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## A Foreign Policy of Mission Creep

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In an eye-opening article [3] in these spaces a few weeks ago, James Joyner cited the words of an American general in Afghanistan who, in reciting his troops' successes in Helmand province, noted that "Roads have been paved and markets secured, allowing commerce to grow in places like Marja, Nad Ali and Lashkar Gah . . ."

Both the general and his troops undoubtedly performed the mission their country gave them professionally and with dedication. But the exchange still begs utterly valid questions: how, when and why did the growth of commerce in Marja, Nad Ali and Lashkar Gah become worth American lives or taxpayer dollars? And what might this portend for our potential involvement in Syria?

Liberal internationalism, so popular in Washington over the past two decades, has transformed the traditional purpose of American foreign policy—historically understood as systematizing relations between sovereign states and attempting to influence the behavior of other countries—into the much more grandiose attempt to remake the political cultures and economic systems of states and societies thousands of miles from our shores.

The result of this transformation of U.S. foreign-policy goals has been what Andrew Bacevich once aptly described as “endless war,” in which the U.S. military is used as an instrument for nation- and state-building in open-ended missions around the world. Consider, as outlined below, the record of some of our recent interventions, and the discrepancy in the time required to achieve their respective military and civilian objectives.

## US Intervention Timelines

|             | Military Objectives Achieved | Civilian Objectives Achieved |
|-------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Bosnia      | 120 days                     | 6000+ days                   |
| Afghanistan | 36 days                      | 4100+ days                   |
| Iraq        | 41 days                      | 3660+ days                   |

(For simplicity's sake, in Bosnia military objectives are defined as having been achieved upon the completion of the terms of the Dayton Peace Accords' military annex; in Afghanistan the fall of Kabul; and in Iraq the proclamation of "mission accomplished." Civilian objectives are defined as achieved when there is an absence of large-scale violence and a reasonably stable democratic system is in place unencumbered by international administration.)

Needless to say, long-running interventions cost real money. The post-WWII reconstruction of Germany is estimated to have cost some \$35 billion in 2011 dollars. Bosnia after 1995 received more money than any country in Europe under the Marshall Plan. As of April 2013, the United States had spent \$60 billion on reconstruction in Iraq and \$93 billion in Afghanistan (and as of 2005 Kosovo had received twenty-five times the amount provided to Afghanistan in per capita terms). These amounts do not even include these wars' financial costs, or their costs in human lives.

The enormous discrepancy between achieving the military and civilian objectives of our foreign interventions is intimately connected to the recent Washingtonian vogue for Clausewitz's conflation of war with politics and diplomacy. Thus, in the 1990s Richard Holbrooke became a proponent of "diplomacy backed by force," and in a memorable exchange between Madeleine Albright and her UK counterpart in the UN Security Council, Albright claimed that "after all, war is merely an extension of politics by other means." To which her British colleague replied "Yes, Madeleine, that is exactly what Clausewitz said. But he was a German, and the Germans listened to him. Look what happened to them, twice."

The obvious problem here is that with the militarization of U.S. foreign policy and our increasingly grandiose ambitions abroad, we have gone down an intellectual slippery slope: if war is the equivalent of diplomacy and diplomacy is equal to nation-building, it therefore follows that war is the same as nation-building. This equation perhaps explains why the U.S. Army now has considerably more civil-affairs personnel than the U.S. State Department has foreign-service officers.

Unfortunately, our grandiose ambition to effect transformative change in far-off countries has not achieved any notable successes. Consider Washington's pet project in Bosnia, the Muslim-Croat Federation. After Bosnia's October 2010 elections, it took some six months for the federation to form a government, which Bosnia's own Central Electoral Commission then ruled

had been formed illegally. Bosnia's international colonial administration, the Office of the High Representative (OHR), however, suspended the ruling. Some twelve months later, political winds in Bosnia shifted, the questionable government fell apart, and a party in the prior ruling coalition went to the federation's constitutional court to prevent its cadres from being purged from the new government.

Unfortunately, the constitutional court could not rule on the issue, since for the past five years Muslim and Croat parties have been unable to agree on replacing the court's four missing judges. Many of these problems stem from an internationally approved effort to substitute two Bosnian-Croat parties representing some 90 percent of the Bosnian-Croat electorate with a marginal (but malleable) party which scraped up about two percent of the Croat vote. Unfortunately for the international architects of this plan, even this small party has fallen apart, with a faction loyal to the federation president forming a new microparty. Its chances for success at Bosnia's next elections seem slim, however, since said federation president has recently been arrested. The divided city of Mostar does not have a functioning legal government because it was unable to hold elections in 2012. The OHR imposed a specific electoral regime on the city in 2004, but its solution to the problem has been ruled unconstitutional. In December 2009, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Bosnia's current electoral law violates the rights of ethnic minorities to be elected to statewide office, but Muslim and Croat politicians can't agree on how to amend the constitution. A few months ago, the American ambassador in Sarajevo announced an attempt to reform this chaos, but he is leaving his post in a few weeks.

In Iraq, *contra* Marx's proposed sequence of events, the farce that has become our Bosnian state-building project is repeated as tragedy. Consider the reality of Iraq in April 2013, a full decade after "mission accomplished" was proclaimed. On April 12, bomb attacks in mosques in Baghdad and Diyala province killed eleven people and wounded 30 more. On April 15, thirty-one people were killed and over two hundred wounded in coordinated bombings in Baghdad, Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, and Nasiriyah. On April 18, twenty-seven people were killed and dozens more injured in a Baghdad café bombing. On April 23, twenty people were killed in clashes between security forces and anti-government Sunni protesters near Kirkuk. On April 24, seven people were killed and more than twenty injured in a car bombing in the Shia district of al-Husseiniyah near Baghdad. On April 25, ten policemen and thirty gunmen were killed in clashes in Mosul. On April 29, eighteen people were killed and dozens injured after five car bombs went off in Shia-majority provinces in southern Iraq.

All told, surveying the nation-building achievements of our foreign policy over the past couple of decades is not encouraging. Last summer, seventeen years after the ostensible end of the Bosnian conflict, a local politician told his constituents "The war is not over. We are still fighting the same war." Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki recently warned that Iraq is in danger of returning to "sectarian war," and notwithstanding Donald Rumsfeld's view that "freedom is untidy" and "stuff happens," an Iraq on the cusp of civil war under increasing Iranian influence is not where the country was supposed to be ten years after the fall of Saddam Hussein. And in Afghanistan, by this time next year there is a good chance the Taliban will again be calling the shots.

The lessons of recent decades suggest that American military might can probably (at least eventually) remove Assad from power, but there is precious little historical evidence to show that we can substantively shape the end-state in Syria—the “end-state” here being understood as the six to twelve months after the Washington war lobby and the media lose interest and move on to some more fashionable crisis. President Obama’s inability to get four senators from his own party to vote for gun reform is a stark, telling reminder of the limits of U.S. power, executive and otherwise.

Against Clausewitz and his latter-day enthusiasts, the late scholar of international relations Edwin Fedder frequently noted that if you have to resort to military force, your diplomacy has already failed. As the Obama administration debates the pros and cons of intervening in Syria, understanding the differences between diplomacy, waging war and nation-building become more urgent—as does developing a realistic appreciation for what military intervention can and cannot achieve.