

INTERVENTION IN FAILED STATES : WHAT THE MILITARY CAN AND CAN'T DO

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One paradox associated with U.S. military intervention in failed (or failing) states is that our army, navy, air force, and marine corps may be the only entities in the world capable of actually affecting a worthwhile rescue. No other organizations possess their logistical or organizational wherewithal. Nor are there any other organizations that approach problems as holistically. In addition to combat soldiers, we have doctors, nurses, engineers, lawyers, water treatment experts, even veterinarians in uniform. If anyone has what it takes to put a state back together again, it is our military. However, our military is also constitutionally averse to intervening in another country's domestic mess, and this – actually -- is for good reason, though the argument I am about to make is not the one usually offered.

First, we must recognize that many states routinely fail their citizens. They do so whenever they can't afford them the basics in terms of either physical or social welfare security. In such cases, citizens find themselves with little choice but to turn to those they know they can count on: members of their extended family, tribe, religious community, etc. In a perverse

sense, so long as these alternative sources of social welfare and subsistence don't become too overtaxed, governments can manage to muddle along, sometimes for decades. Usually it is only when members of the elite (and the middle class – when this exists), in other words, those who ostensibly control government, suddenly find themselves no longer able to make government work for *them*, that we know a state is finally sliding from dysfunction to cataclysmic failure. Then, all sorts of scrambles to re-exert control occur. However, not even this is always sufficient to render a country a failed state in the eyes of the international community. For that to occur, law and order must collapse in the capital, civil war must threaten to destabilize a region, and refugees have to pour across the borders... Then, we suddenly point to all of the warning signs we should have noticed, and start seeking blame in specific, precipitating events. However, in every failed state the building blocks of dissolution are actually societal in nature and have long been in place. What do I mean by this? That basically, where states fail nationalism is lacking. Citizens not only feel no attachment

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or loyalty to their government, but they feel no attachment or loyalty to each other beyond the bounds of whatever ethnic, regional, or religious group they belong to. Another way to put this is that if a sense of nation exists, it does not include all citizens. For instance, in the former Yugoslavia, when push came to shove, most Serbs self-identified as members of a Serb, not a Yugoslav nation.

Here is where we Americans have a difficult time understanding how unlike us most people are. People in many places are branded with a group – not individual – identity at birth. Everyone is recognized to be a member of this or that lineage, clan, tribe, or religious community first *and always*; their status as individuals doesn't count. One consequence of this is that if Saddam Hussein, for instance, preferentially relies on and rewards fellow Tikritis, then being from Tikrit is of paramount significance in Iraq. Similarly, being from Siad Barre's clan in Somalia, just as being a Tutsi in Rwanda, or a Serb in Croatian Krajina could automatically privilege one in the eyes of fellow-members, and damn one in the eyes of non-members. Ethnic politics of this nature preclude nationalism from ever being able to take root.

Typically, nationalism is achieved when or as *a people* shares experiences, and everyone sharing those experiences recognizes they have more in common with one another than with people who haven't gone through these things. What is shared may be linguistic, religious, or

cultural. Without question, there is a strong connection between nationalism and war. Indeed, where we often see the strongest sense of nationalism is where people have either fought one another and then overcome their differences or fought in a war of 'national' survival together against a common enemy. Nor do such wars necessarily have to be won to instill or enhance a sense of nationalism. People just have to come through or gain from them the sense that they still are *a people*. In other words, nationalism can be forged through a shared sense of victimization – the Serbs, Israelis, and Palestinians come to mind. This then means that outsiders can inadvertently help unite a people – something we may have achieved in Somalia if only we had stayed there longer and incited more Somali opposition to our presence. But nothing programmatic outsiders do to "nation-build" will nation-build. External actors cannot make the people of another country feel more attached *to one another* (unless, again, they threaten their identity or survival as an extant people).

Because the Marshall Plan gets cited so often, let me briefly remind readers of its antecedent, which was World War II. We should be mindful that though the Marshall Plan worked wonders, where it worked them was in countries and among peoples who: a) had experienced a long grinding war, b) been conquered, and c) were devastated both literally and figuratively, from the ground-up as well as from the

top-down. In all cases, actually, where the U.S. and our military has effectively helped to rebuild a country – whether in Europe and Japan post-World War II, South Korea after the Korean War, or even our own South after our Civil War – the pre-existing social structure has either been substantively rearranged by the victors (namely, us) and/or the majority of the population was anxious to start over. Contrast these examples with those where we haven't successfully rebuilt governments, let alone governments that could outlast our presence – in Vietnam, Panama, Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and (now potentially) Afghanistan. In none of these places did we fight to take (or retake) the country. In none of these places did we run the place ourselves. That is one difference worth pondering. The second is the kind of infrastructure we build and then leave behind. Is it tied together? Does it tie people *together*? There may be a lesson in this, too.

Indeed, here is where candidate George W. Bush was absolutely correct when he recognized that we should not *nation-build*: we shouldn't because we can't. The most we, as outsiders, can do is help build certain kinds of infrastructure that, in turn, can help strengthen the sinews of a state. Indeed, the most benign, yet significant and durable effect we can have is to help build roads, railroads, bridges, anything that serves to better knit all parts of a country together, that employs locals, leaves behind tangible results, and lines as few pock-

ets as possible. Any other type of aid – foreign aid that is not transformed on site, under donor supervision, into something that can't be stolen, misappropriated, or abused – is always part of the problem and never part of the solution. It directly contributes to the corruption of anyone who can get their hands on it, while usually those who get their hands on it do so for the good of their family and/or cronies. What we regard as nepotism and corruption, we must remember, is a moral imperative in most communities, where people belong to extended families and feel duty-bound to look after their own first. Here, again, is how dysfunction works: whenever high-ranking officials routinely distribute any moneys or goods that flow through their hands to relatives, clan members, clients, etc. this bankrupts whatever social welfare system the government may have set up. With no social welfare net, people have little choice but to then do as government ministers and others do: look after their own first. No amount of pressure placed on governments to be more accountable or transparent is likely to break this vicious cycle, no matter how great the financial incentives dangled by the World Bank or the IMF, because from top to bottom people will continue to think in terms of the good of their own particular group first (no matter how this is defined), and not in terms of the good of the nation. The only way to destroy or substantively rearrange people's loyalties is to smash the social system, and scramble

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these groups. Clearly this is not something we are prone to do, though if we were – and here's another irony – no one could do this better than our military since it and it alone could bring the requisite force to bear.

However, there are at least two other military roles worth considering. Militaries in general are the most nationalist institutions countries have. They take individuals and, at a minimum, give them a new group of people to be loyal to – namely, their fellow soldiers – and, when they work at it, can help secure individuals' loyalty to the nation as well. Our military can help in setting up other countries' national armies, as we are currently doing in Afghanistan. In fact, whenever we intervene in a failed state this is what *we should* do, along with help to establish a credible local police force. Both are critical for restoring security, law and order, and people's confidence in investing in their own futures. Having said this, though, there is also an invaluable demonstration effect to be gained in having our military help with such efforts, even if too few of us Americans engage in national service ourselves: our military showcases what is to be gained when the most lethal structure of state is also the most integrated, meritocratic, and selfless in terms of who and how it serves.

This is made manifest every time the U.S. military is deployed to a failed state to assist in stabilization efforts. Locals see young Americans in uniform slogging their hearts out for

utter strangers. But the hard question we should ask is: are they giving their all in vain? What is left when they leave? In case after case recently, no matter the impression they've made, as soon as they are withdrawn there is a loud sucking sound. There go the resources they represented – as well as the resourcefulness. We may turn over some rebuilt clinics, schools, comfortable facilities, and a heap of equipment to the locals. But we won't have yanked the rug out from under their social structure. Short of this, we won't have solved the problems that led to the state failing in the first place: namely, a lack of nationalism and a surfeit of other allegiances.

We also, though, won't have done what had to be done in this country to break down regionalism, develop the hinterlands, and tie everyone together. This is only likely to be achieved elsewhere the same way it was accomplished in the U.S. – by improving transportation, electrifying villages, damming rivers, etc. Here is where our military blazed the trail and still has tremendous experience. And even though physical infrastructure of this sort may be well be neglected by future governments, even the worst roads in a country like Somalia remain roads.

To conclude, then, when it comes to what our military can and can't do in failed states, we can't 'nation-build'. But we can build, and from this – maybe – will flow change.