

Steve Herbert



A 7th SFG Special Forces medic gives a young boy a coloring book during a meeting with village religious leaders to gain their support and obtain information, Afghanistan 2008

The Backlash Against Nation-Building

BY DOMINIC TIERNEY

During a meteoric rise, David Petraeus became the champion of the “COINdinistas,” or the soldiers, analysts, and policy-makers dedicated to improving the Army and Marine Corps’ capabilities at counterinsurgency and nation-building. In 2012, Petraeus resigned as head of the Central Intelligence Agency. His fall from grace occurred for private reasons, but it nevertheless symbolized the decline of the COINdinistas and the backlash against nation-building in the United States. In recent years, American elites and the public have exhibited growing disapproval of the war in Afghanistan, and increasing opposition toward the idea of stabilization operations as a core function of the military.

The backlash against nation-building will significantly shape the coming era of American foreign policy, by heightening the pressure to withdraw from Afghanistan, deterring the United States from involvement in foreign civil wars, and encouraging a shift in military training and planning away from stabilization operations toward conventional inter-state conflicts. Despite the backlash, however, Washington will almost certainly end up nation-building again. And the aversion to stabilization missions may impede the military’s capacity to carry out “non-traditional” roles, and heighten the odds of being drawn into a prolonged quagmire.

COIN-Star

In the course of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the star of the COINdinistas ascended in the U.S. military, as nation-building became prioritized as a central task for the Army and Marine Corps. Nation-building refers to the use of force to construct a state and create order within another country, including: peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, training of indigenous security forces, counter-terrorism, and counterinsurgency. Nation-building missions can face varying degrees of violent resistance, from relatively manageable organized crime, as in Kosovo, to full-scale guerrilla warfare, as in Iraq and Afghanistan.

*Dominic Tierney is Associate Professor of Political Science at Swarthmore College, and a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. His new book, *The Right Way to Lose a War: America in an Age of Unwinnable Conflicts*, was published by Little, Brown in June 2015.*

The COINdinistas exhibited many of the hallmarks of a successful political movement. First, they had a canon. In November 2005, Department of Defense Directive 3000.05 established stability operations as a “core U.S. military mission,” which should be “given priority comparable to combat operations.”¹ The most significant doctrinal work was the 2006 Army and Marine Corps Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, which placed stability operations at the heart of the armed forces’ mission, and stated on its first page: “Soldiers and Marines are expected to be nation-builders as well as warriors.”²

Second, the COINdinistas had a paladin in the form of General David Petraeus. He was the driving force behind FM 3-24, was lionized in three different *Newsweek* cover stories, and rose quickly through the ranks of the military

and intelligence community to become commander of the U.S. forces in Iraq, head of United States Central Command, commander of the campaign in Afghanistan, and director of the CIA.

Third, the COINdinistas had a major influence on policy. After 2006, the principles of FM 3-24 shaped operational planning at every level of decision-making. The Department of Defense announced a range of initiatives to boost the armed forces’ ability to conduct counterinsurgency, including additional resources for the Army, Marine Corps, and Special Operations Forces, and a renewed focus on language learning and advisory capabilities.³

In 2007, the George W. Bush administration explicitly adopted the counterinsurgency principles of FM 3-24 as part of the “surge”



Sage Ross

Protesters march down toward the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. during the September 15, 2007 protest against the Iraq War.

strategy in Iraq, which contributed to a rapid decline of violence in the country.⁴ Two years later, in 2009, President Barack Obama nearly tripled U.S. forces in Afghanistan and adopted a more expansive counterinsurgency approach. At one meeting in November 2009, Obama turned to Petraeus and said, “What I’m looking for is a surge.”⁵ Jennifer Taw described the embrace of nation-building as “the armed forces’ most fundamental adjustment since the establishment of the Department of Defense in 1947.”⁶

The Backlash Against Nation-Building

Since 2009, there has been a profound backlash against nation-building as a core function of the U.S. military among officials, political elites, and wider public opinion. Skeptics contend that nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan has been a debacle, stabilization operations are inherently a Sisyphean labor doomed to fail, such missions must never happen again, and the military should shift its resources and training away from nation-building toward preparation for conventional interstate war.

Opposition to prolonged stabilization missions is a defining principle of Obama’s foreign policy. The Obama Doctrine favors precise and surgical operations, including raids and drone strikes, rather than expansive efforts to reorder foreign countries.⁷ The president has called for “the end of long-term nation-building with large military footprints,” in favor of “nation-building right here at home.”⁸

Despite his initial support for the surge in Afghanistan, Obama soon grew disillusioned by the slow pace of change and looked for a quicker exit strategy. In late 2010, the president formed a committee—known informally as “Afghan Good Enough”—to narrow the scope

of the mission. The White House decided to remove most U.S. troops by the end of 2014, leaving in place a small successor force of 10,000 soldiers that would be steadily withdrawn by 2016.

Opposition to prolonged stabilization missions is a defining principle of Obama’s foreign policy

In January 2012, the administration announced new national defense guidance, marked by a pivot from the Middle East to East Asia, and a transition away from nation-building toward countering conventional threats. The Pentagon declared that the Army: “will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations.”⁹ In 2015, Obama asked Congress to authorize the use of force against Islamic State but pointedly said the resolution: “would not authorize long-term, large-scale ground combat operations like those our nation conducted in Iraq and Afghanistan.”¹⁰

Leading Republicans have also grown skeptical of nation-building. “I don’t want to be nation-building in Afghanistan,” claimed John Huntsman, “when this nation so desperately needs to be built.”¹¹ In the third presidential debate in 2012, Mitt Romney said: “We don’t want another Iraq, we don’t want another Afghanistan. That’s not the right course for us.”¹²

Within the U.S. military, critics of nation-building have become increasingly vocal. Colonel (Ret.) Gian Gentile, a professor at West Point, argued that a “hyper-emphasis on counterinsurgency puts the American Army in a perilous condition. Its ability to fight wars consisting of head-on battles using tanks and

mechanized infantry is in danger of atrophy.”¹³ In 2011, former Undersecretary of Defense Jed Babbin described the U.S. military as suffering “COIN fatigue,” marked by “stress, doubt and anxiety.”¹⁴

There is a wider backlash in American society against stabilization operations. A strident literature has emerged that is skeptical about the success of the surges in Iraq and Afghanistan,¹⁵ sees nation-building as a distraction from the military’s core task of winning conventional conflicts,¹⁶ and portrays the COINdinistas’ program as a hubristic plan to manage the international system.¹⁷

A strident literature has emerged that is skeptical about the success of the surges in Iraq and Afghanistan, sees nation-building as a distraction from the military’s core task of winning conventional conflicts, and portrays the COINdinistas’ program as a hubristic plan to manage the international system

Meanwhile, the American public mood is allergic to sustained nation-building. In 2012, support for the war in Afghanistan hit an all time low of 27 percent.¹⁸ In 2009, 49 percent of Americans agreed that the United States should “mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can”—the highest figure in over 40 years of asking that question.¹⁹

Why did the backlash emerge? The current aversion to nation-building partly reflects the stark costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nearly 4,500 American troops were killed in Iraq and over 2,300 American troops have died in Afghanistan. The White House put the financial cost of these wars at about \$1.4 trillion since 2001, but the long-term figure,

including obligations to veterans, may be two or three times as high.²⁰

In addition, skepticism about nation-building represents a reemergence of the traditional American view that the military’s job is to fight and win the country’s wars—meaning conventional interstate campaigns. Americans have rarely been enthusiastic nation-builders. Studies show that public approval for nation-building missions is consistently lower than for interventions aimed at restraining the foreign policies of other states.²¹

For many Americans, interstate wars, such as the world wars, feel like righteous crusades to defeat evil. By contrast, nation-building and counter-insurgency are morally murky, and it is not clear who the good guys and the bad guys are. Chasing guerrillas also dredges up painful memories of Vietnam. And in stabilization operations, negative events like bombings are inherently more newsworthy than positive events like building new roads—so if the mission makes the front pages, it’s probably for the wrong reasons.

American culture may also heighten popular skepticism toward nation-building. Americans on the left sometimes view stabilization operations as a form of imperialism, which is contrary to the country’s anti-colonial pedigree. Americans on the right often see nation-building as a kind of big government social engineering. U.S. soldiers should be toppling dictators, not constructing infrastructure or giving handouts to foreigners.²²

The U.S. military has also traditionally prioritized conventional interstate war and regarded nation-building operations, including counterinsurgency, as peripheral tasks.²³ According to historian Russell Weigley, the U.S. military has repeatedly battled guerrillas, but each time it “had to relearn appropriate

tactics at exorbitant costs,” and viewed the experience “as an aberration that need not be repeated.”²⁴ Conrad Crane wrote, “The U.S. military would rather not deal with [stabilization operations] or would like to quickly hand them off to other U.S. Government agencies or international organizations.”²⁵ After the Cold War ended, for example, stabilization missions were dismissed as “military operations other than war,” or MOOTW. The chairman of the joint chiefs reportedly said, “Real men don’t do MOOTW.”²⁶

The current backlash is not a new phenomenon. Historically, U.S. stabilization operations have often triggered a negative domestic reaction. Since the Civil War, the United States has engaged in half-a-dozen phases of nation-building, including southern Reconstruction after the American Civil War, the occupation of the Philippines, the “banana wars” in Latin America in the early twentieth century, Cold War nation-building in South Vietnam and elsewhere, post-Cold War missions in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo, and the war on terror operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Strikingly, each phase produced a hostile elite and public response and sentiments of “never again.”²⁷

The Wisdom of Restraint

Will the backlash against nation-building, and a reassertion of the traditional preference for conventional interstate war, have a positive or negative effect on American foreign policy?

In several respects, the impact could be salutary. Skepticism about nation-building may encourage caution about initiating military campaigns—especially wading into foreign civil wars. On the eve of conflict, presidents are often overconfident about the success of the mission. In 2003, for example, the Bush

administration promised that stabilizing Iraq would be straightforward, but these hopes proved to be wide of the mark.²⁸ Iraq also reveals that when an administration is set on war, and controls the intelligence data, the media and Congress may provide insufficient scrutiny of the strategic consequences of using force. Therefore, if the backlash against nation-building promotes a more self-critical approach toward war, this would be a significant benefit.

There are limits—sometimes stark limits—on the degree of order that the United States can impose in a divided and culturally alien society like Iraq or Afghanistan. Creating an effective state is a long and challenging process, and the temporary arrival of a few thousand Americans does not provide a simple short cut.

In addition, the backlash may underscore the very real challenges of nation-building. There are limits—sometimes stark limits—on the degree of order that the United States can impose in a divided and culturally alien society like Iraq or Afghanistan. Creating an effective state is a long and challenging process, and the temporary arrival of a few thousand Americans does not provide a simple short cut. Indeed, the deployment of U.S. forces may sometimes prove counter-productive by provoking local resistance from foreign traditionalists against the threatening occupier—creating what David Kilcullen calls “accidental guerrillas.”²⁹

Washington may be able to achieve its core goals in a foreign civil war without using expansive nation-building to create a leviathan state with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Many civil wars feature diverse and fluid

relationships between the government and insurgents, in which the regime finds ways to co-exist with rebel factions through formal or informal spheres of influence, or even cooperates with certain guerrilla groups against a common foe. As a result, Washington may be able to live with a messy outcome, where it seeks to manage the degree of harm rather than prohibit the insurgency entirely.³⁰

Historically, conventional interstate conflicts like the world wars have represented the gravest threat to U.S. national security. Prioritizing nation-building over, say, checking the rise of China, could represent a strategically risky trade-off

Furthermore, the transformation of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps into effective nation-building institutions comes at a price. For one thing, presidents could become more tempted to use the military for stabilization missions, potentially encouraging costly interventions. And by preparing for nation-building, the United States may erode its capacity at other military endeavors.³¹ Historically, conventional interstate conflicts like the world wars have represented the gravest threat to U.S. national security. Prioritizing nation-building over, say, checking the rise of China, could represent a strategically risky trade-off.

A Dangerous Mindset

The backlash against nation-building, however, also produces very real dangers. Elite and public skepticism will not prevent the United States from engaging in stabilization operations—but it may inhibit their success.

In some shape or form, future nation-building missions are inevitable. In 2007,

Robert Gates, the secretary of defense, said that unconventional wars were “the ones most likely to be fought in the years ahead.”³² Indeed, U.S. military history is a story of brief periods of conventional interstate war followed by long phases of nation-building. In 1940, the Department of the Navy published the *Small Wars Manual*, which described the Marines’ regular involvement in stabilization and counterinsurgency missions. “Small wars represent the normal and frequent operations of the Marine Corps. During about 85 of the last 100 years, the Marine Corps has been engaged in small wars in different parts of the world. The Marine Corps has landed troops 180 times in 37 countries from 1800 to 1934.”³³

By 2008, little had apparently changed. “Think of where our forces have been sent and have been engaged over the last 40-plus years,” said Gates. “Vietnam, Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Horn of Africa and more. In fact, the first Gulf War stands alone in over two generations of constant military engagement as a more or less traditional conventional conflict.”³⁴

Partly it is an issue of math. The nature of global conflict has shifted away from interstate war toward civil war. The percentage of conflicts that were civil wars rose from 66 percent from 1896-1944, to 79 percent from 1945-1989, and to 87 percent from 1990-2007.³⁵ In a world where almost nine out of ten wars are civil wars, virtually every military path leads to stabilization operations, including intervening in an internal conflict to combating terrorist networks, contributing to a peacekeeping mission, or launching a humanitarian intervention. Foreign internal conflicts do not always—or even usually—represent a major security

threat to the United States. But globalization has heightened the potential for civil wars to produce ripple effects that impact U.S. interests and values. The collapse of Afghanistan in the 1990s spurred the rise of al-Qaeda and ultimately led to the 9/11/01 attacks. In July 2014 a commercial airliner was shot down during the internal conflict in Eastern Ukraine, escalating tensions between Russia and the West.

Today, in the midst of the backlash era, the United States is initiating new nation-building operations. In 2011, Obama sent military advisors to aid allied governments in central Africa fight the Lord's Resistance Army.

In the summer of 2012, the United States dispatched personnel to Jordan to help deal with the consequences of civil war in Syria, including the flow of refugees. In September 2012, in the wake of the Benghazi attacks, Washington stepped up its program to train Libyan commandos in counter-terrorism.

Even the rare exceptions—conventional interstate wars—often evolve into stabilization missions. Regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq triggered extended nation-building operations. As the so-called “Pottery Barn Rule” holds: *you break it, you own it*.

Washington is also likely to engage in counterinsurgency precisely because it does



Army Specialist Fourth Class Dennis Kurpius

A Viet Cong base camp being burned in My Tho, southern Vietnam. In the foreground is Private First Class Raymond Rumpa, 1968.

not favor this type of campaign. Rational opponents will choose guerrilla tactics because they offer higher odds of success. In 2008, Michael Vickers, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict and Interdependent Capabilities, stated that, “more and more adversaries have realized it’s better to take [the United States] on in an asymmetric fashion.”³⁶

Crucially, the backlash may diminish the odds of success in future stabilization operations. Nation-building and counterinsurgency require a unique skill set. In essence, a civil war is a competition between the insurgents and the counter-insurgents over which side can govern most effectively. Counterinsurgents should isolate the guerrillas from the people by living and patrolling close to the population, building local relationships, and

boosting the legitimacy of the regime. Soldiers may be asked to perform roles far beyond a warrior’s traditional purview, including social work, engineering, and teaching. Meanwhile, force should be used with restraint. Indiscriminate firepower can cause collateral damage and recruit more enemies. Variations on these tactics have proved fairly effective in countries as diverse as Malaya, the Philippines, Northern Ireland, and Colombia.

An aversion to nation-building has impaired America’s capacity to develop this skill set. As a result, Washington has repeatedly engaged in stabilization operations without adequate preparation. There is a great temptation to ready the country for the kind of wars that the American public, elites, and the military want to fight—conventional interstate wars—rather than the types of conflicts that



Staff Sgt. William Greeson, U.S. Marine Corps

U.S. Marine Corps Capt. Gus Biggio with the civil affairs group meets with Nawa District Administrator Haji Mohammed Khan at Patrol Base Jaker in Helmand province, Afghanistan to discuss road improvement projects in the district on July 28, 2009.

are most likely to occur—counterinsurgency and nation-building missions. In 2008, Gates warned against: “the kind of backsliding that has occurred in the past, where if nature takes its course, these kinds of capabilities—that is, counterinsurgency—tend to wither on the vine.”³⁷

The United States, for example, fought the Vietnam War in large part as a conventional interstate war, by emphasizing high technology and big unit warfare. William Westmoreland, the U.S. commander in Vietnam, said the solution to the insurgency lay with one word: “firepower.”³⁸

But these tactics proved disastrous in a complex counterinsurgency operation. One study found that areas of South Vietnam bombed by the United States tended to shift over to insurgent control.³⁹ The Army thought that with sufficient high explosives it could not lose in Vietnam, but as defense analyst Andrew Krepinevich noted, more likely it could not win.⁴⁰

After Vietnam, the Army largely abandoned training at nation-building for a generation. All the material on counterinsurgency held at the Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg was deliberately destroyed. Instead, the Army focused on planning for a conventional war against the Soviets in Europe. Defense analyst Robert Cassidy wrote that the Army’s desire to “expunge the specter of Vietnam” kept it “as an institution from really learning from those lessons.”⁴¹ Similarly, during the 1990s, the U.S. military spent much of its time preparing for conventional interstate wars like the Gulf War, even though interventions in foreign civil wars in places like Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo proved to be a far more frequent occurrence.⁴²

In 2000, the George W. Bush administration came into office belittling nation-building as armed social work and Bill Clinton-style do-goodery. “Let me tell you what else I’m worried about,” said Bush the day before the 2000 election; “I’m worried about an opponent who uses ‘nation-building’ and ‘the military’ in the same sentence.”⁴³

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld pursued the “transformation agenda,” or the creation of a leaner U.S. military with highly mobile ground forces that could win quickly through shock and awe. This sharpened rapier was designed for interstate war and regime change rather than the drudgework of stabilization missions. In a 2003 speech entitled “Beyond Nation-Building,” Rumsfeld contrasted the prolonged operations in the Balkans and the resulting “culture of dependence,” with America’s light footprint in Afghanistan.⁴⁴

The Bush administration’s aversion to nation-building led directly to the military fiascos in Afghanistan and Iraq. After overthrowing the Taliban regime in Kabul, the White House resisted any prolonged effort to stabilize the country. A memo sent to Rumsfeld early in the war said that Washington, “should not allow concerns about stability to paralyze U.S. efforts to oust the Taliban leadership... Nation-building is not our key strategic goal.”⁴⁵ In 2002, there were only 10,000 U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan, along with 5,000 international troops, in a country of around 25 million people. These limited forces meant the Afghan government could not offer basic services or establish the rule of law. The Taliban recovered because there was little to stop them.⁴⁶

Similarly, the Bush administration’s skepticism about nation-building undermined the

achievement of long-term political goals in Iraq. Bush sought to remove Saddam without getting bogged down in a drawn-out stabilization operation. As a result, there were too few American troops to stabilize the country, and little or no preparation for the potential collapse of Iraqi institutions and widespread looting. The first U.S. official in charge of Iraqi reconstruction, Jay Garner, described the goal as, “stand up a government in Iraq and get out as fast as we can.”⁴⁷ Even as Iraq slid into civil war, Washington pursued a hurried withdrawal plan known as “leave-to-win,” based on hastily training Iraqi forces, handing over power to Iraqi exiles, and reducing U.S. troop levels from 130,000 to 100,000 by the end of 2006.⁴⁸

At a time of budget cuts, the ax may fall disproportionately on nation-building and counterinsurgency capabilities. As a result of the backlash, the next major U.S. stabilization mission could feature the unprepared Army of 2003 rather than the more effective Army of 2008

The “transformed” U.S. military proved ill suited to the complex demands of counterinsurgency. In 2007, Gates said that after Vietnam, “the Army relegated unconventional war to the margins of training, doctrine, and budget priorities.” As a result, “it left the services unprepared to deal with the operations that followed: Somalia, Haiti, the Balkans, and more recently Afghanistan and Iraq—the consequences and costs of which we are still struggling with today.”⁴⁹

Eventually, at a great price in blood and treasure, the U.S. military became a more effective counterinsurgency force. In 2006, the Army created the Irregular Warfare Center at

Fort Leavenworth in Kansas to institutionalize the lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq. The Center trained dozens of brigade combat teams in the principles of counterinsurgency, helped write army doctrine on irregular war, and collaborated with alliance partners. To create more realistic training programs, the military even hired hundreds of Iraqi-Americans, via the Screen Actors Guild, to act as Iraqi civilians and rebels. These efforts paid a dividend. By 2007, Iraqi insurgents required six times as many bombs to kill one U.S. soldier compared to when IEDs first appeared.⁵⁰

But this skill set may soon be lost. At a time of budget cuts, the ax may fall disproportionately on nation-building and counterinsurgency capabilities. As a result of the backlash, the next major U.S. stabilization mission could feature the unprepared Army of 2003 rather than the more effective Army of 2008.

In 2014, the Army announced that the Irregular Warfare Center would close—even as irregular warfare became the dominant kind of global conflict. Similarly, the Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute (PKSOI) at the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania was established in 1993, and has faced the threat of closure ever since. Indeed, the George W. Bush administration decided to shut down PKSOI, before changing its mind in the wake of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite its tiny budget of around \$3 million, in 2012 PKSOI lost several positions to budget cuts. Although in 2015 it is enjoying significant growth, its long-term survival remains uncertain.

Another danger is that the backlash against nation-building may encourage a kind of national post-traumatic stress disorder, with flashbacks to Iraq and Afghanistan, the avoidance of stimuli associated with these

operations, and significant impairment to functioning. Lawrence Freedman wrote that the “Iraq Syndrome” could produce a “renewed, nagging and sometimes paralyzing belief that any large-scale U.S. military intervention abroad is doomed to practical failure and moral iniquity.”⁵¹

For example, the United States may be tempted to end a military operation prematurely, to avoid any possibility of nation-building. In 2011, the U.S. participated in an international mission in Libya that led to the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi. But Obama was averse to any sustained U.S. effort to stabilize the country. As a result, Libya collapsed into anarchy. In 2014, Obama said, “we [and] our European partners underestimated the need to come in full force if you’re going to do this. Then it’s the day after Qaddafi is gone, when everybody is feeling good and everybody is holding up posters saying, ‘Thank you, America.’ At that moment, there has to be a much more aggressive effort to rebuild societies that didn’t have any civic traditions.”⁵²

It is true, of course, that U.S. military failure in a large-scale conventional campaign could be very costly—but it is also extremely unlikely. After decades of investment in interstate war, the United States has a massive advantage over its rivals, and this edge is not about to disappear any time soon. By contrast, debacles in future counterinsurgency campaigns are all too easy to imagine, and as we saw in Iraq and Afghanistan, potentially carry a high price.

A Multipurpose Army

The United States must prepare for the reality of modern war by forging the military into a tool with a full-spectrum of capabilities—less like a rapier and more like a Swiss Army knife.

We should fashion an adaptable institution that can out-innovate insurgents and terrorists. We should prepare soldiers for the human dimension of war, provide adequate cultural and language training, institutionalize the lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq, and strengthen our capacity to advise indigenous security forces.⁵³

These full-spectrum capabilities are not

We should prepare soldiers for the human dimension of war, provide adequate cultural and language training, institutionalize the lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq, and strengthen our capacity to advise indigenous security forces

cheap. But they are less expensive than big-ticket hardware designed for interstate war, like the F-35 warplane—the most expensive weapon program in history with a lifetime price tag of over one trillion dollars.

The U.S. military’s mission is not to fight and win interstate wars: its task is to protect American security. This may require conventional fighting, or it may necessitate a wide range of other operations. The official “Functions of the Department of Defense and Its Major Components,” for example, lists among the Army’s core duties: “Occupy territories abroad and provide for the initial establishment of a military government pending transfer of this responsibility to other authority.”⁵⁴

Will a full-spectrum military cut against the grain of American culture? Preparing soldiers for a broad variety of endeavors is consistent with the thinking of the earliest Americans. The Founding Generation created what historian Michael Tate called a

“multipurpose army.” In the nineteenth century, troops farmed, dug canals, and built bridges, schools, chapels, hospitals, roads, and other infrastructure, including Minot Ledge Lighthouse in Boston Harbor and the Georgetown Aqueduct. Soldiers helped to survey and map the West, produced a rich bounty of maps and other scientific data, operated a telegraph service, delivered the mail, and aided travelers heading west. For decades, the best engineering education in the United States was found at the United States Military Academy at West Point. Zachary Taylor remarked that, “The ax, pick, saw and trowel, has become more the implement of the American soldier than the cannon, musket or sword.”⁵⁵

Of course, the world of the Founders is far removed from our own times. For one thing, nation-building in the early nineteenth century occurred within the United States and therefore the benefits were more immediately visible. But the Founders’ broad view of a soldier’s vocation shows that there is nothing inherently “un-American” or “un-military” in envisioning troops today as nation-builders. In our globalized and interconnected world, America’s strategic interests call for a multipurpose army that is able to stabilize foreign lands as well as destroy enemy tyrants.

Conclusion

Since the Civil War, Americans have traditionally seen soldiers as warriors rather than nation-builders. For a brief period after 2006, the U.S. military’s embrace of counterinsurgency looked like a revolutionary departure in doctrine and training. What followed, however, was a Thermidorian Reaction, or a profound backlash against nation-building. In the wake of exhausting campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, there is a strong desire to return to

America’s comfort zone by shifting the focus of training, preparation, and weapon procurement to campaigns against enemy countries.

The backlash may have a positive effect by encouraging wariness about using force. Like all countries, the United States should think before it acts. The backlash, however, will not prevent Washington from nation-building, and it may increase the odds of a prolonged quagmire by impeding preparation for future missions. As we learned in Iraq, there is little point in toppling a dictator if the result is chaos and civil war. Sending American troops into tank battles or aerial duels with defective equipment would cause an outcry. Deploying soldiers in stabilization missions without sufficient training is just as scandalous.

The solution is to embrace the benefits of the backlash while warding off the dangers. The U.S. military should become a highly skilled nation-building institution. And then presidents should employ this tool with great discretion. **PRISM**

NOTES

¹ Department of Defense directive 3000.05, November 28, 2005, available at: http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/d3000_05.pdf. Several sections of this article develop material in Dominic Tierney, *The Right Way to Lose a War: America in an Age of Unwinnable Conflicts* (New York: Little, Brown, 2015).

² U.S. Army and Marine Corps, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), xlvi; John A. Nagl, "Constructing the Legacy of Field Manual 3-24," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 58 (3rd Quarter, 2010), pp. 118-120.

³ David H. Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U. S. Military for Modern Wars* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), p. 3.

⁴ Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Summer 2012), pp. 7-40. See also: Austin Long, "The Anbar Awakening," *Survival*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (April/May 2008), pp. 67-94; and Steven Simon, "The Price of the Surge," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 3 (May/June 2008), pp. 57-76.

⁵ "During Marathon Review of Afghanistan Strategy, Obama Held Out for Faster Troop Surge," *Washington Post*, December 6, 2009.

⁶ Jennifer Taw, *Mission Revolution: The U.S. Military and Stability Operations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 2.

⁷ Dominic Tierney, "The Obama Doctrine and the Lessons of Iraq," available at <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/05/201205.tierney.obama-doctrine-iraq.html>; Robert Haddock, "This Week at War: End of the COIN Era?" *Foreign Policy*, June 23, 2011, available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/06/23/this_week_at_war_end_of_the_coin_era.

⁸ Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Defense Strategic Review," January 5, 2012, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/05/remarks-president-defense-strategic-review>; Barack Obama, "State of the Union Address," January 24, 2012, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/24/remarks-president-state-union-address>.

⁹ Department of Defense, "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," January 2012, pp. 2, 6, available at: http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf.

¹⁰ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/11/letter-president-authorization-use-united-states-armed-forces-connection>.

¹¹ "Up for Debate: Foreign Policy and Obama," *New York Times*, November 12, 2011.

¹² The third presidential debate, Boca Raton, Florida, October 22, 2012, available at: <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1012/82712.html>.

¹³ Gian P. Gentile, "A (Slightly) Better War: A Narrative and Its Defects," *World Affairs*, Vol. 171, No. 1 (Summer 2008), pp. 57-64.

¹⁴ Jed Babbin, "Coin Fatigue Disease," *The American Spectator*, November 11, 2011, available at: <http://spectator.org/archives/2011/11/14/coin-fatigue-disease>.

¹⁵ Simon, "The Price of the Surge"; Bing West, "Groundhog War: The Limits of Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 5 (September/October 2011), pp. 163-171; Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Knopf, 2012).

¹⁶ Michael J. Mazarr, "The Folly of 'Asymmetric War,'" *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Summer 2008), pp. 33-53, available at: <http://csis.org/files/publication/twq08summermazarr.pdf>.

¹⁷ Taw, *Mission Revolution*.

¹⁸ Iraq data from the CNN/ORC poll at: <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm>. The Afghan data is from the AP-GfK poll at: <http://www.pollingreport.com/afghan.htm>.

¹⁹ "America's Place in the World," Pew Research Center and the Council on Foreign Relations, December 2009, available at: <http://www.people-press.org/2009/12/03/us-seen-as-less-important-china-as-more-powerful/>.

²⁰ <http://costsofwar.org/>.

²¹ Dominic Tierney, *How We Fight: Crusades, Quagmires, and the American Way of War* (New York: Little, Brown, 2010); Bruce W. Jentleson and Rebecca Britton, "Still Pretty Prudent: Post-Cold War American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (August, 1998), pp. 395-417.

²² Tierney, *How We Fight*.

²³ Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era*.

²⁴ Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 36.

²⁵ Conrad Crane, "Phase IV Operations: Where Wars are Really Won," *Military Review*, Vol. 85, No. 3 (May/June 2005), p. 12.

²⁶ "Making Sense of the Mission," *New York Times* April 11, 2004.

- ²⁷ Tierney, *How We Fight*.
- ²⁸ Dominic Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- ²⁹ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009); David C. Gompert, John Gordon, et al., *War by Other Means: Building Complete and Balanced Capabilities for Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2008), liv.
- ³⁰ Paul Staniland, "States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (June 2012), pp. 243-264.
- ³¹ Mazarr, "The Folly of 'Asymmetric War.'"
- ³² <http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=47744>.
- ³³ Department of the Navy, *Small Wars Manual* (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1940), p. 2.
- ³⁴ Robert Gates, speech at the National Defense University, September 29, 2008, available at: <http://www.defense.gov/qdr/gates-article.html>; "New Pentagon Policy Says Irregular Warfare Will Get Same Attention as Traditional Combat," *Washington Post*, December 4, 2008.
- ³⁵ John A. Vasquez, ed., *What Do We Know About War?* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), p. 263.
- ³⁶ "New Pentagon Policy Says Irregular Warfare Will Get Same Attention as Traditional Combat," *Washington Post*, December 4, 2008.
- ³⁷ "Defense Secretary Urges Military to Mold Itself to Fight Iraq-Style Wars," *Washington Post*, May 14, 2008.
- ³⁸ Max Boot, *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present* (New York, NY: Liveright, 2013), p. 418; Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era*, pp. 35, 43.
- ³⁹ Matthew Adam Kocher, Thomas B. Pepinsky, and Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Aerial Bombing and Counterinsurgency in the Vietnam War," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (April 2011), pp. 201-218.
- ⁴⁰ Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
- ⁴¹ Robert M. Cassidy, "Back to the Street without Joy: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam and Other Small Wars," *Parameters*, Vol. 34 (Summer 2004), p. 74; David Fitzgerald, *Learning to Forget: US Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).
- ⁴² Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era*.
- ⁴³ "Bush Backs into Nation Building," *Washington Post*, February 26, 2003.
- ⁴⁴ Donald Rumsfeld "Beyond Nation-Building," February 14, 2003, available at: <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=337>.
- ⁴⁵ Gideon Rose, *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle; A History of American Intervention from World War I to Afghanistan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), pp. 282-283.
- ⁴⁶ <http://icasualties.org/oef/>; "How a 'Good War' in Afghanistan Went Bad," *New York Times*, August 12, 2007.
- ⁴⁷ Toby Dodge, "Iraq," in Richard Caplan, ed., *Exit Strategies and State Building* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 246.
- ⁴⁸ Dodge, "Iraq," pp. 248-250.
- ⁴⁹ Robert Gates, speech in Washington DC, October 10, 2007, available at: <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1181>.
- ⁵⁰ Kalev I. Sepp, "From 'Shock and Awe' to 'Hearts and Minds': The Fall and Rise of U.S. Counterinsurgency Capability in Iraq," *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 28, No. 2, (March 2007), p. 299.
- ⁵¹ Lawrence Freedman, "Rumsfeld's Legacy: The Iraq Syndrome?" *Washington Post*, January 9, 2005.
- ⁵² "Obama on the World," *New York Times*, August 8, 2014.
- ⁵³ Gompert, Gordon, et al., *War by Other Means*; Peter Katel, "Rise in Counterinsurgency: Will New Tactics Weaken the Military?" *CQ Researcher*, Vol. 18, No. 30 (September 2008), p. 699; John A. Nagl, "Let's Win the Wars We're In," *Joint Forces Quarterly* Vol. 52 (1st Quarter, 2009), pp. 20-26; Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era*.
- ⁵⁴ Department of Defense Directive 5100.01, December 21, 2010, available at: <http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/510001p.pdf>.
- ⁵⁵ Tierney, *How We Fight*, chapter 10.

Photos

Page 14 photo by Sage Ross. 2007. *Protesters march down towards the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. (USA), during the September 15, 2007 protest against the Iraq War. Protesters are shown with a variety of signs, including the yellow and black signs of ANSWER Coalition, which organized the event. An estimated 100,000 people participated in the march.* From http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marching_towards_the_Capitol_-_September_15,_2007.jpg licensed under the Creative Commons **Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported** license. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode>. Photo reproduced unaltered.