

Afghanistan and Nation Building
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As we watch the failure of one of our most sustained efforts at nation building, it is time to revisit when this policy can work and when it cannot. If we do not learn this, we will continue to blunder into hopeless situations.

President Woodrow Wilson established this national aspiration when, at the conclusion of World War I, he was hopeful that our entry could help "make the world safe for democracy." In the wake of that war, three empires did collapse, and a number of aspiring democracies emerged.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed into several Central and Eastern European republics, the most hopeful of which were Czechoslovakia and Austria, both of which were educated, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan. However, these states, along with Yugoslavia, failed to maintain their independence in the face of Fascism and Communism.

The collapse of the Russian Empire freed the Baltic states (Latvia, Lithuania, Latvia) and Poland, none of which escaped recapture by the new Communist Russian Empire. Russia's Central Asian colonies almost immediately fell to the new Communist Empire, as did the most eastern European holdings, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania.

After World War II, empires continued to collapse after the fall of Nazi Germany and Fascist Japan, spawning new republics. In these countries, American nation building succeeded. This emboldened us to think that we could do this everywhere in the world; serve as the inspiration for budding new countries.

The Muslim-majority world demonstrated from the start resistance to democratization. Only powerful, ruthless empires had kept ethnic and religious diversity from conflict. Once empires were gone, those states reverted to their instinctive behavior: corruption, violence, and religious fanaticism. There were only two exceptions: Turkey, the survivor of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and Azerbaijan, which had a two-year run as a vibrant republic before occupation by Communist Russia. Iran, which descended from the great Persian Empire, had a modernizing imperial dynasty which survived for four decades, unfortunately falling to a fascist form of Islam.

American nation building succeeded in most of Europe and in Japan because all of these countries were educated, largely middle class, and with modern secular culture. They had all experienced participatory governance before they fell to Fascism. The American military occupations were essential, and were probably the most benign examples of power ever exhibited by the winners of a war.

The military rounded up for trial and punishment the worst of the fascists, and encouraged reeducating the population. That we were willing to sustain American forces to remain in Germany and Japan guaranteed the continuation of the democratization process.

American nation building has not succeeded in countries with testosterone-poisoned cultures. Those in which the worst aspects of male behavior (bullying, violent competition, disdain for women, and a structure of authoritarianism) dominate. Such testosterone poisoning characterizes religious fundamentalisms (all of them) and dictatorships. The better aspects of masculinity (protectiveness, compassion, courage, and partnership with women) are in short supply in the Middle East and in authoritarian governments everywhere. They all persecute women.

Afghanistan also suffers from its remoteness, far from oceans and surrounded by potential enemies. It suffers further from its cultural history: the wonderful cosmopolitan nature of its once silk-route cities but hampered by its rural, religious, tribal half. It is truly two countries, not one viable one. The eastern area that abuts Iran (from which Afghanistan was carved) is the most amenable to modernization. The area near Pakistan suffers from poisonous tribalism and the most oppressive and brutal aspects of Islam.

Afghanistan has prevented all three of its imperial attackers from remaining and being able to modernize the culture. The British, Russians, and Americans have all failed to subdue them enough to bring their culture to modern standards.

It is most unfortunate that the Communist Russian efforts were thwarted by the United States. The Cold War aborted the Russian near success in enabling modernization and

suppressing tribalism. They were ruthless enough to take on militant Islam, but we ended that campaign by arming the very fanatics who later attacked us.

The Taliban will ultimately collapse in testosterone-poisoned tribal civil war. Afghan women are once more the victims.

686 words

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