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America's nation-building at gunpoint

An Army colonel assesses the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

By Gian Gentile

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Many years ago the British historian and strategist B.H. Liddell Hart pointed out that the object of war should be to produce a "better state of peace." If that is what earns a war a passing grade, then the United States deserves a failing grade for Afghanistan and Iraq.

During the American occupation in Iraq between 2003 and 2011, as many as 250,000 Iraqis died and 1.4 million were displaced. Nearly 5,000 members of the American military were killed, with many thousands more suffering life-altering wounds, both physical and mental.

By most estimates, the United States has spent about \$3 trillion on its nation-building efforts. What has this huge investment of blood and treasure achieved? Iraq is still mired in low-grade civil war, with worrisome indications that it is escalating.

By invading Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein and occupying the country for nearly nine years to rebuild it, the United States has replaced one dictator with another strong-arm leader. And that leader, Nouri Maliki, is closely aligned with America's primary foe in the region, Iran.

Then there is Afghanistan. Since early 2002, more than 2,000 Americans have been killed there, with many more seriously wounded. Thousands of Afghan civilians have been killed too. The United States has spent close to \$1 trillion trying to turn Afghanistan into a modern, functioning state.

What has the United States achieved? The place is more violent today than it was at the height of the Afghan surge of troops under Gen. Stanley McChrystal in 2009, the government is one of the most corrupt in the world, and the ability of the Afghan security forces is dubious at best.

Would Afghanistan have been worse off today if the United States had left soon after toppling the Taliban and crushing Al Qaeda? Remember, the United States had essentially accomplished its core political objective in Afghanistan — the destruction of Al Qaeda there — by early 2002.

Yet, even with all this evidence that nation-building operations conducted at gunpoint don't turn out well, some policymakers hold fast to the idea that these kinds of operations are crucial, arguing that we have achieved many of our goals in Iraq and Afghanistan. The purveyors of this notion are deeply attached to a narrative that emerged from analysis of the Vietnam War and took hold during this past decade of American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This story holds that nation-building wars in foreign lands can be won, as long as the hide-bound conventional armies that fight them then transform themselves, led by "savior generals," into nation-builders. This is the view embraced by popular historian Victor Davis Hanson, who has argued that by the end of 2006, it appeared the war in Iraq was lost, only to be saved by the "maverick savior general, David Petraeus."

Considering the current conditions in Iraq, it is hard to take Hanson seriously. But the narrative is important because it continues to be deployed to convince people that American wars in the troubled spots of the world can be made to work as long as the U.S. military tweaks its tactics under the tutelage of generals like Petraeus.

One of the leading proponents of the efficacy of American nation-building operations, retired Army Lt. Col. John Nagl, has acknowledged that America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and future wars of this type are likely to be "unsatisfying wars." Nagl's point is that these wars of American foreign intervention to "change entire societies" take a long time, they cost a lot, and the results are often inconclusive, or as he says, "unsatisfying."

Yet the question needs to be asked, why should America fight an "unsatisfying" war in the first place?

The American people have fought satisfying wars in their past: World War II and the American Civil War are two examples. The Civil War satisfied because it ended the greater evil of slavery. World War II defeated the evil, expansionist regimes of Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. War is ugly and brutal in the best of cases, but under Hart's definition of a successful war as one that produces a better state of peace, these were unquestionably successful.

Nagl correctly notes that "messy and unsatisfying" have become "the hallmarks of success in modern counterinsurgency wars." And therein rests the biggest problem with the nation-building narrative: Success is measured by the tactics of these wars and the savior generals who supervise them. Did a surge produce some signs of success? Were fighting forces able to pivot from war-making to nation-building? These things seem to be enough for some policymakers, even when over the long run the truth points to the futility of transforming a foreign nation at the barrel of a GI's gun.

The proof is America's very unsatisfying wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The American people should not accept a narrative suggesting that nation-building wars are worth fighting simply because they have been fought. Instead, they should demand that their senior military officers and elected representatives commit themselves only to wars that stand a chance of creating, as Hart put it, "a better state of peace."