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**DEMOCRACY IN THE DESERT:
CIVIL SOCIETY, NATION-BUILDING AND
EMPIRE**

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DISCUSSION PAPERS

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Democracy in the Desert: Civil Society, Nation-Building and Empire

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Summary

The new era of US empire commenced with decisive military victories in Afghanistan and Iraq. But the aftermath of war has proved surprisingly difficult and violent. Explanations of the US's failure to win the peace have largely overlooked the inherent difficulty of planting democracy in so inhospitable a social environment as Iraq's. This paper examines the prospects for US empire, focusing on the problem of nation building, and in particular the role of a well-functioning civil society in making democracy work.

Introduction

On 7 October 2001, US bombers and fighters from Missouri, Diego Garcia, the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf converged in the skies over Afghanistan to launch a massive air campaign against the Taliban regime.² Targets were destroyed across the country in a carefully integrated and overwhelming burst of violence.³ Bombs and cruise missiles pounded airfields, radar and communication systems, air defences, fuel depots, ground forces, barracks, training camps, government offices and Taliban leaders' homes.⁴ Residents of Kabul described terrifying nights of continuous bombardment as huge explosions illuminated the horizon around major Afghan towns.⁵ Residents of Kandahar reported panic in the city.⁶ Over ten weeks, some twelve thousand bombs and missiles carrying upwards of seventeen million pounds of explosives destroyed enemy opposition.⁷ The northern provinces rapidly fell, followed by Kabul, and finally Kandahar. By 7 December, after only 61 days, the war for Afghanistan was effectively over. A regime that ruled the country with a medieval mind and an iron fist was decimated, its remains driven into the mountains and caves of Tora Bora and bombed without mercy. In Kabul, a new administration led by US ally Hamid Karzai took over.

On 20 March 2003, the US opened the war to unseat Saddam Hussein.⁸ Massive air and ground operations saw missiles, precision guided bombs, and heavy artillery batter Baghdad,

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² *The Economist*, 'So far, so fairly good', 11 October 2001.

³ *The Guardian*, 'Allies unleash their firepower', 8 October 2001.

⁴ *The Guardian*, 'Second night of bombing under way', 8 October 2001.

⁵ *The Guardian*, 'Allies unleash their firepower', 8 October 2001.

⁶ *The Guardian*, 'US and Britain begin attacks on Taliban', 7 October 2001.

⁷ Reasonable estimates of the ordnance expended during the first three months of the Afghanistan war range from 10,000-30,000 bombs and missiles carrying upwards of 17 million pounds of explosives. See A. H. Cordesman, *The Lessons of Afghanistan: War Fighting, Intelligence, and Force Transformation*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2002; and CBSNews.com, 'U.S. Slammed For "Cluster" Bombs'.

⁸ *The Guardian*, 'Bid to assassinate Saddam, 20 March 2003.

Mosul and Kirkuk,⁹ while US and British forces secured ports and oil installations in the south.¹⁰ Over the month that followed, some 29,000 bombs and missiles detonated in Iraq, flattening the regime's buildings, disrupting its command, control, and intelligence, crippling its ability to talk to itself.¹¹ In a rapid ground advance, US and British troops thrust up 250 miles from the Kuwaiti border into the heart of the country, easily capturing Baghdad.¹² Despite fears of bloody urban warfare, no serious threat to the offensive materialized, and by mid-April the US-led coalition had triumphed.

In both cases military victory was complete and comparatively easy to achieve. But in both, post-war pacification and the installation of new governments has proved a complicated, bloody ordeal. In Afghanistan the new president relies on foreign soldiers for protection, his writ does not extend beyond Kabul, and large swathes of the countryside remain lawless.¹³ And in Iraq more US soldiers have been killed since President Bush declared hostilities over than died conquering the country.¹⁴

The paradox of an easy war and difficult peace has been extensively debated in the press and other public fora.¹⁵ Explanations offered so far focus mostly on three factors: (i) insufficient planning and preparation by the US government for the aftermath of war; (ii) insufficient military force on the ground to physically control Iraq; and (iii) the continuing inability to catch or kill Saddam Hussein, which is thought to inspire loyalists to terrorist acts. All three explanations are remediable, and – if true – provide grounds for comfort.¹⁶

But there is another deeper and more ominous possibility which has so far largely escaped public discussion – that the task of bringing democracy to a people as tyrannized as the Iraqis and Afghans historically have been is by its very nature undoable. This is because democracy relies on a complex, multi-layered web of civic organizations for a number of its most basic functions. But regimes such as Saddam's or the Taliban's regard such organizations as competing structures of power, and deliberately and systematically undermine them. The organizations that give form to and empower individual initiative are gradually destroyed, leaving citizens atomised and powerless before the authority of the state. Society is 'de-structured'. As a socio-political foundation for a new political order, this is quicksand. Attempting to build a working democracy in such an environment is evidently ridiculous. This is a considerably more worrying explanation of the US's post-war troubles, as remedies will exist only in the long term, if at all. It implies that the US will eventually face an unpleasant choice between a long-term, expensive physical and social reconstruction, or a quicker withdrawal that leaves the conquered country in a semi-anarchic, probably violent state.

This paper examines the problem of nation-building, both conceptually and historically, focusing on the complex role of civil society in sustaining democracy. I first define 'empire', and then set forth the powerful logic that underpins this shift in US international posture. The main part of the essay identifies four key objections to the imperial project: the most

⁹ *The Economist Global Agenda*, 'The air war begins', 21 March 2003.

¹⁰ *The Economist Global Agenda*, 'Pushing towards Baghdad', 21 March 2003.

¹¹ United States Air Force, 'Operation IRAQI FREEDOM – By the Numbers', Shaw AFB, SC: USAF CENTAF Assessment and Analysis Division, 2003.

¹² *The Economist*, 'In the fog of war', 27 March 2003.

¹³ M. Garcia, 'Afghanistan offers clues of problems U.S. faces in Iraq', *The Miami Herald*, 25 April 2003.

¹⁴ Reuters, 'Postwar US Iraq Deaths Exceed Toll During War', 26 August 2003.

¹⁵ Especially concerning Iraq, less so Afghanistan.

¹⁶ The first two could be remedied directly by Presidential order, while the third would admittedly require perseverance and a measure of luck.

important of these is the problem of trying to graft democracy onto a dysfunctional civil society; the second is the US's abysmal record over the past fifty years in transforming conquered countries into peaceful, prosperous democracies; the third concerns the inappropriateness of the instrument chosen for post-war national reconstruction; and the fourth is the straightforward contradiction between the principal problem, terrorism, and the solution chosen, military conquest. Together, these four objections suggest that US empire will fail.

A New Empire for America?

The wars of conquest in Afghanistan and Iraq, together with the overarching policy framework in which they were launched, are part of a coherent and fundamental re-direction of US policy that governs, at the most basic level, how the United States engages with the world. Far from isolated or idiosyncratic events, they demonstrate that a new era of US empire has begun. At this point it is important to define 'empire', an emotionally charged word used less often as an analytical concept and more often as a term of abuse. By imperialism I mean the policy of extending one's authority over foreign countries by force. In the current international context, this means the armed invasion of countries deemed to threaten US interests, whose governments will be ousted and replaced with US-sanctioned regimes. This simple, behavioural definition of imperialism is consistent with generations of scholarship going back to Thucydides (395 BC), and including Doyle (1986) and Hobsbawm (1987).¹⁷ When one country conquers and controls another, an imperial relationship is established. In this straightforward sense, the US has become an imperial power.¹⁸

Note also that there is nothing here of 'informal' empire – cultural and political domination exercised via multilateral institutions and broader economic relations – which many accused the US of establishing during the post-war era. Rather our concern is empire in the old style, fashioned by firepower and infantry, where opposing forces battle and the victor takes over the territory of the vanquished.

The Logic of Empire

Contrary to the views of the more extreme opponents of the US administration, the new US empire was not launched reflexively, without thought or cause. It is rather a deliberate response to the new challenges and dangers that the US faces. The logic of empire is deep and powerful, and works in the following way. Scattered amongst the world's poorer and less stable nations is a chaotic fringe where government and/or society seem locked in pathological decay. In many the state and rule of law have become undisguised instruments of oppression; in others they have broken down entirely, and societies have descended into misrule and chaos. Among these countries are some of the most violent, cruel and miserable places on earth. Like North Korea, where an aggressive, economically inept hereditary tyranny fires missiles over Japan while its citizens are forced to eat their seed-grain and starve. Or Sudan, where the government starves its citizens and undermines its neighbours'

¹⁷ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner, Baltimore: Penguin, 1954 [395 BC]

Doyle (*Empires*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) and Hobsbawm (*The Age of Empire 1875-1914*, London: Phoenix Press, 1987) provide excellent treatments of the concept of imperialism. Two of the earliest and most influential analyses of the modern form of imperialism are Hobson (*Imperialism: A Study*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965 [1902]) and Lenin (*Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. New York: International, 1939 [1916]). Such a minimalist approach is consistent with arguments on both sides of the debate over the role of oil in motivating the second Gulf war, a murky question that I do not address here.

¹⁸ In future, as the US's will and intentions become less ambiguous, empire may also come to mean the bloodless capitulation of foreign governments to US domination without war – when faced with overwhelming US power and an obvious willingness to use it.

stability in a cynical quest for oil. Or the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where foreign and private armies maraud in search of diamonds and gold, and some three to four and a half million people have died over the past decade. Or Myanmar, or Angola, or Liberia. Where such nations are concerned the term ‘developing country’ is nonsensical – they inhabit a fourth world of predation and decay.

Some of these governments actively promote, and others fail to prevent, the emergence of ideologically-driven anti-US, anti-West movements. The origin of such movements is complicated and contentious, but the fact that they have arisen is not. The conventional stance – offering aid money and technical assistance through specialized institutions – is a ludicrous approach to this bottom tier of countries. Rather than fomenting development, it facilitates their continued plunder by the strongmen who misrule them, and ultimately inflicts greater suffering and death on their people. A more robust approach is called for. Such an approach must recognize that the principal problem is not a flawed development strategy, but regimes that make development impossible. For the good of their suffering peoples these regimes must be changed, by force if necessary.

In the past the US dealt with the most egregious of these cases by either befriending their leaders in the hope of attenuating their excesses (where US interests were concerned), or breaking off relations and simply ignoring them in the comfort that they were very far away. But the increasing ease of travel and communication, combined with the accelerating spread over time of technologies of mass destruction – aided greatly by the collapse of the Soviet Union – means that neither option is tenable any longer. The lesson that the new imperialism draws from September 11th is that unsuccessful societies can no longer be left to fester. Oppression and privation create resentments that feed murderous extremism. And extremism poses a direct threat to US national security at home. Small bands of men with operational bases on the chaotic fringe can inflict catastrophic acts of violence on our people, in our cities. For the sake of US security, such countries must be reorganized from first principles. The only viable ‘reorganizer’ is the dominant superpower (accompanied by any willing allies); and who better to take on this monumental challenge than a country founded on a universalistic ideology of freedom, democracy and self-determination?

The marriage of a humanitarian impulse with the need for national security creates a powerful justification for invading and taking over foreign countries. This is how the matter is framed at the highest levels of the US government; both sides of the argument appear in the last two State of the Union addresses, as well as the 2002 *National Security Strategy*. Invade to end tyranny and oppression, and spread freedom, democracy and human rights across the globe. Invade to improve the lives of foreign peoples so they are not tempted by extremist ideologies of hate. And where hatred flourishes, invade as a last resort, to capture or kill the enemy and keep the most powerful weapons out of his hands. This is the case for US empire. It is a powerful logic whose principal motivation is not ideology, beliefs or ambition, but rather the objective reality that the US and her allies now face. The logic would have been present if Al Gore had assumed the Presidency, and will continue to operate after George Bush has stepped down. Ideology, beliefs and political ambition are of course important motivating elements of any policy shift. But the present impulse to empire is more important because it is deeper and more pervasive, and hence more powerful.

Altruism vs. War

To understand how powerful, consider the underlying imperative to which each half of the argument responds. International development was undertaken out of a concern for the

welfare of the world's poor and respect for a common humanity; and if along the way western countries' commercial interests could be promoted, so much the better. But commercial interests did not require aid to succeed, and over time disenchantment drove finance for international aid down to around 0.1% of GDP per year in the US. This is a rough measure of what we may call the 'altruistic imperative'. By contrast, the 'national security imperative' motivated defence spending of 4% to 6% of US GDP per year over the past twenty years. Measured in this rough-and-ready way, the national security imperative is some fifty times greater than the altruistic imperative, which itself drove fifty years of development. Added together, the two promise to motivate a potent, richly funded and long-lived enterprise. Where unfriendly governments or disorder and social anomie threaten US security, the US will grant itself the right to invade, occupy and reorganize. Offending countries will be given ultimatums that they will fail to satisfy, and they will join the US empire.

The Emperor's Clothes

The case for empire is strong, and its pursuit won the administration huge popularity at home. But unfortunately the question of empire is not so simple. In particular, a rationale built not on selfish economic and strategic interests in the nineteenth-century mould, but rather on broader considerations of security combined with the welfare of oppressed peoples, is immediately subject to four powerful objections. These arise from both logical flaws in the underlying premises of the argument, and compelling evidence from recent history. Where logical contradictions are concerned, it is important to note that these are implicit in the opening assumptions – those stressed by the US government itself in the justifications for war in Afghanistan and Iraq¹⁹ – and are not introduced by the conceptual framework that I have built around them. We take the four in turn.

Nurturing Democracy: The Governance-Society Nexus

The first objection – the most nuanced and easily the most far-reaching – is that the imperial project ignores the importance of the governance-society nexus. Here we address the question of nation-building and empire at a purely conceptual level. It is useful to approach the issue through the lens of fifty years of development, and in particular development failure. Why have South Korea and Singapore succeeded while Myanmar and Burkina Faso have not? Generalizing greatly, experience has taught us that successful development is based not on the straightforward accumulation of capital, nor on standardized electoral and bureaucratic prescriptions, nor any combination of the two. Rather development happens when strong, well-ordered, fair institutions function in a dense web of social organization in which minimum levels of trust and cooperation obtain. In abstract terms, of course, this is a hazy, unconvincing mouthful. Frame the issue in terms of specific phenomena that we associate with democratic government, however, and the problem becomes clear. Consider some elemental tasks that democracies take for granted, but which are crucial to their ability to deliver public goods while maximizing citizens' freedom.

For a democracy to represent and then act on the will of its citizens in a way that makes it both fair and responsive, it must be able to accomplish three things: (i) the formation and articulation of shared preferences and opinions, (ii) the aggregation of shared preference, and (iii) the enforcement of accountability. I treat preferences as wants and needs, some of which are individual and hence private (e.g. my favourite shoes, my favourite sandwich), and others of which are shared in society and hence the object of public action (preferred quality of

¹⁹ See the 2002 and 2003 State of the Union Addresses, as well as the new National Security Strategy (2002).

roads, preferred level of taxes). Opinions are more elaborate ideas that are based on these wants and needs.

To understand preference articulation and opinion formation, consider how politically relevant opinions arise in society. The process can be divided in turn into three distinct elements: (a) the articulation of demands felt by many individuals, whose generality was previously unknown – in other words, the conversion of private into public preferences. By making people realize their demands are shared, politicians can create political voice where before there was silence. But shared needs and ideas must still be turned into specific proposals for public action. Hence, (b) the contextualization of these preferences, within the conceptual framework of ideology or political philosophy, into coherent programmes of public action (policies). Shared preferences are turned into politically relevant opinions when they are set into a system of ideas that locates their provenance, justifies their importance, and identifies feasible remedies. In other words, politicians must articulate needs in a way which explains where they come from, why they matter and how they can be met. And lastly, (c) guiding and convincing the electorate that a particular policy/position is important via (a) and (b). There will always be a number of shared preferences, and a number of policy options, competing to enter the agenda of public consideration. The policies that succeed will be those which a majority can be convinced are important, and hence persuaded to consider, either directly or through their representatives. Where these three elements are not present, shared preference will not be discovered in a polity, public opinions regarding shared concerns will not arise, and policies will necessarily be dissociated from what citizens want.

Once political opinions are formed and the policy agenda has been set, society must find some way to weigh competing demands and the tradeoffs they imply, and choose which of them to pursue. That is to say, *social preferences must be aggregated*. This is where government and the political process come in, trading off the demands and needs of different groups, firms and organizations in the search for a social optimum. The most obvious way this occurs is through elections, where individuals vote for competing candidates/parties offering different bundles of policies, and the most preferred wins. But preference aggregation occurs at many other levels and moments as well. In demonstrations, marches and political rallies, for example; through direct contacts between citizens and politicians, whether personal or written; in public discussions within and amongst organizations and firms; through the media; in entirely private discussions between individuals or groups of people, which may have no overtly political aim.

In a well-functioning democracy, preference aggregation and its necessary precursor – the weighing up of competing positions – occurs all the time, at many different levels of society, in ways which are too numerous and varied to describe. It occurs most powerfully when large numbers of people come together to voice support for a specific political proposition (e.g. at a rally). By interacting directly with each other, both they and politicians see their numbers and measure the strength of their commitment, and may gain a better sense of their possibilities. But it also occurs, at the other extreme, when two or more people exchange politically-relevant views, and find commonalities or conflict. Such exchanges allow individuals to gain information and insight into political issues and the degree to which their views are shared, and may inspire them to press further for change.

Once society has expressed its preferences, formed them into political options, and chosen which of these it collectively wishes to pursue, it requires mechanisms that allow it to hold politicians to account for their actions. Too often analysts over-complicate the concept of accountability. At the simplest level, accountability exists when someone can oblige someone

else to do something for him. In a democracy, citizens must have levers of influence over elected officials that allow them to ensure that socially-preferred bundles of policies are implemented with reasonable efficiency. Where accountability is absent, all the preceding is for naught – a chimera of democratic choice with no teeth, conferring upon the people little voice and no power.

The most obvious accountability mechanism is, again, regular elections by which voters can eject unsatisfactory officials from power. But accountability is not only a four-yearly event. Like preference aggregation, it operates continuously through lobbying, protests, speeches and rallies; it is mediated by businesses, civic organizations, NGOs, interest groups, and others. It works through the media, carrying information upwards as well as downwards, through the discipline of an independent judiciary, and through direct contacts between officials, groups and individuals. Like preference aggregation it is both simple and subtle, a multidimensional array of commonplace tools whose simplicity, in isolation, belies the complex complementarities and multiple redundancies of the whole. When it works, accountability informs and constrains elected officials' actions through a complex, multi-layered web of relationships and obligations. When it works, the will of the people is done.

In a healthy democracy, preference formation, preference aggregation and accountability occur throughout society, influenced but not determined by politicians. All rely critically on a densely populated social infrastructure that fills the void between government and voters, where a diversity of civic organizations and other intermediating bodies operate with vigor and independence. This relies in turn on the glue of trust and other social norms that bind people together and allow them to work toward common goals. Where such conditions exist, a population will enjoy a gradual accretion of social structures that can eventually be mobilized in the interests of governance and development.

Civil society is conceived here not as atomised individuals but rather as a set of collectivities interacting amongst themselves and with the institutions of government. Where governance is concerned, society operates as a complex of organizations, aggregating preferences and representing communities' needs, mediating community participation in the production of certain services, facilitating social expression and the assertion of local identity, and enforcing political accountability on the institutions of government. Such organizations develop their own norms of behaviour and responsibility organically, and over time may build up stores of trust and credibility that enhance capacity, or may not. Government depends on the relationships that collectively comprise civil society to elicit information necessary to the policy-making process, judge the efficacy of previous interventions, and plan for the future. Politicians also depend on these relationships to gauge public satisfaction with their performance between elections. The organizational dynamics of civil society are thus intrinsic to the process of governance.

This is the governance-society nexus. It explains why the notion that a country's system of government could work when its society does not is ridiculous. Its failure explains a large number of the development failures of the last century. Haiti, Burma, Sudan – these and many other countries represent heroic attempts to impose functioning governments on populations riven with social fractures.²⁰ They lack both coherent intermediary organisations and the social interplay between them whereby preferences can be discovered, and policies discussed and selected. These are not so much societies as loose populations deprived of civic interaction. Importing government institutions based on Western models into such countries

²⁰ And religious and linguistic fractures as well.

neatly puts the cart before the horse. It is not so much that ‘development’ failed these countries as that both governance and development were built on foundations of sand.

And yet this is exactly what the US empire proposes. The nations targeted for conquest and democratisation – those that breed terror – are largely places where society does not work. In some, such as Liberia and the Congo, war destroyed these bonds. And in others, such as Afghanistan, North Korea and Iraq, tyranny deliberately and systematically undermined them in order to stamp out alternative structures of power and resistance. In both cases, society cannot perform the complex, decentralized tasks implied in the discovery, debate and selection of social goals. In such countries society is de-structured, and the governance-society nexus is missing.

The Myth of Liberation

The first objection is thus a straightforward contradiction. Why is the US’s ambition blind to it? Consider the post-war reconstruction of Europe, and in particular the damaging grip the German example continues to have on our collective imagination. Germany is the most impressive, successful and complete example of military conquest and democratisation in modern history. If a nation destroyed by Nazism could be rebuilt so quickly and successfully in just fifteen years, then surely countries conquered with laser-guided missiles and smart bombs can be rebuilt even faster?

This is an example of the general fallacy of liberation, which says that external intervention can be used to lift the constraints that oppress society, allowing it to spring forth and democracy to flourish. Intervention can take the form of military force or development assistance. The fallacy suffused the first half-century of development thinking, and now – curiously – informs the imperial project. Its fundamental mistake is to ignore the differences between building and re-building. In Germany’s (and Japan’s, and all of Western Europe’s) case a rich economy and a powerful and effective government apparatus were built on the foundation of a dense web of social organizations, strong traditions and norms of civic interaction, and a rich institutional framework. Conquest and democratisation, by contrast, imply trying to install liberal democracy in a tyrannized social and institutional wasteland where it has never before existed. After ‘liberation’, when the dictator’s instruments of oppression have finally collapsed, there will be only a vacuum between US soldiers and millions of people who are confused, hungry and resentful. The flower of democracy will not thrive in such a desert.

Of course, the United States possesses the wealth and managerial ability to administer foreign countries militarily over extended periods, if it chooses. The question of whether it will have any alternative depends on how quickly civil society can be (re-)built, and the social vacuum filled. The prospects of such a thorny task are difficult to judge, but *a priori* do not appear favourable.

To begin with, social science does not have a clear explanation of why effective civic organizations arise in certain places, at certain times, while elsewhere they do not. But one element about which there is significant consensus is that the sorts of self-expressing, self-organizing structures described above require trust and freedom to flourish.²¹ Military rule,

²¹ Putnam (*Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) is the most famous treatment of this topic. Faguet (‘Decentralizing the Provision of Public Services in Bolivia: Institutions, Political Competition and the Effectiveness of Local Government’, PhD Dissertation, London School of Economics, 2002) theorizes more specifically on the civil society-governance link.

based on obedience, command and control, provides neither. Indeed, a civic infrastructure that nurtures democracy is the social equivalent of the decentralized market mechanism, while military occupation resembles a planned economy. Far from leading naturally to the emergence of robust social organizations, US occupation is likely to stifle their emergence, and with them the emergence of democracy.

Nurturing Democracy: America's Near Abroad

If the conceptual case for imperial nation-building is weak, what about the empirical case? What can history teach us? The second objection takes note of the implicit contradiction of conquering a foreign people so that they may be free. This paradox is fundamental, obvious, and risks earning the US the opprobrium of millions around the globe. Such a contradiction of principle can, of course, be overcome in practice if the conquering power establishes a government that is more open and free than its predecessor. Hence the importance of the empirical question: do the US's bellicose means tend to result in liberal, democratic outcomes? To answer this question we must look to the past, and in particular the recent past. And here, unfortunately, The US's record of forcefully transforming tyrannies into prosperous democracies is abysmal.

Set aside Iraq, where the outcome cannot yet be judged, and Afghanistan, where increasingly it can. Consider also Panama and Grenada, where US armed invasions toppled governments deemed contrary to the national interest and replaced them with friendly regimes. Or Guatemala and Nicaragua, where much the same was achieved covertly in the name of halting the spread of communism and promoting democracy. These are the four clearest cases in the post-war era where the US used military force (overt or covert) to topple regimes of which it disapproved, on joint grounds of national security and the spread of democracy. In many other countries US efforts were either more limited (Haiti, Somalia) or failed outright (Vietnam, Cuba). But in these four countries, in its own back yard, the US had considerable freedom to do as it chose. In all four, enemy governments were overthrown and friendly regimes installed. What do these experiences teach us about the likely course of empire?

In Panama the US mounted a quick and successful public relations effort to demonise dictator and former ally Manuel Noriega, and then loosed an invasion "that killed far more Panamanians than his regime had".²² Noriega was quickly ousted, and the country returned to elected democracy, and to the sons of the plutocrats of half a century earlier. Fourteen years on these lords of the jungle, mired in apparently endless corruption scandals, preside over what the World Bank calls "one of the most unequal countries in the world...on par with Brazil and just below South Africa". Over 95 percent of the indigenous population live in poverty and 86 percent live in extreme poverty.²³

In Nicaragua the US sponsored a ten year guerrilla war which eventually drove an exhausted leftist regime from power. The country was returned to its politico-business elite, which nurtured a kleptocracy while ordinary Nicaraguans endured an explosion in criminal violence and the country became an international centre for drugs transshipment.²⁴ While politics has been shrunk into the parlours of the sons and daughters of privilege, the living standards of

²² *The Economist*. 'A refuge for ex-presidents', 16 April 1998.

²³ World Bank, *Panama Poverty Assessment*, Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2000, p.vi and x. In Panama, the report notes, the rich are very rich and the poor are very poor

²⁴ Rodgers, D., "'We Live In A State Of Siege': Violence, Crime, And Gangs In Post-Conflict Urban Nicaragua', DESTIN Working Paper No. 02-36 (2002), p.3. Rodgers points out that criminal violence has increased by 10 percent per year every year since the democratic transition in 1990, "and the number of violent crimes leading to injury increased by 135 percent between 1992 and 1998".

the rest remain below those of the 1970s. Half the population continues to toil in the grinding poverty of the Western hemisphere's second poorest country.²⁵

But neither country can compare with Guatemala. After a US-sponsored coup there, power became concentrated in the grasping hands of a small, white elite that systematically excluded the indigenous majority from the power and largesse of the state. For forty years successive right-wing governments – both civil and military – in effect waged war against the indigenous poor while basking in the glow of US friendship and aid. Heinous abuses were committed in the name of defending democracy and fighting communism: over two hundred thousand people were killed or 'disappeared', and over four hundred villages destroyed.²⁶ Of these four US liberations, only Grenada approximates success. Its one hundred thousand inhabitants have been buoyed by a rising tide of rich tourists and offshore banking which allowed GNP to grow healthily after the US invasion of 1983.²⁷

We do well to reflect on Guatemala, Nicaragua and Panama. In none of these countries did US intervention improve living standards or increase freedom for the average citizen. Since intervention, their silent poor have stared into a wall of misery and exclusion and voted with their feet, abandoning their homelands in ever increasing numbers. Under normal circumstances it would not be fair to lay all the blame at the US's door – many other national and international factors are undoubtedly at work. But at a time when the US has launched a new empire promising to change foreign governments for the good of their peoples, we must examine the central assumption that 'liberated' peoples benefit. The four best cases of regime change since World War II do not suggest that the awesome destructive power of US military will be put in the service of the peace and prosperity of distant lands. They do not offer hope that US imperialism will prove benign. More often, the evidence suggests, the US will quickly turn her back on conquered territory once elites friendly to her have been handed power. Little effort will be made to nurture democracy in more than the narrowest, mechanical sense of periodic elections. Fairness, justice and equality will be forgotten. So long as ruling elites remain friendly to Washington, much will be tolerated. Who knows what goes on down there? The citizens of the US's future enemies will examine the record and recoil. Iraqis are not eager to become Guatemalans.

The Military Instrument

The third objection concerns agency. The US's chosen instrument of post-conquest national reorganization appears to be its armed forces. Why this should be, or indeed if it should be, is entirely unclear, and has not been explained or debated in public. Most likely it is an improvised answer of convenience, given the absence of any alternative US nation-building body. Whatever the case, consider the contradiction implicit in the chosen solution.

The US military – the most potent destructive force ever devised by man – is uniquely unsuited by mandate and temperament to society-building, government-building or nation-building. A highly effective command and control organisation, it lacks the skills required to nurture independent, lively social groups, regulate political organisations, or police elections.

²⁵ Government of Nicaragua, *A Strengthened Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy*, Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2001.

²⁶ Amnesty International, 'Guatemala: Addressing Guatemala's Lethal Legacy: Appeals Against Impunity', London: Amnesty International, 2002 and CNN.com World News, 'Central America's longest civil war comes to a close', 29 December 1996.

²⁷ *The Economist*, 'Small states, big money', 21 September 2000.

And this is as it should be. The first priority of the US military must always be the ability to crush enemies with overwhelming power. Anything that conflicts or distracts from this goal is a burden that saps military strength. All such burdens that can be removed should be. But the new US empire seems destined to do the opposite. It is a dangerous irony that victory and conquest abroad are likely to mire US fighting forces in responsibilities unnatural to them that will ultimately leave them weaker.

Terrorists and Soldiers

The fourth and most damning objection is also the simplest. This is the idea that invasion and conquest represent – in the narrowest military terms – a feasible solution to the problem of international terrorism. Even cursory consideration of the new terrorism shows that an imperial strategy cannot succeed. The most salient characteristics of the new terrorism are its multinational, cellular and decentralized organization – with relatively weak centres, where ideological capacity is located, and strong local nodes, where operational capacity lies. Eschewing both physical presence and elaborate command structures, these movements are extremely difficult to localize, let alone physically attack.

As a result terrorist cells will simply migrate when under assault. They will vanish during the run-up to war, and then spring up elsewhere. They will easily remain several steps ahead of a pursuing US army that knows neither whom to look for nor where to look for them. And even when terrorists are captured and cells disrupted, their networked structures will protect the movement in the same way that telephone systems and electricity grids are robust to storm damage in a local loop. The terrorist beast is a many-headed hydra that cannot be stamped out by force one country at a time. Afghanistan and Iraq have already shown this.

Conclusion

In this age of instant global telecommunications, we are blessed with front row seats at the birth of a new US empire. Forged in the fires of September 11th, the new imperialism discards the US's traditional relationship with the developing world, at arm's length and mediated by institutions, in favour of direct intervention. Where tyranny or social anomie create the conditions in which US-hating extremism can flourish, the US will invade, conquer and reorganize countries. Bold US action will serve not only her own national security, but also the security and prosperity of conquered peoples.

But the imperial project is subject to four powerful objections – objections that doom it to failure. Military conquest cannot and will not stamp out a terrorist phenomenon based on loose, international networks of independent, mobile cells. Terrorists will simply move. And the medium-term goal of installing prosperous democracies in conquered countries is deeply flawed. Democracy cannot be imposed on a population from afar because its core functions depend on the active, critical involvement of a rich mosaic of social groups. And the nations that spawn terrorism and give it succour boast some of the most divided, dysfunctional societies on earth. Post-conflict military administrations will further inhibit the development of such organizations. The weight of recent history supports this view: conquest will not free oppressed populations. It will conquer them, leaving them enslaved. They will see this, and they will not like it. Hence the short-run goal of empire is impossible, and the medium-term goal may not be feasible. And lastly, the wrong instrument has been chosen for both.

The United States is stumbling into an empire it does not understand. Its strategy is based on misconception, erroneous assumptions, and plans that are perhaps half thought through.

Surely the most disappointing element is the obvious lack of consideration given to imperial follow-through, as Afghanistan and Iraq make clear. Having misconstrued this new phase of foreign engagement as a series of quick wars followed by short occupations, the US has failed to make adequate plans for the long, difficult, costly process of reconstruction. This will involve not only rebuilding bridges, roads and power stations, but establishing basic institutions (law, property, norms of political competition) and social organizations in places where little from the past can be rescued. The constitution of working, effective government in 'liberated' countries will not last a year or two, as the US currently seems to think,²⁸ but decades, as new people educated in the everyday practice of democracy displace a generation trained in the ways of tyranny. To accomplish this the US needs either to turn the task over to outsiders with the necessary skills, or establish its own nation-building bureaucracy. Make no mistake – what is called for is nation-building in its purest form. Making US armed forces responsible is a mistake. The US military is good at destroying enemies – extremely good. There is no reason to think it will be good at building them back up afterwards.

Even if we ignore these harsh realities, empire is a bad choice for the US. The will to empire marks a sharp turn away from traditional US values. Like Europeans five centuries ago, the onset of empire is likely to change the US profoundly in ways that are hard to anticipate. Historically the United States defined itself not so much as a non-imperial as an anti-imperial power. Ideals of freedom and self-determination were born with the nation in the fracture of empire. US citizens hold liberty most dear, and the prospect of a new policy to invade and replace foreign governments strikes at the heart of US identity and US values. But unfortunate realities cannot be ignored. Empire is also a dangerous, expensive and ultimately futile quest that promises to cost thousands of lives and billions of dollars. Seeking security and progress, the US will instead reap insecurity, violence and destruction. The US empire is a disaster in the making, which we will all soon come to regret.

²⁸ *The Economist*, 9 September 2003 quotes Paul Bremer as saying that elected Iraqi authorities would take over from the US interim authority he leads by mid-2004.

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The aim of the Crisis States Programme (CSP) at DESTIN's Development Research Centre is to provide new understanding of the causes of crisis and breakdown in the developing world and the processes of avoiding or overcoming them. We want to know why some political systems and communities, in what can be called the "fragile states" found in many of the poor and middle income countries, have broken down even to the point of violent conflict while others have not. Our work asks whether processes of globalisation have precipitated or helped to avoid crisis and social breakdown.

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Research Objectives

- 1 We will assess how constellations of power at local, national and global levels drive processes of institutional change, collapse and reconstruction and in doing so will challenge simplistic paradigms about the beneficial effects of economic and political liberalisation.
- 2 We will examine the effects of international interventions promoting democratic reform, human rights and market competition on the 'conflict management capacity' and production and distributional systems of existing polities.
- 3 We will analyse how communities have responded to crisis, and the incentives and moral frameworks that have led either toward violent or non-violent outcomes.
- 4 We will examine what kinds of formal and informal institutional arrangements poor communities have constructed to deal with economic survival and local order.



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