Achilles Doesn’t Live Here Any More: Democracy, the Western way of war, and how the two ruin nation-building efforts

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Abstract:
Among the greatest threats the stability of the international system are fragile and failed states. A major focus of contemporary scholarship has been on nation-building as a mechanism for reducing the impact of failed states. While nation-building the cooperation of a range of institutional actors, the core of nation-building missions remains the military forces of the intervening states. When Western states intervene their military forces are placed in an untenable situation: their nation-building mission is incompatible with their broader mission of war-fighting. The Western model of warfare, based on decisive battle against uniformed armies in a defined battle-space is not compatible with the nation-building context. This paper argues that the West will be singularly ineffective at nation-building so long as it continues to depend on its conventional military forces to carry out and accomplish the core functions of the nation-building effort. Further, democratic governments are unlikely to provide sufficient political and economic support to alternative models of nation-building, leading to the conclusion that a serious policy debate on the future of nation-building is necessary.

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The West knows what needs to be done to engage in effective nation-building. The problems of the nation-building process are widely discussed in the practitioner and academic literatures. The general guidelines of what is necessary to provide an opportunity for success are accessible to anyone with an internet connection and the ability to purchase texts from Amazon.com. There are no nations in the world with the experience at successful nation building comparable to that of the West. The West is wealthy enough that it can afford such nation-building efforts. In short, the West has all of the characteristics necessary to intervene successfully in a fragile or failed state and to develop effective local institutions. That the West fails again and again to do so is not a matter of any lack of knowledge and experience. It is not a failure to understand the problem. The West fails to nation-build because the political and social systems of the West simply do not permit the expertise and experience to be effectively applied in practice.

In the classical mythology of Western Civilization, Achilles is the archetypical warrior. He is the standard of the warrior-hero in the West and has been the model for warriors both mythical and real from Alexander the Great to Jack Bauer. The western hero is a pure fighting man who can overcome all enemies, but is ultimately undone due to some single flaw in their perfection. Less discussed is another important aspect of the Western hero: he does not do well at home. Achilles abandons the chance at a long and happy life with his family to pursue glory in the Trojan War. In the film series *Die Hard*, John McClain can defeat all manner of terrorists, but can’t stay on good terms with his wife and kids. Hearth and home is not the place for the Western Warrior.

In a world where fewer and fewer people read the classics of the West, such a discussion seems to be one best left to the dwindling number of classics scholars hidden away in the dusty buildings of a shrinking number of universities. But while we have largely turned away from these classical texts, their echoes remain in our culture, and they shape how we see the world in the present. The contemporary West retains its older ideas about warfare and the role of the warrior, and these impact a wide range of policy areas that are of direct, and growing importance to the stability of the world in the twenty-first century. The ideas about war and the warrior are part of the social construction of the use of force in the world today and these ideas have a direct impact on policy choices make by political leaders. These ideas are shared by both leaders and populations in the West. As democracies, this influence impacts how the wider population sees the role of the military and how it evaluates military missions. Importantly, these ideas also affect the relative support for various policies that require military action.

This paper argues that the Western ideas of warfare undermine the ability of democratic states to engage in effective nation-building in the world today. The social construction of norms about war and the warrior undermine the ability of the West to make the types of commitments necessary to engage in nation-building. This is partially the result of the cultural context of the West, but also the result of how Western political institutions have come to approach nation-building. The cultural norms about warfare have become embedded in how political institutions manage national security. Populations assess their leaders’ prowess in security using the standards of the cultural context. The combination of the cultural norms and institutional practice in democratic states has led to a set of circumstances in which it is highly unlikely that the West can support effective nation-building in the cases where it is most needed. The argument that follows suggests that the West will almost invariably fail in its nation-building missions and that the circumstances that lead to this conclusion are not likely to change in the foreseeable future.
While the general tone of what follows is certainly pessimistic, there are threads of hope for the future of nation-building. A number of potential changes to the institutional framework for nation-building are suggested that will mitigate some of the problems faced by Western democracies. It is also suggested that there are times in which even the limited nation-building efforts of the West can be effective if the conditions are right. This paper also suggests that even failed nation-building attempts may be preferable to no nation-building in some cases. A partial success may be better than nothing. Overall, the paper concludes that a serious debate over the goals and methods of nation-building must include the assumption that the West will always under-resource conflicts and nearly never see them through to the end. This suggests the need to shift assumptions on the part of nation-building practitioners and possibly a wholesale reassessment of the potential of nation-building for at least a generation.

The Western Way of War

War is not simply something that exists in isolation from the context in which it takes place. Cultural norms have a significant impact on how war is fought. Even before the introduction of writing, warfare was part and parcel of the human condition. Wars have remained with us through most of the history of humanity. Unlike the basic condition, the way in which we fight wars and how we integrate them into our culture has varied widely across cultural contexts. One need only read Sun Tzu and Clausewitz in order to see how time and culture change the nature of war. That we still read the works of both men tell us that their themes ripples across the pages of history and still hold relevance for us today.

The social construction of warfare in the West derives from a collection of ideas and assumptions about warfare that the historian and classicist Victor Davis Hanson had labeled the Western Way of War. This larger theme has been discussed in a wide range of works that seek to explore the origins of contemporary idea about warfare in the classical world. That the works of the classical period in the West were read widely throughout most of its history explains part of why this legacy has persisted. We still tell the story of the battle of Thermopylae today and it can even be the foundation for a blockbuster film. The name Achilles resonates with students who have never read (and likely never will read) the Iliad. The Western Way of War thus leaves a lasting legacy today on our cultural understanding of warfare.

In the West, war is socially constructed to be a particular type of conflict, one that reflects a set of expectations embedded in our culture. This construction is reinforced in contemporary cultural values and becomes embedded in our institutions at a basic level. The constructed concept of warfare permeates policy debates, planning processes, and appeals to the electorate in many ways. The impacts of these ideas about war are significant and have a powerful role in the planning of policies that require the use of the military. These ideas affect the assumptions of political leaders in the policy planning stages and they form a lens through which the electorate in democratic states sees the use of military force abroad.

The Western Way of War is based firmly on a handful of elements that define it and separate it from other sets of ideas about warfare. Three of these elements are critical for understanding how the Western Way of War impacts the ability of Western democracies to engage in effective nation-building:

1. The separation of war from peace
2. The role of decisive battle
3. The responsibility of the community in war
These three elements form an important part of the core of the Western understanding of warfare and they are directly related to both elite and popular opinion about the role of nation-building in the post-Cold War context.

Among the most critical elements of the Western Way of War is that war is considered to be something separate from peace. The symbolism of the Shield of Achilles in the Iliad is a key element of this. The Shield depicts two cities, the city of peace and the city of war. In these two cities the world is very different. The basic structure of society is changed and the rules are divided. In the city of peace, the rule of law dominates. In the city of war, force determines the outcome regardless of right. This is one of many symbolic separations of war from peace that we see in the West. From the Roman practice of holding open the doors of the temple of Janus during wartime to the structure of contemporary international law, the city of war and the city of peace are considered separate. The two worlds are separate and the rules of one do not apply in the other. This dichotomy between war and peace implies that there are ways to determine in which state one finds one’s self. In practice, even in the most ideal circumstances war and peace are not so neatly separated, but this does not change the long standing tradition in the West of thinking of these two worlds as separate from each other.

The role of decisive battle is one of the most interesting elements of the Western Way of War. In the contest of many other cultures, battle is something to be avoided and ideally engaged in at a distance. In the classical Greek world a form of warfare, that of hoplite battle, developed which reversed this more common trend. The Greek model of warfare was based on short, sharp conflicts that left one side a decisive victor at the end of the battle. In a world of citizen farmers whose lands could not be left for long periods without serious threats to their own survival, this model of shock warfare was well suited to the needs of the cultural and material context. A short battle, usually over in hours left one side standing and the other driven off. At the end of the battle, both sides would collect their dead under truce and the winners would erect a monument to their victory. At that point the fighting was generally over and the sides returned to the farm. This form of battle, based on closing to the enemy and striking hard until they broke, forms the core of the Western Way of War. The oft mocked “shock and awe” slogan for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is a modern extension of this older notion of how wars are to be fought. The two sides are expected to line up, clash with all their might until one side collapses. At the end of the battle the defeated are expected to acknowledge their defeat and the battle is over. While we may mock a banner that reads “Mission Accomplished” now, the tendency to see the fight as over when the battle is done is one of the most deeply rooted ideas in the Western cultural understanding of war. A long line of diverse leaders including Xerxes, Varus, Edward I, and George W. Bush have all made the same mistake of assuming that the enemy will follow your assumptions about battle.

The role of the community in war is also a critical feature of the Western Way of War. This has shifted significantly over time, but has retained a general commitment to the duty of citizens to fight for their polity. There is a reciprocal assumption that leaders will manage the war in a way that fits the interest of the community. While the commitment to the effective leader of the war band is a key element of the idea of what makes a warrior in the West, there is an implied assumption that the leader will look out for the interest of the warriors under his (or her) command and that the larger interest of the polity are being considered. There is a communal responsibility for war. The leader must consider the community, but the community must also follow its commitment to the leader.
In the classical Greek and Roman models of warfare, this was embodied by the citizen soldier. All citizens owed service to the state and were required to maintain their ability to fight when called upon to do so. The ability to fight for the polity was part of what defined a citizen. This model eroded in the period after the fall of the Roman Empire and transformed in the feudal period to the idea that war was the responsibility of a permanent warrior class. The mounted knight and the professional men at arms who followed him were the primary war-fighting class in the medieval period. Yet even in this period, there remained the ultimate call to all male citizens to heed the cry to war in times of need. In extreme circumstances the ruler could call upon the lething or fyrd, a levy of all able bodied free citizens to heed the call to arms. In the industrial age, conscription created modern version of this older model. All adult male citizens, and in a few cases all citizens regardless of gender, owe military service to the state. Thus we have retained a sense of the duty of the wider community to sacrifice to fight the nation’s wars. It is significant to note that across all these cases, the duty of fight is embedded in a wider context of reciprocal duties in which the duty to the state is part of the duty of the ruler to the wider community. In the classical world, the duty of the citizens was embedded in social traditions, but also in the legal traditions of the early polities. In modern democratic societies, this duty is formalized in the constitutional arrangements of various states.

The Western Way of War is thus a complex set of arrangements that bind warfare in the cultural context of Western life. The contemporary West retains many of these ideas in the popular culture of the contemporary period. Whether fighting terrorists, super-villains, aliens, or vampires, the modern warrior remain firmly situated in the cultural context of the Western Way of War.

The social construction of the Western Way of War has significant policy implications. The policy choices of political leaders will be made in the frame of reference based on this model of warfare. Democratic populations living in this cultural context will have expectations of policy outcomes based on these ideas about how wars are fought. Further, the expectation of timing and commitment of resources will be framed through a lens of how the public and policy-makers understand war. In any case where military force is used, the expectations of the public and their political leaders will be framed through their cultural lens. As military force is part of any serious effort to nation-build, this strongly suggests that nation-building efforts are likely to be evaluated based on standards interpreted through the frame of warfare. This has powerful implications for the likely ability of democratic Western states to engage in effective nation-building efforts.

Nation-building requires force, but only as one of many components. The inclusion of force is among the most visible aspects of a nation-building mission and it is likely to be the focus of attention of the public. While this is an inaccurate way of evaluating nation-building in an abstract sense, accuracy is rarely the most important element of democratic politics. This creates a problem for nation-builders in Western democratic states: the basic lens through which the effort will be seen is an inaccurate way of assessing the task at hand. Further, the fact that policy-makers also see the problem at least partially through this lens means that they will be likely to make errors in judgment about the nature of the commitment required to succeed in nation-building.

**Nation-Building 101**

Policy planners contemplating a nation-building effort face many challenges. Nation-building is complex and no single plan will work in all cases. Nation-building is a highly
contingent process, depending on many inputs, one of which is random chance. While there is no single plan that can cover all potential nation-building missions, there are a range of policy choices that can greatly increase the likelihood of success. There is also a common set of challenges that potential nation-builders must face in order to succeed in their larger policy aims. What follows is an overview of the major challenges facing the nation-builder and a framework for addressing these challenges. This overview is intended to focus on determining what resources would be necessary for implementing a nation-building strategy that provides the minimal conditions for success. What follows is not a formula that will offer any guarantees; it is simply a model to help us see the minimum commitments required for nation-building in the context of the 21st century.

The following model divides the process of nation-building into phases of the process and the focal areas that a potential nation-builder must address at each stage of the process. The process is divided into four phases:

1. Planning
2. The “golden window”
3. Stabilization
4. Exit

In each phase, the challenges facing the nation-builder are different. It is possible that the effort can fail at any one of these phases if the nation-builder does not execute the process effectively. The phases are also ordered in such a way that the early processes are more critical than later process in determining failure. Poor planning and execution in the golden window make success at later phases much more difficult. A nation-builder may also choose to move to the exit without success at any time in the process. It is also possible to abandon a nation-building effort as the US did in Somalia in 1993.

In each phase of the process Dobbins, et al (2007) have identified a series of areas of focus that the nation-builder must balance:

1. Security
2. Humanitarian relief
3. Governance
4. Economic Stabilization
5. Economic Development
6. Democratization

These are general areas of policy planning and responsibility that must be accounted for by the nation-builder. They are critical areas in order to establish the basic conditions for success of the nation-building mission and the eventual stability of the new state after the withdrawal of the intervenor. In each phase of the process, these areas must remain the focus of the efforts of the nation-builder in order to offer a chance of success.

In the planning phase, the nation-builder must identify the key aspects of the process, most notably the context of the intervention, the key players on the ground, and the basic nature of the country into which the intervention will take place. The intervenor should also have a
clear objective for the intervention. This is generally not nation-building for its own sake. The nation-building effort is usually in service of some larger policy goal. It is this goal that should be the overall objective of the effort. Of necessity all externally driven nation-building efforts are interventions, but the details differ widely. Post-conflict nation-building will be different if the outside power is invited by exhausted factions or by a single group that had decisively defeated all of its opponents. If the nation-builder is also an invader that has defeated the forces of the area to undergo nation-building there will be many additional complications. These basic starting conditions are key parts of the process and must be included in the considerations of the intervenor.

The planning phase must also include the gathering of information relating to the key stakeholders in the target country, the surrounding countries, and in the intervenor. Access to expertise and resources is a key part of the nation-building process. This frequently requires a significant coordination of the efforts of a wide range of groups. Even the simplest of nation-building efforts will require inter-agency cooperation within the government of a single intervening state. While this is the easiest possibility, it remains complex for reasons that will be discussed in greater length in following sections. The normal nation-building context includes a much more complex set of relationships as it is likely to include states, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, a fractured set of local interests of all sorts, and potentially multinational corporations and other actors. The potential nation-builder may end up longing for the simple days when all they had to do was herd cats.

In the planning phase, the role of military forces must be clearly addressed. The size and composition of forces is a critical part of the early calculations for any intervenor. The initial military forces will generally have a goal that is effectively negative in nature. The mission is typically oriented towards stopping something that is taking place or preventing an unwanted action. The intervention is intended to stop a humanitarian crisis or prevent the local conflict from spreading to surrounding states. This is a different mission from the positive goals of the follow-on process in which the nation-builder seeks to engage in specific actions and to make specific things happen. The nation-building efforts will include a series of efforts across the areas of focus described above both the positive and negative phases. The intervenor must create a functioning government, provide basic order, encourage economic recovery, etc. The early military intervention builds the foundation on which later policies may be undertaken.

Central to this part of the planning process is the need to assess the manpower and resource requirements of the mission. The intervenor must know what sort of commitment must be made in order to achieve the basic stability to give the mission a chance of success. Dobbins, et al. (2007) examined a series of case studies to determine the relative force ratios needed to provide the minimum chance for success. (Dobbins, Jones et al. 2007, pgs. 37 – 40) The required forces were determined by the mission in question. For monitoring missions where all parties had agreed upon the terms of peace and were primarily seeking outside help in the monitoring of an established peace, the nation-building forces were able to deploy a small force with one soldier per one thousand inhabitants. For “light” peacekeeping missions, in which the sides had agreed on a peace, but were not clearly exhausted and the risk of a return to fighting

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1 Throughout this paper, the term intervenor will be used to denote the outside force seeking to engage in nation-building. The term can refer to a range of possible actors, including coalitions of all of these actors. The term is used in this way for purposes of simplicity.

2 For comparison, the United States has a ratio of military to civilian population of .2 per 1,000 in the population. (Dobbins, et al 2007)
existed, the forces required were six soldiers per thousand inhabitants. For “heavy” peacekeeping missions, those in which peace must be imposed or the expectation of a resumption of hostilities was high, the force requirements are greater: thirteen troops per thousand inhabitants. In especially difficult circumstances where no effective local institutions exist it was predicted that the intervening force would need a ratio as high as twenty per thousand in the population in the first year in order to establish basic security.

The planning process must include a consideration of what will be required after the initial, primarily military phase of the operation. This will require a consideration of how the military phase will have disrupted the status quo (positively or negatively) in the region. The initial mission is critical to providing an effective groundwork, but it is just the start. The planning process will also be heavily influenced by the circumstances in the target state. If the target has effective institutions that can be co-opted, the mission will require fewer forces and less money and other resources. If the mission will require that these institutions be built from scratch, the force and finance requirements are much higher. Table 1 provides a short summary of estimates for the required numbers of troops in a number of countries where nation-building missions have either been recently attempted or could be contemplated.

The planning phase must also consider other forms of resource allocation in nation-building. As with the decision to send troops, the underlying conditions heavily impact these calculations. In some missions local resources can be used in order to support the mission. The local economy may be in relatively good shape. The target country may also be completely devastated and all of the resources must come from the intervenor. Dobbins, et al estimated that the first year cost of humanitarian relief in a simple nation-building context is $34. This assumes that the intervenor will provide minimal humanitarian relief in the target country and that only a portion of the country’s population will require humanitarian assistance. The cost would be higher in more severe cases. Table 2 summarizes the relative first year humanitarian costs of the intervenor for our group of comparison states. The intervenor must also consider whether sufficient number of trained technocrats exist in the target in order to establish a government or if such persons must be trained. As with the necessity of providing basic security, governance may also have to be built from the ground up, making the mission much more expensive and time-consuming.

The question of the costs of restoring government services must also be considered in the planning stages. While this cost will vary widely, Dobbins, et al provide a basic estimate of the cost based on the cost of government services in sample developing countries. Their figure of 10.4% of GDP is somewhat problematic as it is drawn from a range of sources (UN, World Bank, IMF) and is an average across a wide range of developing states. It also assumes that the cost to reconstitute government and provide services is comparable to the cost of maintaining the provision of services through existing institutions. While this is likely to generate a highly conservative figure, the annual cost of governance is also listed for our states in Table 2. Table 2 shows that the first year costs of these interventions is likely to be high, but it also shows that these cost estimates are likely to be on the low end of the spectrum. Critically these cost estimates also leave out any additional economic development efforts such as infrastructure development. As these programs will depend greatly on the nature of the conflict and its aftermath costs will vary widely across cases. It is safe to assume that the costs in Table 2 represent a minimum cost of humanitarian assistance and government operations.

While there are many additional areas that must be covered in the planning stages, the resources are the element most susceptible to the impact of the Western Way of War. The
allocation of resources to the mission is informed by the perception of the mission on the part of political leaders and policy elites during the planning phase. That the use of military force is part of the process means that the lens through which this force will be seen in that of war. Even when experts among practitioners may be aware of the necessity of treating the effort as something other than war, the political leadership will still largely be focused on the frame most familiar to them: that of war. Further, the population at large will see the use of military force through the lens of their own understanding of war. These will combine with problematic results.

The golden window is the initial period following the start of the intervention. There is a period of time where the stakeholders are essentially on the fence over whether or not the intervenor is credible. During this time, it is imperative that progress be seen to be made in all of the focus areas discussed above. Most imperative is basic security. People must feel that they can live their lives free of the fear of death or chaos. This is a test of the intervenor’s ability to carry out their commitments. If the intervenor cannot provide basic security, the other promises are untrustworthy. In the golden window the intervenor has the chance to demonstrate that they are a worthy partner in nation-building. The intervenor must balance competing demands in this time. Too large a military force and it is likely to be resented. Too small a force and the intervenor cannot maintain order. This “footprint dilemma” is a challenge that all intervenors struggle to manage.

If the intervenor is successful during the golden window, the stabilization phase can begin. In this phase, the intervenor transfers governance to the indigenous population. The institutions that are co-opted or constructed during the golden window begin to take a greater and greater role in the running of the state. The military forces of the intervenor shift to a training and support role and total numbers of troops can be reduced as the indigenous forces demonstrate the ability to handle basic security themselves. Moving through the stabilization phase can be slowed by the need to construct institutions from scratch. This often requires training of personnel including security forces, bureaucrats to administer the government, law enforcement personnel and a judiciary to enforce the rule of law. This can be a complex and time consuming process that must unfold over years. In extreme cases this could take over a decade in a large country with no existing institutions such as Afghanistan.

The stabilization phase also requires continued economic development over time. The golden window shows that the intervenor is moving in the right direction, but economic stabilization requires that perceptible progress be made towards a return to indigenous rule. This will require continued economic and financial support from the intervenor, but will be supplemented by the gradual return of domestic revenues as improved governance increases the capacity of the target state to pay for its own services. A key element of this process is the restoration of the economic viability of the state and the ability of its institutions to provide effective economic governance.

Assuming all goes smoothly in the stabilization phase, the intervenor will be able to exit smoothly, leaving behind a state managed by an indigenous government that has a firm institutional foundation and a democratic mandate. Exit is also possible short of success and need not be seen as the fulfillment of the process. Repeated interventions by the US in Haiti in the 20th century demonstrated that early exit is often a preferred strategy. In other cases, such as Timor Leste, the international community can make an exit after achieving its nation-building goals. The final transition to local rule and the withdrawal of the intervenor is an important part of the process. If the earlier stages have been successful, this stage has a large chance of success.
The nation-building process is thus complicated and dependent on effective planning and implementation across a wide range of activities. The process involves a diverse array of actors, not all of whom are likely to support the nation-building efforts, at least not initially. The resources required for effective nation-building are significant and they require the commitment of significant amounts of money and the risk of significant loss of life for the intervenor. In short, nation-building is a complex and expensive process. Even if you do everything well, you still may fail.

**Why the West Fails to Nation-Build**

In spite of all the complexities discussed above, the West knows how to nation-build. The wide range of texts, reports, and proceedings demonstrate a remarkable consensus in what is required to engage in successful nation-building efforts. The frequently cited Dobbins, et al. work combines the information in a simple, straightforward plan of action, but numerous other works offer similar conclusions. If you properly plan and resource a mission, the likelihood of success rises significantly. If you plan poorly (or not at all) and under-resource the mission, the likelihood of failure rises drastically.

The idea that repeated failures are the result of an ignorance of what to do is a convenient myth used by policy makers to hide a deeper truth: They know what must be done, but choose not to do it. It would also be nice if we could simply argue that our political leaders are incompetent. This would be a simple answer on multiple levels. It explains their failures without any need to believe that they are making these poor choices knowingly. It also offers a simple solution to the problem: replace them with competent leaders. Unfortunately, our political leaders are not incompetent. They are, in fact, highly competent at what they do and they know how to achieve the ends that they want. The problem is that they don’t want to nation-build.

There are two elements inherent to Western democracies that make political leaders consistently and knowingly plan for failure in nation-building. The first is that the Western Way of War does not lend itself to long-term, complex type of efforts like nation-building that do not involve engagement with and destruction of an enemy. The second is that democratic political leaders face powerful institutional incentives to engage in temporary stabilization, not nation-building. To be blunt, Western democracy has powerful internal incentives that mitigate against the pursuit of effective nation-building strategies.

The Western Way of War permeates the structure of Western governments. The militaries of the major Western powers are steeped in the tradition of war as it has been practiced in the West for nearly three millennia. In part this is due to the warrior culture of our citizen armies. The militaries of the West are based on the citizen soldier, and include the implicit bargain that the soldier will be called upon to serve the interest of the state only when necessary. More importantly, however, is how the bureaucratic function of the military has come to fit into the political institutions of the West. The military exists to defend the state against its enemies. The military is a tool for the ends of national policy, a legacy of the Clausewitzian element in Western military thinking. The ends of the Defense Department are to protect the nation against threats. The organization of Western defense bureaucracy is based on the identification of threats to the interests of the state and to provide a defense against those threats. This is filtered through a lens that frames how to deal with such threats in the context of the Western Way of War. Threats are identified and plans for directly dealing with such threats are developed. Real, material calculations are included, but the core of the planning structure is based on the need to
seek out and engage the enemy once battle is joined. Defense entails deterrence of such battles when possible, but when deterrence fails, the Western model of defense is based on bringing the enemy to battle and destroying his ability to wage war. This model is highly effective when fighting other nation states, but has no clear parallel in the nation-building context. In nation-building the military may have to destroy enemy forces, but they will simultaneously be required to provide policing functions, something outside the normal Western model of warfare.

The skills necessary for nation-building cut across the bureaucratic organization of Western democracies. While the military is a critical part, and perhaps the most visible element of the process, other institutions must also play a powerful role. Governance promotion, economic development, and the coordination of humanitarian relief and economic stabilization do not fit in the bailiwick of the military forces of the West. While they can provide security to allow these other functions to take place, the actual execution will require other agencies to play a major role.

This set of circumstances leads to a significant problem for Western governments; there is no institutional actor that is responsible to the success of nation-building. No agency is responsible for the success or failure of the nation-building operation. Bureaucratic agencies focus on the key policy areas that are part of their mission. This lack of institutional accountability points out a significant problem in the context of Western democracy. The lack of accountability means that no agency will be responsible for the ultimate failure of a nation-building mission. All groups may point to the actions of others when apportioning blame. While there is no clear responsibility, there is a strong incentive to seek control over nation-building funds. The funds at stake may be large or small, but there is a drive for all agencies to seek additional funds when they are on offer. The sizable funds necessary for even simple nation-building make the participation in such missions attractive for agencies, especially given the general lack of responsibility for the end result. Bureaucratic competition for funds will drive groups to seek participation in nation-building, but the lack of accompanying accountability offers no means of ensuring that such funds will be put to productive use. Bureaucratic competition decreases the likelihood of success in such missions.

Another side of the bureaucratic competition problem is that nation-building missions must compete for scarce resources with other programs and policies. The amount of money available to Western governments is limited and the demands on the public treasury far outstrip any possible means of financing. In short, the governments will always be pressed for more money than they can possibly provide. Deficit spending has offered a way around this problem, although even that appears to be reaching its limits in some states. This presents a problem for potential nation-builders. The need for adequate resourcing requires a budget contest in which the nation-building mission is pitted against both existing and potential programs. These programs already demand more than can be provided. Nation-building must justify its worth in the domestic political battle over scarce resources.

This is where the democratic nature of Western governments creates a significant problem for nation-builders. The primary driving motive for political leaders is to survive. Political leaders in democratic states survive by building winning coalitions of sufficient size that they can maximize the likelihood of victory in future elections. In democratic states this requires the provision of public goods in the form of policy that provides benefits to the members of the
The competition for resources suggests that the projects likely to become funded are those that contribute to the winning coalition of the political leadership. Even in cases of leadership transition, the leaders must calculate the likely support formed in the new winning coalition. Opposition political leaders make offers based on tangible political support within the potential coalition. This suggests that nation-building will gain support and resources from the government only when there is a meaningful political support based in the existing or potential winning coalition. This requires that there be significant political support for nation-building and that such support must be maintained for a significant period in order to engage in successful nation-building.

Democracy undermines a commitment to nation-building in another way: the duration dilemma. The duration of nation-building missions is likely to be long. While light missions in states with relatively viable institutions can take as little as five years, heavy missions involving the construction of state institutions from scratch are likely to take a decade or more. This takes the time to success well past the limits of the electoral cycle of democratic states. A decade would require that a nation-building mission be maintained across several electoral cycles in most states. In the United States, a decade would require survival through five House elections and two Presidential elections. Political leaders face serious resource constraints in the present and they must balance the current need for election with the longer-term demands of policy. In these cases, short-term electoral needs often trump the long-term needs of elected officials. This is true in economic terms, even to the point where democratic leaders will create long-run problems in exchange for short-term gains. There is no reason to expect that nation-building will be seen in a different light. In fact, the lack of a clear institutional home for nation-building leaves it without a significant backer in battles over annual budgets, making it less likely to experience success in these battles.

While nation-building is likely to lose in the budget battles in the day to day politics of most democracies, the underlying conditions that raise calls for nation-building do create a political problem for the leaders of democracies. Nation-building is required in failed or fragile states and generally enters the policy debate when some result of state failure has impacted the political system. Somalia enters the political debate when piracy disrupts international shipping. Sierra Leone enters the debate when its collapse threatens to spread contagion to the region. Afghanistan enters the debate only after the US had toppled the Taliban-led government in 2002. The US only toppled the Taliban due to the 9/11 terror attacks. Nation-building is never the goal. There is some other goal and nation-building is one of the policy tools for achieving it. This means that the actual nation-building mission will be of secondary concern. The larger goal will be the primary mover of policy.

This has significant implications for resourcing. Missions that require significant resources are likely to be either ignored or significantly under-resourced. The immediate costs of nation-building are high and the potential payoffs are long-delayed. The costs of an under-resourced mission are deferred, often past the next election cycle. The incentive is to use just enough to give the appearance of progress in the mission to get through the next election cycle and deal with the resulting consequences later. This is clearly seen in economic behavior and there is no reason to see the calculations any differently in nation-building.

It also requires a commitment to fund broader public goods that maintain a commitment to the system as a whole. This provides a hedge against future uncertainty in which the party in power loses power, but the system that will allow them to come back one day is preserved.
Democratic governments thus face a significant temptation to face the challenges of a policy that requires nation-building by funding a minimal mission that will open the golden window, giving the appearance of progress until the next election has passed. After this election, present problems or failings can be blamed on unforeseen circumstances, ungrateful locals, or a previous administration. As there is no clear institutional responsibility, this process will be abetted by the rampant finger-pointing of the bureaucratic agencies involved. The end result is that such missions will nearly always be under-resourced and thus likely to fail.

The basic political problem is exacerbated by the public mindset framed in the Western Way of War. The public perception is largely seen through the most visible early effort: the use of military force to establish order, defeat local resistance, and begin the process of transition. The frame of reference for the general population is thus that of war. The complexities of nation-building are not a concern of the wider population and their tendency to perceive such events through existing frames is strong. The frame of war is useful shorthand and seems to fit the conditions given what most people will see early in the process.

The problem here is that the Western Way of War is based on decisive battle and the return to peace quickly afterward. This model of warfare assumes that early success is generally all that is required. The rest should easily follow as defeated enemies accept that they have lost and accept outside help in reconstruction. This has been reinforced by the shorthand understanding of Japan and Germany after the Second World War. What is generally remembered is that defeated powers accepted that they had lost and were reintegrated into the world community as model states. That the effort required nearly a decade and the permanent basing of tens of thousands of troops is largely forgotten. The model in the minds of the Western populace is thus of nation-building as a short, sharp process that follows the model of war. The problem is that this is clearly not the way that nation-building works. The reality of the situation and the long time frame required are likely to generate policy fatigue in the population of Western intervenors. The support for such missions dwindles over time, a process accelerated if other events come to the fore.

The publics in Western democracies are likely to have mixed feelings about nation-building due to its demands on resources, but the long-run support is unlikely to hold for the duration required to succeed in challenging nation-building missions. Combined with the political survival incentive, this is likely to make political leaders in the West reluctant nation-builders at best. The incentives are strong to provide minimal treatment for the underlying issue and to withdraw before the task is completed. The bureaucratic support for nation-building is similarly thin. With no agencies with a clear responsibility for the outcome, there is no institutional mechanism to hold actors accountable for success or failure. All of these factors suggest that Western democracies will be ineffective nation-builders.

**Afghanistan – The Case that Should Have Worked but Didn’t**

If any nation-building effort should have worked it was the effort in Afghanistan. The United States suffered a significant terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 launched by a group based on Afghan territory. This group was supported and defended by the Taliban government. The United States was enraged by the attack and there was widespread popular support for using military force to destroy those who had attacked the US and ensure that no future attacks would be possible. There was widespread popular support amongst allied states for such a response. The Taliban government was generally unpopular in the world, having achieved recognition by a limited number of states. The United States is the most powerful nation in the world. It had the
strong support of allies. The relative costs of the Afghan mission were well within the capabilities of the US to afford, although not without sacrifice. No nation in the world had more experience with nation-building than the US. Despite all of this, the mission failed and Afghanistan is currently muddling along waiting the withdrawal of American forces just before the election of 2012. What happened?

To begin with, there was effectively no planning for the Afghan nation-building effort. The timing of the conflict in Afghanistan was based on American political considerations rather than military considerations. The primary mission was the military defeat of the Taliban government using the forces that could be deployed within the political timeline. While early military success led the US to believe that the war was largely over within six months, there was still only a rudimentary nation-building strategy.

Table 1 shows the estimate for the number of troops necessary in the first year of a nation-building effort in Afghanistan. The mission can be considered a heavy mission in which the institutions must be created from the ground up. The civil war in Afghanistan had effectively destroyed all national institutions and there was no government in place that could be co-opted. This suggests a force of just under 600,000 troops as the minimum necessary number in order to provide a chance for success. The total number of active duty US Army and Marine Corps personnel on March 30, 2001 was 517,890. This indicates that the United States was militarily incapable of engaging in post-conflict nation-building in Afghanistan with its existing forces. The use of reserve forces and allied troops could have supplemented forces sufficiently to make the mission possible, but this would have required significant commitments of personnel on the part of a large number of NATO member states. The United States could have expanded its forces by expanding its military, but this option was never considered. Even if the US had called up reserves, allied commitments would have been required to meet the first-year requirements of the golden window. Simply looking at the military forces necessary in the first year of the nation-building mission, it would have taken great effort on the part of the United States and its allies to deploy the necessary troops in order to achieve the minimum necessary numbers in the first year of the nation-building effort. Having said this, it is clearly possible that it could have been done in a material sense.

That it was not only not done, but not even suggested tells us an important story. The struggles to support even the inadequate numbers of troops that were deployed suggest an even more important story. Following the most devastating terror attack in its history, with strong allied support, the United States never even considered undertaking the minimum necessary effort to engage in nation-building in Afghanistan. Following a devastating attack that launched a global war on terrorism, the United States did not increase the size of its military forces to match its commitments. In a moment in which there was as much support as will ever exist for military intervention and the nation-building to follow, not one Western democracy even raised the possibility of adequately resourcing the mission.

To be fair, Afghanistan is among the worst possible scenarios for nation-building. The country is large. Years of civil war left no infrastructure either economic or governmental in place. The country is well-armed and generally hostile to outsiders. A worse case would be hard to find. The political pressure on President Bush to act in response to 9/11 was powerful and there was significant reason to hurry in launching a military response. Yet these factors do not change the fact that a full resourcing of the Afghan mission was never even considered. No plan
was put forward, and no debate was ever held in the Congress. There was never even a proposal given to the President that included the fully resourced option.4

The cost of the choice to under-resource the mission has been high. Failure of nation-building in Afghanistan has led to significant complications for American policy. Afghanistan remains a battleground. While counterinsurgency efforts have had some success in 2010-11, these are offset by the withdrawal dates for US forces beginning in the summer of 2011 and being well underway before the 2012 Presidential election. The existence of an exit date gives the Taliban a strong incentive to bide their time while the US draws down. The chaos from the Afghan conflict has spilled into Pakistan. Attacks in Iran and India show how the contagion is spreading. The Taliban remains alive and well and al Qaeda remains active, its success in recruiting Americans has grown, not diminished. These costs are large and the costs grow with each year.

While the cost of failure has been high, it also illustrates the problems of democracy in nation-building. The costs of the Afghan failure are not directly felt in the United States. The occasional terror attack and the radicalization of a handful of individuals in the US is not a serious threat to the United States, nor does it represent a significant cost from the perspective of the political elite. The cost of deploying a sufficient force to Afghanistan would have raised the monetary cost by a significant amount. To maintain the large numbers of troops over time would have required that the overall size of the Army be increased, increasing defense spending at the expense of domestic programs or requiring higher taxes, or (most likely) both. Such a commitment would also have effectively prevented the United States from engaging in any other large scale military operations for the duration of the Afghan conflict. The invasion of Iraq (also under-resourced, although not as badly) would have been impossible. Deterrence against Iran, North Korea, and others would also have eroded. Most importantly, it remains an open question whether the required troop numbers could have been supported without the activation of Selective Service. The potential need for the resumption of conscription would have raised significant political opposition in domestic politics. It would have entailed significant political risks.

The strategy of under-resourcing produced the domestic outcome desired. There was no serious political debate in the United States about Afghanistan until well after the 2002 elections. Even in 2004 the election was more focused on the invasion of Iraq than on Afghanistan. The Afghan War remained the back-burner issue until the 2008 Presidential Campaign. Even then, it was held as a contrast to the unpopular Iraq War. Afghanistan was portrayed as having been forgotten in the drive to war in Iraq, ignoring the basic fact that the decision to under-resource Afghanistan was taken before any war was on prospect in Iraq.

We can never know whether or not the American people and their allies in NATO countries would have supported a force of 600,000 for a sustained period in Afghanistan. We will never know because they were never asked. The cost of such a force was too high to even contemplate in spite of the widespread public support of actions against the Taliban. If nation-building cannot be supported under these conditions, it is unlikely that it every will be.

Conclusions

Nation-building missions are complex and require proper planning and execution in order to be successful. In spite of this, the powerful democracies of the West have the collective

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4 This is a contrast to the Iraq War where the Pentagon provided fully-resourced invasion and reconstruction plans which were rejected by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. (Woodward 2004, Bensahel, et al. 2008)
expertise and financial resources to engage in nation-building. That they choose not to is a reflection of the deep incompatibilities between the Western ideas of warfare and the nature of the nation-building mission. It is also a reflection of the general aversion towards policies that have immediate, potentially high costs and deferred payoffs. The nature of the democratic process makes under-resourcing of nation-building likely. There will be strong pressure for democratic leaders to spend their money elsewhere.

As the Afghan case shows, even in cases where there are the conditions for public support for such missions, there will be great reluctance on the part of political leaders to undertake such expensive and time-consuming missions. The quick apparent victory in Afghanistan was followed by an assumption that the nation-building would take care of itself and public attention quickly moved on. The idea that the decisive battle was over and the enemy had been defeated led to widespread misunderstanding of the nature of the nation-building phase of the Afghan mission and encouraged the withering of the Afghan effort.

The combination of the Western Way of War and democratic politics places both cultural and political pressure on political leaders to avoid commitments to nation-building. Political leaders facing these pressures will consistently under-resource nation-building so long as the current conditions are in place.

While this suggests that there is a dim future for nation-building, there are a number of hopeful elements that can be taken from this analysis. The first is that political leaders respond to the demands of their institutions. The lack of a constituency for nation building in advanced democracies is not a permanent fixture of Western culture. Education and lobbying efforts can gradually shift the public mind to a greater acceptance of the need for nation-building. A focus on cost-benefit logic will be a part of this process. It is much cheaper to engage in a monitoring mission in a fragile state than to deal with the contagion effects of civil war in a failed one. This suggests that early intervention and monitoring could shift the cost side of the equation, making the required investment on the part of the intervener lower.

It is also possible that democratic states could create an institutional “home” for nation-building. The present system where no institution is accountable leaves the democratic West with no bureaucratic support for the pursuit of nation-building. The creation of a Department of Nation Building would solve this by creating a permanent group dedicated to the successful execution of nation-building missions. While this organization would have to fight the usual bureaucratic battles, it would at least have a powerful stake in success. This would have a further advantage in that it could help shift nation-building out of the realm of military forces and into a civilian role. If nation-building could become more directly associated with economic development, the impact of the assumptions of the Western Way of War could be reduced. Military force would still be required, but the policing and institution-building efforts could be handled by the civilian forces with the changed expectations that would entail.

While there are ways to adapt, it is not clear that there is any pressing constituency to make this happen in Western governments. There is no apparent reason for the West to change its current policy stance of avoidance and under-resourcing. Until the development of a clear domestic political constituency that favors nation-building, it is unlikely that we will see significant progress in making international interventions more effective.
Table 1: Approximate Number of Troops Needed for Nation-Building in the First Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State (Population)</th>
<th>Peace Monitoring</th>
<th>“Light” Peacekeeping</th>
<th>“Heavy” Peacekeeping</th>
<th>Heavy Peacekeeping and Ground-Up NB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone (5,363,669)</td>
<td>5,400</td>
<td>32,000</td>
<td>64,000</td>
<td>107,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haiti (9,719,932)</td>
<td>9,700</td>
<td>58,000</td>
<td>126,000</td>
<td>194,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivory Coast (21,504,162)</td>
<td>21,000</td>
<td>130,000</td>
<td>258,000</td>
<td>430,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan (29,835,392)</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>180,000</td>
<td>358,000</td>
<td>597,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source of population numbers: CIA World Fact Book, 2011
Source of troop estimates are based on Dobbins, et al, 2007

Table 2: Costs for Various Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State (Population)</th>
<th>First Year Humanitarian</th>
<th>Annual Governance Costs</th>
<th>Total First Year Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone (5,363,669)</td>
<td>$182,364,746</td>
<td>$500,448,000</td>
<td>$682,812,746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haiti (9,719,932)</td>
<td>$330,477,688</td>
<td>$1,162,720,000</td>
<td>$1,493,197,688</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ivory Coast (21,504,162)</td>
<td>$731,141,508</td>
<td>$3,393,200,000</td>
<td>$4,662,341,508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan (29,835,392)</td>
<td>$1,014,403,328</td>
<td>$3,100,240,000</td>
<td>$4,114,643,328</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source of population numbers: CIA World Fact Book, 2011
Source of troop estimates are based on Dobbins, et al, 2007
References:


