

CDDRL

WORKING PAPERS

Imperial Designs, Empirical Dilemmas: Why Foreign-Led State Building Fails

Jason Brownlee

Center on Democracy, Development, and The Rule of Law
Stanford Institute on International Studies



Number 40
June 16, 2005

This working paper was produced as part of CDDRL's ongoing programming on economic and political development in transitional states. Additional working papers appear on CDDRL's website:
<http://cddrl.stanford.edu>.

Center on Democracy, Development,
and The Rule of Law
Stanford Institute of International Studies
Stanford University
Encina Hall
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: 650-724-7197
Fax: 650-724-2996
<http://cddrl.stanford.edu/>

About the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL)

CDDRL was founded by a generous grant from the Bill and Flora Hewlett Foundation in October in 2002 as part of the Stanford Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. The Center supports analytic studies, policy relevant research, training and outreach activities to assist developing countries in the design and implementation of policies to foster growth, democracy, and the rule of law.

About the Author

Jason Brownlee is a Postdoctoral Scholar in the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law for 2004 – 2005 and Assistant Professor at the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. His areas of interest are in regime change and regime durability; political institutions; domestic democratization movements and international democracy promotion. His publications include: “...*And Yet They Persist: Explaining Survival and Transition in Neopatrimonial Regimes*,” *Studies in Comparative International Development*, (November 2002); “*The Decline of Pluralism in Mubarak’s Egypt*,” *Journal of Democracy*, (October 2002). Reprinted in Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Daniel Brumberg (eds.), *Islam and Democracy in the Middle East* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 2003); and “*Low Tide After the Third Wave: Exploring Politics under Authoritarianism*,” *Comparative Politics*, (July 2002).

Imperial Designs, Empirical Dilemmas: Why Foreign-Led State Building Fails

Jason Brownlee
Post-Doctoral Fellow
Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law
Stanford University
jmb334@stanford.edu

Assistant Professor
Department of Government
University of Texas at Austin
brownlee@gov.utexas.edu

Abstract: Proponents of foreign-led state building or shared sovereignty arrangements have exaggerated the ability of powerful states to foster institutions in developing countries. The empirical record, from successful outcomes in Germany and Japan to dismal failures across the global South, shows foreign forces are heavily constrained by antecedent local capacity. The societies alleged to be most in need of strong institutions have proven the least tractable for foreign administration. Rather than transmitting new modes of organization, would-be state builders have relied upon existing structures for governance. This dependence on the very context that was intended for change shows that foreign state builders wield very little infrastructural power. They are consistently unable to implement political decisions through the subject population. Contrary to recent arguments that sustained effort and area expertise can enable success, external state building has foundered *despite* such investments. Understanding why foreign-led state building continues to fail is crucial for redirecting intervention where it can be more effective. Advocates of humanitarian assistance should consider the merits of smaller, regenerative projects that can respond better to uncertainty and avoid the perils of large-scale political engineering.

Jason Brownlee © 2005

DRAFT – NOT FOR CITATION OR CIRCULATION

Introduction

"The rulers of outlaw regimes can know that we still believe as Abraham Lincoln did: 'Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves; and, under the rule of a just God, cannot long retain it.'"¹

-US President George W. Bush, 20 January 2005.

As violence in US-occupied Iraq escalated, George Bush reaffirmed America's role in changing regimes abroad.² While its final policy implications remained undetermined, Bush's second inaugural address emphasized the importance of democratization for ensuring American security. The speech thereby sustained the Bush administration's strategy of pre-emptive action against corrupt or failing states. An array of scholarly have supported this position and revisited the traditional understanding of sovereignty.³

¹ Lincoln's words come from a letter written prior to his presidency. The excerpted line follows the sentence, "This is a world of compensations; and he who would *be* no slave, must consent to *have* no slave." Abraham Lincoln, 6 April 1859.

² Bush spoke about the capacity for democracy to check threats of state and non-state violence. "For as long as whole regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny - prone to ideologies that feed hatred and excuse murder - violence will gather, and multiply in destructive power, and cross the most defended borders, and raise a mortal threat. There is only one force of history that can break the reign of hatred and resentment, and expose the pretensions of tyrants, and reward the hopes of the decent and tolerant, and that is the force of human freedom." Meanwhile, material and human costs of the Iraq occupation rose. At the time of this writing, Congressional Budget Office estimates put expenditures at \$130 billion with an additional \$80 billion (for Iraq) to be requested from Congress during 2005. Peronet Despeignes, "Congress Expects \$100 Billion War Request," *USA Today*, 4 January 2005. For the month of January 2005, prior to election-day violence on 30 January, the minimum civilian casualty estimate confirmed by two independent news sources was 347. One hundred US service men and women in Iraq lost their lives during the same period (1 January-29 January). Sources:

<http://www.iraqbodycount.net/database/> and <http://icasualties.org/oif/>

³ The 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States argues that the conjunction of weak states and terrorists organizations seeking weapons of mass destruction constitutes the greatest current threat to American security, "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones. We are menaced less by fleets and armies than by catastrophic technologies in the hands of the embittered few" The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2002).. The implications for "contingent sovereignty" have been elaborated by officials such as Richard Haass, director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff. Richard N. Haass, "Sovereignty: Existing Rights, Evolving

The concept of “nation building,” has been revived through notions of “trusteeship,” “shared sovereignty,” and “empire”.⁴ Advocates of interventionism maintain that even if U.S. leaders have mismanaged Iraq, they can learn from this mistake and accomplish its goals more effectively in future targets, such as Iran.⁵ Typical proposals involve American or multi-lateral administration of troubled countries, in some cases for an indefinite period: The problem of this century is failed domestic governance; the solution is committed foreign intervention. A look at the last century, however, indicates

Responsibilities," (Department of State, 2003). Academic works exploring this position include Jeffrey Ira Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 264-72. Robert O. Keohane, "Political Authority after Interventions: Gradations in Sovereignty," in *Humanitarian Intervention : Ethical, Legal, and Political Dilemmas*, ed. J. L. Holzgrefe and Robert O. Keohane (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Neotrusteeship and the Problem of Weak States," *International Security* 28, no. 4 (2004). Noah Feldman, *What We Owe Iraq: War and the Ethics of Nation Building* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004). Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004). Stephen D. Krasner, "Sharing Sovereignty - New Institutions for Collapsed and Failing States," *International Security* 29, no. 2 (2004).

⁴ In his 11 October 2000 debate with Vice President Al Gore, Bush contended the U.S. should not engage in nation building, which had borne mixed results during the 1990s in such places as Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia. "[Somalia] started off as a humanitarian mission and it changed into a nation-building mission, and that's where the mission went wrong. The mission was changed. And as a result, our nation paid a price. And so I don't think our troops ought to be used for what's called nation-building. I think our troops ought to be used to fight and win war. I think our troops ought to be used to help overthrow the dictator when it's in our best interests. But in this case it was a nation-building exercise, and same with Haiti. I wouldn't have supported either." Commission on Presidential Debates, "The Second Gore-Bush Presidential Debate," (2000).

⁵ Sermour Hersch has reported that the planning and execution of regime change operations has migrated from the Central Intelligence Agency to the Department of Defense. Yet the idea of promoting democratization through force has not lost currency, as one former CIA official described. "Everyone is saying, 'You can't be serious about targeting Iran. Look at Iraq... But they say, 'We've got some lessons learned—not militarily, but how we did it politically'" Seymour Hersch, "The Coming Wars," *The New Yorker*, 24 January 2005.. Nor is Iran the only potential target. During her Senate confirmation hearings Secretary of State nominee Condoleezza Rice described six states (Belarus, Burma, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Zimbabwe) as "outposts of tyranny." "Transcript: Confirmation Hearing of Condoleezza Rice," *New York Times*, 18 January 2005.

that these imperial plans have not solved the empirical problems that had previously discredited nation building. Unless architects of interventionist democratization contend with the root causes of *failed* nation building, they risk exacerbating the very instabilities they seek to remedy.⁶

Recent analyses stress the importance of a sustained effort and the application of local expertise, mischaracterizing institution building as a technical process and neglecting the political dilemmas of imposing change. Investments of time, resources, and specialized knowledge have not brought a capacity for large-scale political engineering. On the contrary, the institutional weaknesses invoked to justify intervention have confounded nation building by even determined and “well-trained” forces. The web of social constraints that hampered prior indigenous leaders has entangled occupiers as well. High levels of uncertainty and tenacious authority structures reveal to interventionists the limits of their power. Consequently, foreign administrators often find themselves deferring to the same local leaders they had planned to reform. This pattern of ineffective ruler is common to developing countries

⁶ From this point in the paper forward, I will attempt to replace the often misapplied term “nation building” with a less succinct, but more accurate phrase, “foreign-led state building.” Foreign-led state building is an apt label for the process commonly implied by “nation building”: the assumption of domestic state functions, particularly the attempt to monopolize the use of force within a given territory, by an external state or group of states aiming to accomplish certain political goals (e.g., institution building, provision of domestic stability). Foreign-led state building thereby encompasses the proposals of shared sovereignty and imposed regime change that have gained currency in recent years. It lies at the intersection of domestic regime change processes, which occur largely autonomously from foreign governments, and short-term interventions, which do not attempt to perform functions of the state being subject to intervention. For a discussion of the concepts and terminology in the intervention literature, see Paul F. Diehl, Daniel Druckman, and James Wall, “International Peacekeeping and Conflict Resolution: A Taxonomic Analysis with Implications,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 1 (1998): 39.

and external forces pursuing state building. America's experiences, for example, belie the notion that foreign-led state building successes will correct domestic state failures. The US has performed most poorly when its mission required the most work (e.g., Haiti, Somalia). Conversely, it has done best where it did less (Germany, Japan), deferring to old regime civil servants and upgrading existing institutions. This paradox returns us to the domestic environment but does not provide an easy solution to persistent state weakness.

The present paper advances discussions of intervention by diagnosing this problem—the absence of “infrastructural power” in the target society—and considering distinct alternatives that may serve similar humanitarian goals. The material is developed through three sections: the theoretical problem of sovereignty and state weakness, empirical comparisons of nation building, and implications for future interventions. First, I introduce the problem of state failure and state weakness as addressed in the growing literature on shared sovereignty and intervention. Notions of imposed regime change or foreign-led institutional development have reified willpower and intentions while minimizing issues of capability and constraints. Domestic power depends on leaders eliciting societal compliance, often through gradual, open-ended negotiations and conflicts.

In contrast, foreign-led state building tries to bypass local politicking and instead gets nowhere. Hence, while many post-colonial states lack the infrastructural power to provide domestic order or robust economic growth, foreign intervention is not a

panacea. External state builders find themselves facing the same issues when they attempt to govern another society.

The second section shows why foreign-led state building has repeatedly failed, despite the application of time, resources, and expertise that recent works present as the package for success. Examples of American and British intervention from the twentieth century reveal the weakness of Western states when attempting to transmit new modes of governance abroad. This persistent problem suggests we should rethink the limits of projected state power and consider the trade-offs of lesser ambitions, and better results. The final section concludes with constructive proposals for the bounded effectiveness of humanitarian intervention, prescribing an alternative approach of “regenerative power” that builds on local capacities without taking over political tasks. Rather than imposing a grand blueprint for national restructuring, regenerative projects are limited in scale and duration. They are by disaster relief efforts; foreign groups serve under the direction of indigenous leaders in physical reconstruction and the provision of emergency services.

Sovereignty and the Limits of State Power

The idea of intervention in failed states links two issues of sovereignty. First, the failure to maintain domestic order signals a lack of internal (positive) sovereignty. Second, the invasive rehabilitation of a country by foreign forces violates that entity’s external (negative) sovereignty. Therefore, the basic premise of intervention correcting state failures is that reductions in *external* sovereignty can bring gains for *internal* sovereignty.

Renewed interest in “quasi-states” treats variants of the question: Can nation building, and institutional transmission via occupation, lay the groundwork for a self-governing state that enjoys independence vis-à-vis other states? In formulating their answers, revisionists of external sovereignty have tended to minimize the problem that internal disorder, the primary rationale for intervention, has tended to persist despite nation builders’ efforts. Problems of domestic governability have defied the theorized trade-off by which outside involvement is expected to accelerate internal political development.

The Threat of State Weakness

Fifteen years ago, Robert Jackson called attention to the persistence of poor governance in post-colonial states, which he termed “quasi-states”. Jackson contended that negative sovereignty, freedom *from* foreign intervention, had enabled despotic rulers to oppress their people and exploit the economy. Alternative arrangements that delayed independence might, he argued, have better-served the interests of the populations of these failing states, “[A] greater variety of international statuses, including more intrusive forms of international trusteeship might have rendered the post-colonial situation less unsatisfactory than it proved time and again to be under the one-dimensional negative sovereignty regime.”⁷ Today Jackson’s argument forms the intellectual backdrop for discussions about limiting sovereignty and boosting

⁷ Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Third World* (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 202.

intervention efforts. A substantial set of policy analysts and scholars have speculated on the benefits of turning back the clock on decolonization. They have defended potentially indefinite restrictions on sovereignty until the subject states become sustainable democracies.

Jentleson's USIP paper is one of the earlier works in this area: "The scope of a state's right to sovereign authority is not unconditional or normatively superior to the right to security of the polity."⁸ Fukuyama reaches similar conclusions despite what he recognizes as the difficulty of transmitting institutions onto foreign soil: "It is not clear, given the low to nonexistent level of stateness in many failed states, whether there is any real alternative to a quasi-permanent, quasi-colonial relationship between the 'beneficiary' country and the international community."⁹ Krasner makes a nearly identical, as do Fearon and Laitin. "In the future, better domestic governance in badly governed, failed, and occupied polities will require the transcendence of accepted rules, including the creation of shared sovereignty in specific areas."¹⁰ "[W]hether the problem is a failed state or a rogue regime that has been attacked and destroyed... the United States is now drawn to a form of international governance that may be described as neotrusteeship, or more provocatively, postmodern imperialism."¹¹ Although more strident than these other authors in his call to empire building, Ferguson also links external intervention to local problems of stateness and the international risks they pose:

⁸ Bruce Jentleson, *Coercive Prevention: Normative, Political, and Policy Dilemmas* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2000), 23.

⁹ Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century*, 104.

¹⁰ Krasner, "Sharing Sovereignty - New Institutions for Collapsed and Failing States," 85.

¹¹ Fearon and Laitin, "Neotrusteeship and the Problem of Weak States," 7.

“[T]hanks to the relative cheapness and destructiveness of modern weaponry, tyrants and terrorists can realistically think of destroying our cities... Countries in this condition will not correct themselves. They require the imposition of some kind of external authority.”¹² Whereas Jackson’s original work treated misgovernment as a “bad” in itself, these analyses frame domestic sovereignty failures (civil wars, collapsing states) as *international* security problems through the nexus of radical organizations and portable WMDs. During the Cold War state power was the principal concern; now the threat is state weakness.

The professed intention of these long-term interventions is to succeed where the colonial powers failed and establish sustainable and effective self-governance.¹³ “[T]he objective of nation building,” writes Noah Feldman, “ought to be the creation of reasonably legitimate, reasonably liberal democracies”.¹⁴ In this view the problem of domestic institutions can be solved through effective foreign administration once interventionists determine “how to externally stimulate state-building in countries with severe internal dysfunction”.¹⁵

Yet before assuming the trade-off between negative sovereignty and domestic development hinges on applying the correct formula for institution building, we should also scrutinize the limits of technical expertise in what is principally a political project.

¹² Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire*, 24.

¹³ Social scientists have long acknowledged that the desiderata of political freedom and political order are not only separate, but often competing outcomes Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven,: Yale University Press, 1968), 1. Yet the current generation of nation building advocacy seeks *both* democracy and order. Thus, this essay evaluates the record of imposed regime change in these terms.

¹⁴ Feldman, *What We Owe Iraq: War and the Ethics of Nation Building*, 8.

¹⁵ Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century*, 96.

While writers have regularly alluded to the difficulty of foreign-led state building, they have focused more on where such enterprises will go and less on where they have been. For example, even as Keohane reasoned that “it is important to estimate the probability that intervention will lead to a non-abusive, self-sustaining structure of political authority,” he proceeded to advocate “gradations of sovereignty” without a historical assessment of how low that probability might be.¹⁶ Clearly, “[d]ecisions ‘before intervention’ should depend, to some extent, on prospects for institutionalization ‘after intervention,’” but the empirical record reminds shows those prospects are much more modest than the clamor for shared sovereignty implies.¹⁷

The United States and other Western powers have actually performed quite poorly at generating institutional growth in countries under their occupation. Instead of realizing their aims, even the most committed states have been hampered by an inability to improve substantially upon the initial endowments of the subject country. The contribution of new institutional capacity has been minimal, reflecting the problem of state instability back upon those who expected to solve it. This political dilemma begs the question of how “quasi-states” can stabilize and democratize, but it does not encourage optimism that foreign administration provides the answer.

¹⁶ Keohane, “Political Authority after Interventions: Gradations in Sovereignty,” 275-76.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The Problem of Infrastructural Power

While aiming to establish internal sovereignty (and eventually restore external sovereignty), intervention forces typically discover they cannot monopolize the legitimate use of force, much less accomplish political goals within the country they have entered. In short, foreign state builders suffer from a lack of “infrastructural power” the capacity to implement political decisions by evoking societal compliance, a shortcoming that amplifies pre-intervention state failures.¹⁸ Subsequently, they find themselves entangled in the very problems of societal instability that they intended to rectify. This debility remains common across the developing world, but it has crippled state builders.¹⁹

As they attempt to steer social development, foreign state builders undermine their own enterprise in two respects. First, they assume indigenous authority structures are far more malleable than has been the case in Western or developing societies, neglecting the durability of political traditions and organizations.²⁰ Second, they minimize the role of contingency and unintended consequences in local responses.

¹⁸ Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power - Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 170.

¹⁹ In analyzing the failure of state power in developing societies, Joel Migdal has written, “[T]he state leaders’ drive for predominance—their quest for uncontested social control—has stalled in many countries because of tenacious and resilient organizations scattered throughout their societies... At the most elementary level, the strength of the state rests on gaining conformance to its demands by the population” Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States : State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 32.

²⁰ Schumpeter’s adage holds, “Social structures, types and attitudes are coins that do not readily melt.” Joseph Alois Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 2d ed. (New York, London,: Harper & brothers, 1947), 12. Quoted in Reinhard Bendix, *Nation-Building and Citizenship: Studies of Our Changing Social Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 10.

While imposing designs on a society to which they are but superficially connected, foreign state builders fail to develop robust linkages with broad constituencies. Subsequently, when foreign administrators act independently from the demands of its newly acquired constituency they deny themselves the constructive influence among local populations that their mission requires. Their missions acquire a debilitating and facile kind of autonomy. After circumventing the arduous process of negotiating with the populace and nurturing state power, they are frustrated to find they cannot evoke mass compliance. Like a giant throwing boulders into a wide river, they can disrupt local practices but not rechannel them. These problems, the discounting of societal inertia and inflexibility toward unforeseen outcomes, are inherent in the ambition and application of foreign-led state building, which seeks to override indigenous social processes by engineering macro-level political transformations.

Despite an abundance of personnel, material, and military resources, foreign state builders find that day-to-day governance in the subject country confounds their wishes and dashes their expectations. The utility of coercion proves limited and, sooner or later, the intervention's executives realize their inability to accomplish the political tasks of state building. Constraints on large-scale political engineering compel a change of plans and the goal is adjusted to account for realities on the ground. Typically, the defeated state builder soon demonstrates the full reach of autonomy and departs, having added little institutionally to the local political order. Seemingly reticent to digest the

implications of infrastructural weakness, the present cohort of foreign state builders is on course to oversee a reenactment of their forerunners' errors.²¹

Foreign-led state building projects have been remarkably non-penetrative, presiding over the subject country without enlisting local populations or constructing institutions from the base upward. Once foreign states have taken upon the mission of building domestic institutions they immediately finding themselves stuck in the morass of domestic politics they hoped to correct. The project of external state building requires its executives wield power *and* autonomy yet domestic political development typically requires leaders some balance between the two. What seemed simple from the outside becomes exceedingly complex on the ground as administrators struggle to exert political authority. This mammoth task is largely untreated in the literature on shared sovereignty even though commonly cited cases illustrate the consequences of "infrastructural debility." Ambitions of institution building crumbled as American presidents and their officers on the ground discovered they were incapable of reordering their target societies. When strong prior institutions were absent, their infrastructural weakness gave the lie to slogans of transferring democracy and order. Nor were avowedly colonial projects more successful. After all, they produced the very "quasi-

²¹ Note that this argument about infrastructural weakness differs from Mann's own critique of "incoherent imperialism." He emphasizes the break between an earlier less militarist approach to foreign policy and the current "Bush Doctrine" of preemption, driven by neoconservatives who came to the fore through Bush's election in 2000 and the crisis of 11 September 2001. In contrast, this paper stresses the continuities in American approaches to nation building and excavates the underlying causal logic that perennially confounds such projects. Whereas Mann concluded the solution was to "[t]hrow the militarists out of office," the present analysis advances a more basic reconsideration of how state power can be utilized abroad. See Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (New York: Verso, 2003), 8-9, 267.

states” foreign intervention is supposed to rectify. We turn in the next section to how the problem of infrastructural power illuminates past failures and overshadows recent prescriptions.

Imperial Designs, Empirical Dilemmas

While diagnosing the problem of failed states, advocates of shared sovereignty prescribe a treatment that has failed repeatedly in prior periods. Contrary to the assumption that proper state building is a matter of incentives or willpower, the exercise of political authority and institutional development has plagued even the most committed intervention forces. From forays into Central America and the Caribbean through Cold War intervention, the U.S. has consistently failed to develop infrastructural power and mobilize society in accomplishing political goals. Emblematic of general trends was the United States’ experience in its own region. As empire-advocate Ferguson concedes, the departure of U.S. forces from the Dominican Republic (1924), Nicaragua (1933), Cuba (1934), and Haiti (1934) revealed “[t]he dream of using American military force to underwrite American-style governments in Central America had failed miserably. There was only one true democracy in the entire region by 1939, and that was Costa Rica, where the United States had never intervened.”²²

In contrast, the best outcomes have amounted to a structurally modest buttressing of an existing state, the archetypal “success” cases of Germany and Japan. Those experiences do not present an alternative model, because democratization

²² Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire*, 58.

depended more on institution restoration than the introduction of new resources or personnel. Another advocate of intervention, Fukuyama, makes the point: "In both countries, the state apparatus survived the war and was preserved into the postwar period with remarkably little change... The American occupation seriously underestimated the competence and cohesiveness of the Japanese bureaucracy and did little more than change a few positions at the top... [In Germany] all but 1,000 of the 53,000 permanent civil servants initially purged were ultimately reinstated."²³ Foreign administrators benefited from antecedent institutions and prudently used the available political, bureaucratic and economic apparatus. Institutional growth could soon be undertaken by indigenous elites and the occupier did not have to cope with widespread social agitation.²⁴

This record flips the core lesson of Germany and Japanese reconstruction on its head: Rather than being model cases for future foreign-led state building, they demonstrate that interventions lean heavily upon existing state capacity for their functioning. These are cautionary cases, not encouraging ones, for the prospects of spreading democracy through occupation. Because the primary rationale for intervention is state failure, candidates for future foreign-led state building bear little

²³ Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century*, 38-39.

²⁴ When calculating the replicability of these experiences, one can also include the unusual international climate Germans and Japanese citizens faced on the cusp of the Cold War. Edelstein has drawn attention to the importance of this external threat in motivating the occupied populations to comply with the designs of the United States and its allies. While forwarding two competing but compatible explanatory logics, Edelstein's paper and the present analysis point in the same direction, toward the rarity of a German or Japanese-style democratization through occupation. David M. Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail," *International Security* 29, no. 1 (2004): 61-65.

institutional resemblance to post-World War II Germany or Japan, which were not “quasi-states” but imperial powers. In terms of the structures of a democratic state, twenty-first century targets are likely to have more in common with early twentieth-century Cuba, Haiti, and the Philippines. With regard to the more relevant examples of state building in the global South, comparisons of twentieth century intervention and occupation portray a dismal record.²⁵

Hoping to transcend this history, many analysts appear to defy the very lessons they seek to impart, often through seemingly original conclusions about how to avoid past failures. Refurbished state building models stress two ways intervention can learn from its earlier mistakes: 1) By making a sustained effort of resources and manpower and 2) By applying local knowledge in the management of institutional development.²⁶ Yet the empirical record should dampen even these self-conscious imperial ambitions. Cutting edge research in the field would add little to the guidebook of British colonial administrators or Wilsonian policy planners. Failures of institution building throughout the period of Western intervention in the developing world occurred not for lack of

²⁵ Minxin Pei and Sara Kasper highlight the importance of local conditions in assessing America’s 4-12 record in twentieth century democracy building, which includes short-term interventions in Panama and Grenada Minxin Pei and Sara Kasper, “Lessons from the Past: The American Record of Nation Building,” *Carnegie Policy Brief* 24 (2003): 4. Edelstein’s broader study of military occupation reaches a similar ratio (7 out of 28 and none since the post-World War II period). Edelstein, “Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail,” 90-91. Dobbins and his coauthors observe that “the German and Japanese occupations set standards for postconflict transformation that have not since been equaled” James Dobbins et al., *America’s Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2003), xix.

²⁶ In focusing on these two variables I am consciously addressing two of the sturdier arguments out there for why nation building should be possible. Others such as the establishment of rule of law or institutions for self-governance are semi-tautological and raise the same issues as the overall enterprise. This pair of variables gives us something novel beyond earlier literatures. Yet it is still deeply flawed.

investment in these areas, but despite such attention to them. Consequently, the cocktail of proposals for successful foreign-led state building reiterates defunct strategies. For instance, they are as unlikely to resolve contemporary dilemmas in Iraq as they are to have advanced British goals there eighty years ago. Indeed, the very same measures failed to rescue British plans for a liberal Iraqi state. The “lesson” is that political realities on the ground have conditioned the duration of state building and even foreign experts with extensive local experience have proved ill-suited for remolding the society they study.

The Commitment Fallacy

Currently, the dominant explanation of why foreign-led state building has failed and how it might succeed is that foreign forces have rarely sustained their commitment to the subject countries.²⁷ Thus, a recent RAND study concludes, “Many factors influence the ease or difficulty of nation-building... However, among the controllable factors, the most important determinant seems to be the level of effort—measured in time, manpower, and money.”²⁸ Feldman diagnoses the problem in similar terms, ““The tendency of the United States, and indeed the United Nations and its member states, has

²⁷ One finds a variant of this “effort thesis” among critics of the Iraq War who contend it is unilateralism and the neglect of robust international coalitions that undermines the feasibility of nation building. See John B. Judis, *The Folly of Empire: What George W. Bush Could Learn from Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Scribner, 2004). Gary J. Dorrien, *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana* (New York: Routledge, 2004). Larry Diamond, “Lessons from Iraq,” *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 1 (2005): 13. These claims are based on the same ontological premise of the sustained commitment argument; More effort—in the form of allies—brings more success. As discussed below, the evidence shows that success has enabled duration, but duration has not delivered success.

²⁸ Dobbins et al., *America’s Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq*, xxv.

been to settle for the dampening of violence, not to devote to state building the resources or time that would be needed for it to succeed.”²⁹ The “excessively short time horizon” of American imperialism, Ferguson speculates, may be “its principal shortcoming.”³⁰ These arguments assume the autonomy of “effort” from local conditions, overlooking the ways the subject society affects a foreign state builder’s performance and, in turn, the project’s duration. When an occupier’s lengthy stay coincides with institutional accomplishments, duration has been the symptom of political stability but not its source.

Levels of “effort” and “will” have largely been extensions of antecedent circumstances rather than independent influences upon them. The resilience of indigenous authority structures and ubiquity of unexpected local responses enables the target society to alter the occupier’s project rather than be altered by it. Despite plans of change at the outset of state building, those executing the project soon embrace a change of plans. Withdrawal, whether sooner or later, announces the failures to reorder society and build institutions, but does not bring it about. Hence, length of occupation may indicate *when* foreign forces recognize the futility of their initial designs, but defiance and entrenchment do not remedy those flaws. The endurance of an occupier may correlate with the degree of success (e.g., a long stay in Germany, a short one in Haiti). Yet the relationship is not causal; both variables depend largely on the initial conditions of the subject country. Favorable institutional endowments have drawn the most

²⁹ Feldman, *What We Owe Iraq: War and the Ethics of Nation Building*, 19.

³⁰ Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire*, 13.

sustained engagement while weak institutional contexts have frustrated even determined external forces attempted large-social political reorganization.³¹

Three sets of cases can help embed the spurious correlation of commitment and success in the problem of infrastructural power. These are examples of short-term commitment without success (Mexico 1914, Haiti 1994), sustained commitment with success (Germany 1945-1952, Japan 1945-1952), and sustained commitment without success (the Philippines 1898-1946, British-ruled Iraq 1918-1932).³²

Mexico and Haiti - The history of foreign-led state building is replete with examples of short-lived operations and crushed expectations. Projects that failed to take hold in the United States geo-political backyard are especially illustrative, since they evince the

³¹ Another commitment claim is Peceny's finding that American support for free and fair elections was strongly correlated with post-intervention democracy. However, prior democratic experience, even when set alongside Peceny's electoral promotion variable, remains a powerful predictor of regime outcomes: "The fact that the democratic status of states in 1944 is the most significant variable for explaining democracy in 1993 suggests that continuity in regime type was the norm for all states, not just those that experienced U.S. intervention." Peceny may have understated the significance of antecedent conditions by not measuring duration of prior democratic experience the way he gauges extent of intervention. Eight of his fifteen cases in the quadrant of "free and fair elections" and "democracy" outcomes had prior history as democratic regimes. Across the full set of success cases the average length of earlier democracy is nearly twelve years. Mark Peceny, "Forcing Them to Be Free," *Political Research Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (1999): 571.

³² Edelstein argues that the American occupation of South Korea from 1945-1948 produced "mixed" results. Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail," 88. Yet South Korea's institutions of government depended largely on the infrastructure built by Japanese colonialism from 1905-1945. See Atul Kohli, *State-Directed Development: Political Power and Industrialization in the Global Periphery* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 27. Further, South Korea did not democratize until 1987, nearly four decades after the US occupation ended. By that time the gradual maturation of domestic opposition forces had become a driving force. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 153-55. Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 94-96.

limits of effecting institutional change over modest distances. In 1914, Woodrow Wilson set his sights on toppling General Victoriano Huerta in Mexico.³³ The U.S. ambassador in London then declared, "The United States will be here for two hundred years and it can continue to shoot men for that little space till they learn to vote and to rule themselves."³⁴ A three-month presence of U.S. forces destabilized Huerta's hold on power, but failed to bring an American-friendly successor as Wilson had envisioned. Instead the country plunged into civil war.³⁵ Wilson's occupation of Haiti lasted considerably longer (1915-1934) and yielded minimal results, as did a shorter incursion sixty years later.³⁶

Escalating violence after the American occupation of Haiti in 1994 prompted a speedy transfer of authority to multi-lateral forces.³⁷ "Six months [after restoring Jean-Bertrand Aristide], the United States handed over responsibility to a UN mission, leaving only a few hundred men on the island and allowing Aristide to resume the normal routine of Haitian politics: theft, murder, intimidation, corruption."³⁸ Haiti's "normal routine" did not include Aristide, however. Ten years after America had restored him to the presidency, he was back in exile, "exactly where he would have been

³³ Wilson had personal experience in the limits of imposing democratization. Four years prior he had abandoned plans to disband "eating clubs" and integrate the undergraduate and graduate student communities at Princeton University, where he served as president from 1908-1910 Judis, *The Folly of Empire: What George W. Bush Could Learn from Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson*, 84.

³⁴ Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*, 53.

³⁵ Judis, *The Folly of Empire: What George W. Bush Could Learn from Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson*, 91-92.

³⁶ On early twentieth century U.S. involvement in Haiti see Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail," 63.

³⁷ Bob Shacochis, *The Immaculate Invasion* (New York, NY: Viking, 1999), 327.

³⁸ Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*, 141.

had Clinton never acted".³⁹ Contrary to the notion that "effort" brings results, levels of local stability drove the extent of American involvement in Mexico (1914) and Haiti (1994), rather than the reverse. The misleading association of occupier endurance and results weakens further when we examine state building projects that lasted much longer.

Germany and Japan - Not surprisingly, Germany and Japan are invoked as examples of the U.S. staying for the long-term. However, like the successful institutional outcomes for which they are credited, the fortitude of American administrators owed much to favorable conditions from the start. It is far easier to remain in a country where the foreign state builders are unthreatened by domestic discontent and in both countries total post-conflict casualties were zero, a record only matched (so far) by ongoing operations in Bosnia and Kosovo.⁴⁰ This stability, from the outset of U.S. occupation, signifies an especially conducive environment for long-term involvement. External threats on the eve of the Cold War may have provided further impetus for collusion between the occupiers and the occupied, but the nature of the state building project was much less radical than would have been the case for poorly institutionalized polities.⁴¹ Pre-existing institutions help to harmonize the interests of foreign occupiers, intent on state development, and local concerns. The less work the occupation force has to do, the less invasive its mission and the less disruptive to the society being ruled. More sobering

³⁹ Feldman, *What We Owe Iraq: War and the Ethics of Nation Building*, 29.

⁴⁰ Dobbins et al., *America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq*, 153.

⁴¹ On the significance of external threat see Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail," 80-81..

examples come from the Philippines under U.S. occupation and Iraq under the British, both of which evince the limits of sustained commitment for institutional gains in a more typical context.

The Philippines and British-Ruled Iraq - The unusually long tenure of US forces in the Philippines shows the conditions that enable sustained presence. It also reveals how political goals are often subordinated to local authority patterns. Soon after displacing the Spanish in 1898, the US military battled a broad indigenous campaign for independence. By contemporary standards the costs were enormous. 4300 American soldiers and nearly 200,000 Philippine soldiers and civilians lost their lives.⁴² Although the size of American forces grew dramatically to 126,000 soldiers, ten times the initial commitment, even "as late as 1913, the United States was still fighting insurgents."⁴³ Still, the US ultimately prevailed and established domestic order. Interestingly, despite the tremendous destruction of this internal war, old patterns of social authority and wealth distribution persisted. In fact, US administrators magnified the power of affluent families through regressive redistribution, inflating already substantial economic inequality among Filipinos.⁴⁴ Political reforms then further enhanced the dominance of

⁴² David Wurfel, *Filipino Politics: Development and Decay, Politics and International Relations of Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 6.

⁴³ Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*, 49. Judis, *The Folly of Empire: What George W. Bush Could Learn from Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson*, 46.

⁴⁴ Benedict Anderson, "Cacique Democracy in the Philippines - Origins and Dreams," *New Left Review*, no. 169 (1988): 10-11.

the oligarchic class. Local elections transformed rural populations into clients of the landlords since voting for their patron's candidate promised future rewards.⁴⁵

American administrators soon found their efforts in the country welcomed by the presumptive Philippine ruling class. Interactions with the colonial power assumed a collaborationist hue. The political economy arrangement served the country's aristocracy so well that the most outspoken and influential advocates of Philippine independence were ultimately *American* labor and agriculture lobbies threatened by the influx of cheap Filipino commodities, such as sugar. Meanwhile, ruling families in the Philippines feared that independence would cost them their lucrative access to the American market. "It was thus with real reluctance that in 1935 [the Philippine elite] accepted Commonwealth status."⁴⁶ Through the next decades and after the country gained full independence in 1946, these same aristocratic forces continued to dominate Philippine political life.⁴⁷ The subsequently weak two-party democracy was largely an extension of the "bifactional" nature of local rivalries.⁴⁸ Two decades of elections were plagued by violence at the polls.⁴⁹ President Ferdinand Marcos then ruled as a dictator

⁴⁵ Mark R. Thompson, *The Anti-Marcos Struggle: Personalistic Rule and Democratic Transition in the Philippines* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 16.

⁴⁶ Anderson, "Cacique Democracy in the Philippines - Origins and Dreams," 12-13.

⁴⁷ Edelstein, who also evaluates the Philippines as a "failure," notes that continued American presence in the island nation "fomented Japanese antagonism". Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail," 84..

⁴⁸ Carl H. Lande, *Leaders, Factions, and Parties; the Structure of Philippine Politics* (New Haven: Southeast Asia Studies Yale University; distributor: Cellar Book Shop Detroit, 1965), 36.

⁴⁹ Mark R. Thompson, "The Marcos Regime in the Philippines," in *Sultanistic Regimes*, ed. H.E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 211.

from 1972-1986. In the time since, his elected successors have struggled to escape coup attempts and mollify social discontent.⁵⁰

A second example of foreign-led state building failure despite extended intervention comes from Iraq under British administration. British rule in Iraq lasted from 1918 to 1932 and its conclusion ratified Britain's failure to establish a liberal democratic state. From the outset of their occupation in Iraq, British leaders displayed exactly the kind of commitment recent evaluations contend is critical for success. At the time of the occupation the Middle East department of Britain's Colonial Office wrote, "[Our] course of action has deeply committed us to the creation and support of an independent Arab State in the whole area [of Iraq]... We have undertaken... to do our best to make this regime a success."⁵¹ British colonial officials did not flee from what they would subsequently describe as a slide into quagmire: "[I]n November 1918, we were in effective occupation of the whole of the Basra and Baghdad vilayets and practically the whole of the Mosul vilayet. We could not withdraw at once and leave chaos. There we were, and there we had to remain and to administer, for the time being at any rate."⁵² The time stretched forward and British administrators remained.

⁵⁰ There are more positive appraisals of the country's political instability. Peceny regards the Philippines as an example of successful transitions to democracy inaugurated by US intervention. In fact the Philippines provides *three* (20%) of his confirming cases for democratization through liberal electoral engagement. In Peceny's account the Philippines becomes a democracy after US involvement concluded in 1936, 1958 and again in 1988. Peceny, "Forcing Them to Be Free," 568.

⁵¹ Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation-Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 17.

⁵² B.H. Bourdillon, "The Political Situation in Iraq," *Journal of the British Institute of International Affairs* 3, no. 6 (1924): 274.

A revolt involving over 100,000 Iraqis from June 1920 through February 1921 signaled Iraqis' rejection of the British, yet did not dislodge them.⁵³ Although an unwelcome stay threatened to bring Britain "the same dreary disillusionment which she has had to bear in India and Egypt," British leaders ultimately opted to stay anyway.⁵⁴ Delays in the granting of sovereignty prompted resistance, as "key members of the political elite deployed all means at their disposal to pressure the British into granting them control over Iraq's political and military affairs. From 1927 until 1929 politics in Baghdad were paralyzed."⁵⁵ The British faced a choice between attempting to override existing social structures or instead defer to them. As commitment proved insufficient the British gradually accepted the limits of their influence.

Eventually, the move toward Iraqi independence from Britain came as a preemptive measure against escalating domestic discontent and the desperate use of airpower to maintain a semblance of political order. Recognizing that the "prolonged interruption of constitutional government...might well lead to disastrous results," the acting High Commissioner, Sir Gilbert Clayton, was empowered to announce that Iraq would be proposed for League of Nations membership in 1932. However, the British handover accompanied recognition by the colonial administration that ambitions for a liberal state would be scrapped.⁵⁶ While Ferguson treats British determination as a trait for emulation, the contemporary implications for Iraq and other foreign-led state building ventures are sobering. He writes, "there were British government

⁵³ Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation-Building and a History Denied*, 135.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

representatives, military and civilian, in Baghdad uninterruptedly for almost exactly forty years. When the British went into Iraq, they stayed."⁵⁷ But the British stayed *and* failed. Prolonged commitment can defy local conditions but does not correct them. In most cases the positive correlation of effort and state building outcomes comes from the tremendous impact of antecedent government capacity on the occupier's mission.

Misapplying Local Expertise

Specialized knowledge of developing areas forms the second leg of renewed foreign-led state building advocacy. Proponents of intervention reason that institutional development must be tailored to suit local contexts. They call for close understanding of the society in which the new state will grow and fault the United States for not investing enough in area training.⁵⁸ Thus, Ferguson bemoans the lack of Near Eastern Studies majors at Ivy League schools and chides young Americans who, unlike the predecessors in the British Empire, seem unwilling "to spend their entire working lives... running infernally hot, disease-ridden countries."⁵⁹ Edelstein also lists training among the core "lessons" of failed occupations and note that a background in the local culture, language and history meant "authorities in [Germany and Japan] were far more qualified for the job than their predecessors had been."⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*, 205.

⁵⁸ Diamond and Fukuyama have cited the focus on "scientism" over regionally-based knowledge as a principal weakness of the contemporary academy Larry Diamond, "What Political Science Owes the World," *PS Online*, no. March (2002). Francis Fukuyama, "How Academia Failed the Nation: The Decline of Regional Studies," *SAISphere* (2004)..

⁵⁹ Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*, 207, 10.

⁶⁰ Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail," 82.

Yet experts commanding deep knowledge of authority traditions and indigenous political structures have still been ineffective at their charge. Foreign specialists applying area knowledge may realize the insufficiency of their understanding more quickly than colleagues with less training, but they have not succeeded at national building. When applied instrumentally toward a predetermined goal, local knowledge undercuts its comparative advantage, the ability to participate in open-ended political decision-making. The imposition of grand designs is anathema to the kind of gradual local politicking that characterizes indigenous political development and the unforeseen consequences it yields, as shown in the experiences of two well-intentioned Arabist state builders. John Glubb's work in British Mandate Iraq and Noah Feldman's participation in U.S.-administered Iraq illustrate the limits of local expertise for imposed political engineering.

John Glubb - British colonial administrators, despite their education at home and extended tours abroad, were sometimes stumped when converting their expertise into political results. Here John Glubb represents the ideal-type of foreign-trained local expert. After fighting in Europe during World War I Glubb came to Iraq and took up residency, spending "the 1920s stationed in rural Iraq many miles from the out-posts of the British Empire."⁶¹ Yet Glubb's Familiarity with local practices did not enable him to unlock the secrets to political success. Instead, his analysis rehearsed the tropes of British discourse at the time. As historian Toby Dodge writes, "Although [Glubb's] exposition

⁶¹ Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation-Building and a History Denied*, 76.

of tribal cohesion was more detailed and anchored in experience than that of others, his understanding was still nevertheless permeated with romanticism.”⁶² Rather than revising dominant stereotypes, Glubb employed the idea of “Oriental Despotism,” a theory that precipitously trumpeted de-Turkification and minimized the Ottomans’ institutional legacy.⁶³ Scholarship and field experience was misapplied to national administration and the tasks of political rule. This continues to be the case today.

Noah Feldman – While some wonder why “so many products of Britain’s top universities” were willing to assist their country’s state building efforts, but so few Americans have been, but one finds a latter-day version of Glubb in Noah Feldman.⁶⁴ Feldman took a bachelor’s degree in Near Eastern Studies with highest honors from Harvard University, a D.Phil. from Oxford University (where he was a Rhodes Scholar), and a law degree from Yale University. In terms of scholastic qualifications, he was the very model of a modern state builder. Between April to July 2003, Feldman served as senior constitutional advisor to the Office of Reconstructions and Humanitarian Assistance (later renamed the Coalition Provisional Authority), bringing to Iraq world-class training in Middle East studies and Islamic law.⁶⁵ After his return to the United States, however, he took back many questions about state building and candidly described how insufficient his skills had been for the project he endorsed.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 48.

⁶⁴ Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire*, 207.

⁶⁵ Noah Feldman, “Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing on Building Democratic Institutions in Iraq and the Middle East,” (Washington, DC: 2003).

While defending the management of millions of Iraqis by less-informed administrators, Feldman admitted how lost he often was in meetings of hundreds. At one point during his tenure in Baghdad, Feldman scrambled to create an on-the-spot legal justification for abrogating Ba’thist regulations in Iraq’s lawyers associations. He succeeded in mollifying the majority of attendees but alienated a substantial faction; a well-intentioned decree thereby provided a short fix while delaying resolution of more fundamental issues.⁶⁶ “These meetings,” he reflects, “were fascinating, in a frustrating sort of way, because they showed me just how little I really understood the thought world of the Iraqis with whom I had the greatest amount in common.”⁶⁷ Yet Feldman was ambivalent about the deeper implications of those shortcomings: “We like to imagine that our expertise will make the difference; in the end, though, not we, but the Iraqis, will have to run these institutions and make them work—and *there is just too much that we do not understand about the complexities of Iraqi politics and society*. My skepticism, however, does not lead me to conclude that we should abandon any role in the process whereby institutions must be designed.”⁶⁸ This quandary, which Glubb also faced, may unsettle administrators with less training: If experts such as Feldman and his forerunners in the British colonies cannot resolve these problems, who can?

The problem stems not from insufficient erudition or experience, but from the misapplication of local understanding. Regional studies can yield tremendous intellectual dividends. However, the strength of area expertise is not in taking shortcuts

⁶⁶ Feldman, *What We Owe Iraq: War and the Ethics of Nation Building*, 57.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶⁸ Emphasis added. *Ibid.*, 82.

around local practices in order to impose a foreign plan, but rather in developing new concepts and assumptions through an open-ended process of learning and engagement.⁶⁹ Just as American social scientists would be limited in the guidance they could impart to a veteran congressperson, so too are American experts in *other* countries constrained in the application of their knowledge toward complex social tasks. The intricacies of political power are, after all, *political*, not technical. Even most analysts who live years abroad will still not wield the kind of practical know-how by which individuals may participate in broader movements of change.⁷⁰ Area expertise does not resolve the problem of infrastructural debility, although local knowledge helps in comprehending it. Given Feldman's posture of inquisitive cluelessness (an experience commonly shared by graduate students in the field), it is likely that training and

⁶⁹ For example, contrast Feldman's *What We Owe Iraq* with Richard Fenno's *Homestyle: House Members in Their Districts*. Rather than expecting to *impart knowledge*, Fenno treats himself as a consumer in the marketplace of practical experience about local politics. This posture yields a different kind of scholarship and learning than the position of benevolent consultant. Richard F. Fenno, *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978).

⁷⁰ James Scott has shown the importance of practical know-how ("mētis") in the functioning of local politics and the frustration of large-scale planning. "[Mētis], is the mode of reasoning most appropriate to complex material and social tasks where the uncertainties are so daunting that we must trust our (experienced) intuition and feel our way... Where the interactions involve not just the material environment but social interaction as well—building and peopling new villages or cities, organizing a revolutionary seizure of power, or collectivizing agriculture—the mind boggles at the multitude of interactions and uncertainties (as distinct from calculable risks)." James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, *Yale Agrarian Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 327. See also Bent Flyvbjerg's discussion of the related concept, "phronesis" (practical wisdom), and associated exchanges about the role of context-based learning for a cumulative social science. Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). David D. Laitin, "The Perestroikan Challenge to Social Science," *Politics & Society* 31, no. 1 (2003). Bent Flyvbjerg, "A Perestroikan Straw Man Answers Back: David Laitin and Phronetic Political Science," *Politics & Society* 32, no. 3 (2004). Sanford F. Schram, "Beyond Paradigm: Resisting the Assimilation of Phronetic Social Science," *Politics & Society* 32, no. 3 (2004).

experience abroad would inject a dose of humility about the would-be state builder's skills, rather than bestowing a sense of mastery over the society in question. From here one may begin to develop an alternative tact for humanitarian assistance and the use of state power abroad.

Constructive Implications of Failed State Building

"Operation of the theories of trusteeship and tutelage are best illustrated by Iraq... The further history of Iraq will test the soundness of the Covenant's theory of the proper relation between advanced and backward peoples."

-Quincy Wright, 1926.⁷¹

This message from the past suggests that "learning lessons" in the field of intervention may necessitate a sharp break from foreign-led state building as it is conventionally defended and debated. Rather than adjusting projects of large-scale political engineering and imposed regime change, scholars and policy analysts should consider distinct alternatives that scrutinize the efficacy of intervention from the bottom up. Otherwise, the bold conclusions of today may simply become the droll epigraphs of future generations.

The argument that foreign-led state building is a flawed but salvageable project prejudices its fundamental viability. Foreign attempts to impose order and democracy by assuming governance functions have foundered not because of insufficient effort or a dearth of area experts, but because political power depends on eliciting societal compliance and negotiating constituent demands. Foreign state builders seek to

⁷¹ Quincy Wright, "The Government of Iraq," *American Political Science Review* 20, no. 4 (1926).

transform institutions but do not reach into the society in which those institutions are anchored. They attempt projects far more ambitious than even popular indigenous leaders, with a command of local customs and history, would ever consider. Hence, while the challenge of penetrating society confronts all rulers, it plagues foreign occupiers. Typically, their well-formed plans disintegrate as the local population responds in unpredicted ways. Unintended consequences in micro-management soon aggregate into systemic failures. Indeed, macro-level political breakdown in a state building administration is arguably the only deterministic aspects of the process. There is no surety about *when* the occupier will opt for exit and sustained civil conflict, but sooner or later grand ambitions fade.⁷² Is there another way for foreign states to assist developing countries?

Given the record of failed foreign-led state building and the inability of occupiers to develop infrastructural power, aspirations should be humble in the most prosaic sense. Imposed political order tends to be self-defeating. As the state builder increasingly relies on indigenous organizations, the limits of his capacity to change the

⁷² Indigenous ideologies and modes of organizations need not be undemocratic or particularly non-Western in order for the target society to reject imposed regime change. Even in the presence of shared hopes for democratic governance and the protection of individual liberties, the processes by which local constituencies would pursue such goals may be completely unfamiliar to even the most well-intentioned foreign occupiers@ similar goals, different paths. This point has been misconstrued in current debates that frame democratization as *either* a Rustowian "fortuitous bi-product" between undemocratic actors *or* a Lipsetian process built upon certain social and economic "prerequisites". The exchange between Diamond and Smith over the Iraq war and occupation reflects these views. See Dankwart A. Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model," *Comparative Politics* 2, no. 3 (1970). Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic-Development and Political Legitimacy," in *American Political Science Review* (1959). Larry Diamond, "Was Iraq a Fool's Errand? What Really Went Wrong: Reply," *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 6 (2004). Tony Smith, "Was Iraq a Fool's Errand? What Really Went Wrong," *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 6 (2004).

target society become apparent and the rationale for intervention weakens: If foreign occupiers cannot govern more effectively than their predecessors, why enter in the first place? Infrastructural power is either revived from antecedent traditions or it continues to be absent. This incapacity for institutional development even undermines the prominent humanitarian rationale employed to justify external sovereignty infringement.⁷³ Any application of violence (despotic power) only signals these failings and further galvanizes local discontent. We can imagine a third kind of influence, however, which may be termed “regenerative power” and which is exercised during relief efforts, such as emergency assistance following natural disasters.

The Bounded Effectiveness of Regenerative Power

Regenerative power involves neither the adoption of domestic state functions nor physical coercion. Distinct from infrastructural power and opposite to despotic power, regenerative power denotes the ability of a state to provide material and personnel assistance under the direction of the local population. It means, for example, rebuilding a post office, but not delivering the mail. It is typified by America’s responses to natural disaster relief within its own borders and abroad. Regenerative power turns nation-building on its head; Rather than imposing an external blueprint from outside, participants respond to the needs of the affected community. It is restorative rather than transformative. There is no preexisting master plan for what the “final product” will be,

⁷³ Michael Ignatieff, “State Failure and Nation-Building,” in *Humanitarian Intervention: Ethical, Legal and Political Dilemmas*, ed. J.L. Holzgrefe and Robert Keohane (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 320.

but rather an organically evolving process in which the assisting group serves at the direction of the people being assisted. The exercise of regenerative power is inherently limited in scale since it depends on local engagement rather than elite planning. It is inimical to macro-level ambitions but it also acquires a bounded effectiveness that imposed regime change lacks.

Where foreign-led state building attempts to overwrite existing organizations and instrumentally applies local understanding, disaster relief efforts and regenerative projects begin from the assumption that local communities know best their own needs. Existing social networks and patterns of authority are an asset, not a hindrance, and local know-how offers the principal tool for resolving local crises. Rather than pursuing the oftentimes destructive delusion of interventionist state transformation, regenerative power starts from an interest in using state power for constructive purposes and a sober assessments of the limits of that aim. When planners contend with faulty assumptions and a hefty amount of contingency, differences in scale are differences in kind. Small projects of limited duration that proceed in revocable steps are more likely to enjoy the flexibility and adaptability needed to avoid disastrous unintended consequences. Regenerative projects thereby pursue humanitarian goals by curbing ambition and the breadth of planning. Even in the smallest projects, though, there remains the risk that foreign groups will assume political tasks and capsize the practice of indigenous administration. It is at this point—the threshold between well-intentioned aid and unexpected harm—where research can usefully inform action.

Future Research Trajectories

The failures of foreign-led state building indicate that research in the field has been moving away from where we can learn the most. Interventionist plans should be downsized not supersized.⁷⁴ Anchoring analysis in the “real world” it purports to serve requires trading national-level comparisons for nuanced local accounts. Here comparativists and international relations scholars can profit from two seemingly disparate fields: work on disaster relief and studies of urban planning. These might seem unconventional sources of wisdom for students of war and democratization, but they offer a wealth of cases on foreign assistance and infrastructure development. In both areas practitioners confront the potential for severe unintended consequences.⁷⁵ Yet the vast array of prior projects offers a universe of examples with substantial variation in outcomes. Those contrasts, among earthquake relief missions or city park designs, hold the potential for a productive and systematic exploration of development as it is negotiated by its participants. Having produced a rich collection of monographs and articles on the Marshall Plan and post-Cold War interventions, we may learn a great deal from the less-discussed experiences of the Big Dig or rebuilding efforts after Hurricane Frances.

⁷⁴ The idea that more intervention is the answer spreads from Ignatieff’s critique of “empire lite” through Feldman’s regret that the British left Iraq too soon. Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2003). Feldman, *What We Owe Iraq: War and the Ethics of Nation Building*, 129.

⁷⁵ Two monographs that treat the risks of humanitarian aid, on one hand, and urban projects, on the other, are Milton J. Esman and Ronald J. Herring, *Carrots, Sticks, and Ethnic Conflict: Rethinking Development Assistance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001). Bent Flyvbjerg, Nils Bruzelius, and Werner Rothengatter, *Megaprojects and Risk: An Anatomy of Ambition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

A line of inquiry is more heuristic and involves the continued study of domestic state building, particularly in its most protracted and gradual forms. This paper, like the literature engaged above, has compared different cases of intervention, leaving open the counter-factual of how countries develop without foreign occupation. To put the question somewhat boldly: What would the present states of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka be like if the British had not ruled the sub-continent for a century? Would they enjoy much less democracy today? Might they resemble neighboring uncolonized states such as Turkey, Iran, Nepal or Thailand? Future comparisons of indigenous development with colonial rule may provide answers. A useful step for such work would be to integrate colonial regimes into broader datasets and discussions that have generally focused on democratization in independent states. Additionally, where ongoing civil conflicts give the question of humanitarian assistance heightened urgency, we need more studies of what Weinstein terms “autonomous recovery,” contrasting the fate of non-intervened cases with those that experienced external engagement.⁷⁶ Finally, more work on state building outside of Europe and the United States can bring less examined experiences, such as nineteenth century state formation in Asia and Latin America, to bear on the problems of governance in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

⁷⁶ See Jeremy Weinstein, “Autonomous Recovery and International Intervention in Comparative Perspective,” unpublished paper.

Conclusion: Foreign-Led State Building as Known Unknowable

"[T]here are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know."

-US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld

Internal conflict in Iraq brings the rationale for intervention and the limits of such actions into sharp contrast. Foreign-led state building has confounded its architects with almost predictable regularity, showing how much we still do not understand about the construction of state power. Contrary to their expectations of remolding the political arena, foreign occupiers have proven just as incapable of institutional development as the local leaders that preceded them. Recognizing the poor record of Western powers attempting macro-level political planning, conscientious advocates of intervention treat the "how" of state building as a "known unknown". Yet the persistence of infrastructural debility betrays a known *unknowable*. Incapable of wrestling with "the radical contingency of the future," on one hand, and the conservative inertia of social continuity, on the other, state builders have suffered repeated failure despite the commitment and credentials now invoked to resuscitate their project.⁷⁷

Heroic expectations notwithstanding, those trying to impose regime change and raise new state structures find themselves daunted by the complexity and resilience of local politics. This dilemma pushes would-be state builders down one of two undesirable paths. Either they recognize their inability to restructure indigenous political arrangements or they attempt to do so in vain. Consequently, it is the blueprints

⁷⁷ Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, 343.

for reconstruction, rather than the target countries, that tend to morph; bold plans for change are themselves altered to accommodate the realities of negotiating unfamiliar political terrain. Although a nascent consensus argues that successful foreign-led state building depends on sustained effort, historical experience shows the U.S. has done best where it has done the least, upgrading indigenous institutions rather than implanting new ones. Conversely, its most ambitious projects have typically ended in failure, ratified by the withdrawal of American forces. On the whole, the impact of foreign intervention has ranged from boosting existing institutions to making cosmetic alterations.

These patterns raise serious questions about the chances of success in even the most well-intentioned of regime change missions. They also demarcate the limits of projecting state power abroad, whether for humanitarian or security purposes. The failures of imposed regime change lead to the conclusion that indigenous gradual political development—with all of its potential for authoritarianism and civil unrest—could be the optimal path for sustainable democratization and state building. Therefore, we may be left paraphrasing Churchill’s endorsement of democracy as the worst kind of government except for the alternatives: Sovereign political development may be the worst form of government except for all those kinds of foreign-led state building that have been tried. Or, as a seasoned John Glubb remarked after nine years in British-

occupied Iraq, “Would it not be more practical, as well as more polite, if we left these nations to govern themselves in their own way?”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation-Building and a History Denied*, 100.