Western extremism. Only sub-Saharan Africa

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faces a demographic challenge even sharper than that of the Muslim world. There, an excruciating combination of high birth rates and widespread AIDS infection threatens social disintegration and governmental collapse—which in turn offer opportunities for terrorists to find sanctuary.

Terrorism is only one of the threats that dysfunctional states pose. Much of the world's illegal drug supply comes from such countries, whether opium from Afghanistan or cocaine from Colombia. Other kinds of criminal business flourish under the cover of conflict as well. Sierra Leone's black-market diamonds have benefited a rogues' gallery of thugs, including President Charles Taylor of Liberia and Lebanon's Hezbollah. Failed states also challenge orderly ones by boosting immigration pressures. And those pressures create a lucrative traffic in illegal workers, filling the war chests of criminals.

None of these threats would conjure up an imperialist revival if the West had other ways of responding. But experience has shown that nonimperialist options—notably, foreign aid and various nation-building efforts—are not altogether reliable.

### **RICH MAN'S BURDEN**

Take the chief alternative to imperialism, foreign aid. It is no coincidence that the main multilateral organizations for dispensing it—the United Nations and the World Bank—were set up at the end of World War II as the European empires started to unravel. For decades, the aid intelligentsia was certain that it had the solution to chaos. In the 1950s and 1960s, it thought that simply providing capital would ensure self-sustaining growth in poor countries. In the 1970s, the focus

shifted to relieving poverty directly by building health clinics and schools. In the 1980s, donors sought to tie their aid to economic reforms. In the 1990s, they added on demands for anticorruption measures and other improvements in governance. Along the way, development theorists flirted with the idea that population control might hold the key. But no magic key has yet been found. An obstinate group of dysfunctional countries has refused to respond to these approaches.

This is not to say that aid has failed. Since 1960, life expectancy in poor countries has risen from 45 to 64 years. The global illiteracy rate has fallen from 47 to 25 percent over the last three decades. And the number of poor people has fallen by about 200 million in the last two decades—at a time when the world population has increased by 1.6 billion. Development institutions deserve more credit than they get, whether from antiglobalization protesters or from aid critics within Congress and the Bush administration. But aid donors must face up to their inability to shake the most dysfunctional countries out of poverty, especially in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa.

The World Bank has convened an internal task force to confront its record on failed states, and the group will undoubtedly come up with some suggestions. Routing aid around dysfunctional governments is likely to be one of them. But the bank has tried this kind of thing before. In Chad, for example, it spent years devising a plan to develop the country's oil fields while preventing the profits from being wasted by corrupt rulers. An elaborate accounting system was designed in which oil revenues would go into a special fund to pay for health,

education, and other worthwhile causes. When the system was unveiled in 2000, the bank even suggested that the “Chadian model” might point the way forward for other resource-rich developing nations. Within six months, however, Chad’s government found a way of diverting \$4.5 million of oil money to finance unauthorized arms purchases.

In countries such as China and India, which have functioning governments broadly committed to development, aid and technical advice have greatly accelerated the escape from poverty. In Uganda, which has weaker institutions but a fierce dedication to development, aid has helped cut poverty by 40 percent in one decade. But in countries such as Chad, Haiti, or Angola, aid cannot accomplish much. Such places are beyond the reach of economists who prescribe policies from afar. If outsiders want to make a difference in this kind of environment, they must begin by building the institutions that make development possible. They must engage, in other words, in the maligned business of nation building.

#### **NO QUICK FIX**

Modern nation building is partly an offshoot of the development business. In the late 1980s, development theorists began to acknowledge that the main alternative to imperialism—economic aid—could not stabilize the weakest states. A political supplement was needed, starting with transparency and other principles of decent governance. This recognition coincided with the collapse of authoritarian regimes—first in Latin America and East Asia, then, more spectacularly, in communist countries. Suddenly dozens of nations found themselves in a state of uncertain

transition. The need to focus on the political components of international stability was clear, and a new era of nation building began.

The post–Cold War history of this experiment resembles the history of development aid since World War II. The simple-sounding goal of building stable democracies has proved maddeningly elusive. In turn, nation builders have pushed their strategy through successive stages of elaboration. The sudden collapse of authoritarian regimes first encouraged hopes that democratization might be quick, requiring little more than a simple effort to organize and monitor elections. Later, as transition turned out to be hard, donors sought to build political parties, police forces, law courts, tax offices, central banks, and customs systems—not to mention newspapers, community organizations, and the entire penumbra of independent groups that make up civil society. Within each of these categories, donor efforts have grown more elaborate as well. Rather than simply monitoring elections, for example, nation builders now seek to assess the preceding campaigns to ensure that the playing field is level.

As with development aid, democratization efforts have succeeded in some promising settings. Except for the Balkans, eastern Europe has done well thanks to peace, educated populations, and proximity to the rich European Union. But in the toughest countries, where state failure threatens the export of chaos, nation building has been hard. Perhaps the closest to a success story in a war-torn country is Mozambique, which has remained reasonably stable since foreign peacekeepers pulled out in 1995 after organizing multi-party elections (although that achievement

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now looks shaky). More typical is Angola, where a 1992 election under U.N. auspices proved worthless because defeated rebels refused to respect the verdict of the polls. In Cambodia, the loser in a 1993 U.N.-supervised election, Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party, ignored the results and stayed in power through force. In Bosnia, Kosovo, and East Timor, meanwhile, nation builders are making some headway but are not yet successful enough to withdraw.

To their credit, nation builders have tried to confront this discouraging record. Lakhdar Brahimi, the Algerian diplomat now overseeing the U.N.'s efforts toward Afghanistan, recently produced a report on beefing up the peacekeeping department at the U.N.'s New York headquarters. Out in the field, some peacekeeping operations have been reinforced. The U.N. went into Sierra Leone with an inadequate contingent of 6,000 in 1999; it now has more than 17,000 troops there. The world has also tried to make up for the U.N.'s peacekeeping inadequacies by sending in other types of forces, with or without a U.N. umbrella. The West winked at Nigeria's failed effort to impose order on Sierra Leone in 1997, even though Nigeria intervened without a U.N. mandate. Some observers even argue that mercenaries might carry out more nation-building tasks, as seen in brief deployments in Sierra Leone and Angola.

As with the World Bank's task force on failed states, however, these efforts to beef up nation building are more interesting as implied admissions of failure than as signs of decisive progress. In the absence of greatly increased commitment from the U.N.'s leading member states, a wide gap will remain between nation builders'

aspiration to create stable democratic states and what the world's institutions can deliver. Yet the Brahimi report and the occasional calls for a standing U.N. army recognize the dilemma posed by the end of empire. The rich world increasingly realizes that its interests are threatened by chaos, and that it lacks the tools to fix the problem.

### **SOMETIMES A GREAT NATION**

Might an imperial America arise to fill the gap? Most people would dismiss this as utterly implausible. The United States, it is assumed, has a strong inhibition against external adventurism. Look at the no-passport crowd in Congress, Washington's occasional isolationist fits, and the Bush administration's repeated denunciation of nation building. From the failure to occupy Iraq at the end of the Gulf War to the refusal to commit peacekeeping troops in Afghanistan, the United States has not exactly displayed latent imperialist tendencies.

Yet these inhibitions are less than they appear. U.S. history includes an isolationist tradition, but it is by no means dominant. Other traditions, such as the urge to go forth and improve the world or open up foreign markets, have been present throughout American history as well, and the tradition that prevails at any time is the one that best matches the circumstances. Until the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, security seemed assured by brute geography; potential enemies were far across the seas, so foreign policy was often regarded as a luxury. During World War II and the Cold War, that presumption changed. Fascist expansionism and nuclear weapons threatened U.S. interests in obvious ways, and the United States responded with



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unusual vigor. It fought wars both hot and cold, deploying troops all over the globe. It still spends much more on defense than do the European governments that routinely protest American isolationism.

Now U.S. foreign policy must again respond to circumstance—this time to the growing danger of failed states. The Bush administration's denigration of nation building and its refusal to participate in a peacekeeping force for Afghanistan are not the final words on this subject. By launching his war on terrorism, the president has at least acknowledged the urgency of the threat. For all the grumbling over Balkan commitments, the administration has pulled out of neither Bosnia nor Kosovo. The logic of neoimperialism is too compelling for the Bush administration to resist. The chaos in the world is too threatening to ignore, and existing methods for dealing with that chaos have been tried and found wanting.

**MANIFEST DESTINY?**

Empires are not always planned. The original American colonies began as the unintended byproduct of British religious strife. The British political class was not so sure it wanted to rule India, but commercial interests dragged it in there anyway. The United States today will be an even more reluctant imperialist. But a new imperial moment has arrived, and by virtue of its power America is bound to play the leading role. The question is not whether the United States will seek to fill the void created by the demise of European empires but whether it will acknowledge that this is what it is doing. Only if Washington acknowledges this task will its response be coherent.

The first obstacle to acknowledgment is the fear that empire is infeasible. True, imposing order on failed states is expensive, difficult, and potentially dangerous. Between 1991 and 2000 the United States spent \$15 billion on military intervention in the Balkans. A comparable effort in Afghanistan, a much bigger area with deeper traditions of violence, would cost far more. But these expenses need to be set against the cost of fighting wars against terrorists, drug smugglers, and other international criminals. Right after September 11, Congress authorized \$40 billion in emergency spending—and that was just a down payment in the struggle against terrorism. The estimated cost to the U.S. economy ranges from \$100 billion to \$300 billion.

The second obstacle to facing the imperial challenge is the stale choice between unilateralism and multilateralism. Neither option, as currently understood, provides a robust basis for responding to failed states. Unilateralists rightly argue that weak allies and cumbersome multilateral arrangements undercut international engagement. Yet a purely unilateral imperialism is no more likely to work than the sometimes muddled multilateral efforts assembled in the past. Unilateralists need to accept that chaotic countries are more inclined to accept foreign nation builders if they have international legitimacy. And U.S. opinion surveys suggest that international legitimacy matters domestically as well. The American public's support for the Persian Gulf War and the Afghan conflict reflected the perception that each operation was led by the United States but backed by the court of world opinion.

The best hope of grappling with failed states lies in institutionalizing this mix

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of U.S. leadership and international legitimacy. Fortunately, one does not have to look far to see how this could be accomplished. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) already embody the same hybrid formula: both institutions reflect American thinking and priorities yet are simultaneously multinational. The mixed record of both institutions—notably the World Bank's failure on failed states—should not obscure their organizational strengths: they are more professional and less driven by national patronage than are U.N. agencies.

A new international body with the same governing structure could be set up to deal with nation building. It would be subject neither to the frustrations of the U.N. Security Council, with its Chinese and Russian vetoes, nor to those of the U.N. General Assembly, with its grid-locked one-country-one-vote system. A new international reconstruction fund might be financed by the rich countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the other countries that currently contribute to the World Bank's subsidized lending program to the poorest nations. It would assemble nation-building muscle and expertise and could be deployed wherever its American-led board decided, thus replacing the ad hoc begging and arm-twisting characteristic of current peace-keeping efforts. Its creation would not amount to an imperial revival. But it would fill the security void that empires left—much as the system of mandates did after World War I ended the Ottoman Empire.

The new fund would need money, troops, and a new kind of commitment from the rich powers—and it could be established only with strong U.S. leadership.

Summoning such leadership is immensely difficult, but America and its allies have no easy options in confronting failed states. They cannot wish away the problem that chaotic power vacuums can pose. They cannot fix it with international institutions as they currently exist. And they cannot sensibly wish for a unilateral American imperium. They must either mold the international machinery to address the problems of their times, as their predecessors did in creating the U.N., the World Bank, and the IMF after World War II. Or they can muddle along until some future collection of leaders rises to the challenge. 🌐