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Afghanistan and the Real Vietnam Analogy

The war in Vietnam showed the abject failure of nation-building – and the imperial logic behind such efforts. But the U.S. repeated its mistake in Afghanistan.

By Andrew Gawthorpe

The fall of Kabul has, predictably, led to boom times for Vietnam analogies. Local allies clamoring to escape, chaos in the streets, a hastily evacuated embassy – all of these evoke comparisons to the end of the United States' disastrous war in Southeast Asia. But most of these analogies are surface-level and, in political discourse, serve more as a form of withering critique than as useful tools for learning. Nobody wants to be responsible for "another Vietnam." But how to actually avoid it?

There is, however, one way in which a comparison between the two wars is incredibly revealing, and can indicate ways in which Washington can minimize its chances of future disaster. And that is by acknowledging the failure of nation-building, and the imperial logic which underlays it.

When we think about the Vietnam War, nation-building isn't the first thing that springs to mind. Instead, we are liable to think of the big-unit war, or perhaps of "pacification," the effort by Americans and allied forces to provide local security and development in the villages. But as I explored in my book "To Build as well as Destroy: The American Experience of Nation-Building in South Vietnam," both of these things only existed and made sense when considered in the context of the U.S. effort to encourage the emergence of effective and legitimate governing institutions in South Vietnam.

In wars like those in Vietnam and Afghanistan, nation-building is the exit strategy. That's why we tend to notice it has failed when it becomes time to leave. Killing the enemy isn't enough if the enemy can reconstitute their manpower, as both the Vietnamese Communists and Taliban proved able to do. And "pacification," which we now call counterinsurgency, usually proved ephemeral on its own. Once foreign forces moved on – and they always did – the flimsy structures of governance they constructed tended to disintegrate under the weight of inherited political and social circumstances. Isolated local governments in villages or even provinces will usually succumb to a coordinated insurgency unless they have a strong, effective central government at their back. Recognizing this, one U.S. nation-builder in Vietnam likened pacification to throwing a rock into the ocean. There was a "[b]ig splash, then nothing."

In Vietnam, U.S. nation-builders realized that the key to a more durable impact lay at the central level of government in Saigon. If they could develop effective and legitimate institutions of governance here, then the problem of sustainability would be solved. The goal in Afghanistan was the same – although the country has traditionally been highly decentralized, the Americans placed their bets on developing the central regime's ability to extract resources, muster manpower, and act as a focal point of loyalty. If nurtured correctly it would eventually be able to backstop and buttress the officials, regular military, and militia out in the field – and U.S. counterinsurgents would be able to go home.

In 1967, the Johnson administration created the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, which would go on to spearhead the most sophisticated and well-resourced wartime nation-building effort in U.S. history. It established a presence at every level of the South Vietnamese government, from the Presidential Palace in Saigon down to each of the country's districts. It was a rare example of an organization in which civilians directly commanded military personnel and vice versa, an acknowledgement of the role that civilian expertise would play in nation-building. Between 1967 and 1973, tens of thousands of Americans served as nation-builders, advising every level of the South Vietnamese government on how to become effective and legitimate in the eyes of its own population.

On paper at least, the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support did everything right. If wartime nation-building was going to succeed anywhere, it should have been here. The effort was tightly integrated with the Vietnamese government at every level, and Americans and Vietnamese worked together to implement annual nation-building plans. The Americans constructed a tall scaffold around the government from Saigon to the field, allowing them access to every level. The leaders of the agency – first Robert Komer and then future CIA head Bill Colby – had the ear of the South Vietnamese leadership. If joined-up, whole-of-government operations have become the mantra of modern nation-building efforts, the Americans in South Vietnam were way ahead of their time.

But the right bureaucratic organization could not deliver success when the underlying project was flawed. At the root of nation-building is the idea that if the United States applies pressure at the appropriate points just right, then it can transform – or at least radically redirect – the politics of another nation. What's more, the effort has to be undertaken with large knowledge deficits about the nation in question. The United States cannot afford to maintain thousands of personnel who are intimately familiar with the politics, history, and culture of every single country in which it might become involved in a war – and by the time the war starts, it's usually too late to train them.

There is an imperial logic underlying this enterprise, one which assumes that the politics and culture of a less-developed nation are blank slates onto which the United States can paint whatever it wishes. U.S. policymakers would consider it risible if told that Russia proposed to invade California and establish a kleptocratic oligarchy that will win the assent of the Californian people, because they know that Californians have their own institutions, customs, and history that they will defend against outside encroachment. But too often policymakers don't think twice when the United States proposes to export its own institutions somewhere else. This can only be because they see countries like Vietnam and Afghanistan – and their people – as somehow incomplete, lacking in depth and complexity, a simple caricature in need of saving. How else can Americans propose to save somewhere they barely understand?

In Vietnam, the administration at least recognized this knowledge deficit, and set out to close it by establishing the Vietnam Training Center, which gave some 2,000 nation-builders a crash course in the country before they were deployed into the field. The scale of the effort was and remains unparalleled in the annals of U.S. nation-building. But it was also deeply flawed, and only reinforced the futility of the overall enterprise.

Most of all, the effort to educate nation-builders on an industrial scale ended up reproducing stereotypes and ignorance rather than enlightenment. Students read documents with sweeping titles such as “The Vietnamese Peasant: His Value System” which claimed that “the peasant...

likes war movies, perhaps because he can identify with them.” Those heading to serve as advisers to provincial governors were told that they had to establish the answers to 64 separate questions about their Vietnamese counterpart’s sex life, religion, business connections, and education in order to influence him properly. As I wrote in my book, the ridiculousness of the enterprise can be seen by imagining that the Vietnamese government had parachuted a man into California with a few months’ training and barely any English, then told him to develop a comprehensive understanding of the interests of Governor Ronald Reagan. But when it came to saving poor, benighted Vietnam, that was essentially the American plan.

Indeed, lack of sufficient language instruction was another frequent complaint of graduates, as was the fact that they received no specific training in the dialect or politics of the province they would actually deploy to. This handicapped their effectiveness. While most would be able to talk to their counterparts in the Vietnamese government, who generally spoke either English or French, they were completely unable to speak to the people the government was supposed to be serving – severely limiting their perspective on the success of nation-building. It also meant they were subject to manipulation by the very local elites who expected to own the future, and who were trying to shape it accordingly – not always in line with U.S. wishes.

In South Vietnam, as in Afghanistan, this U.S. inability to impose its will on local political realities ultimately led to the failure of nation-building and defeat in war. The specific ways in which Afghanistan has collapsed highlight the primacy of the local.

Regional politicians, looking out for their own interests in the post-American reality, have reached deals with the Taliban to hand over power. Military commanders have showed they value their own wealth more than the survival of the U.S.-backed government by pocketing money meant for the armed forces. The men at the very top of the regime, like President Ashraf Ghani, have been revealed as creatures of ephemeral structures with little control over what happened in the provinces. Now the regime’s U.S. power source has been removed, the lights have gone out and they have been forced to flee a country in which they are no longer safe. U.S. nation-builders, meanwhile, apparently understood the institutions they had created so little that they were shocked by their sudden collapse. That they lacked a grasp on the situation in a country where the United States has spent 20 years, thousands of lives, and countless dollars is alone an indictment.

The fall of Kabul, just like the fall of Saigon, is likely to be followed by decades of recrimination. After Vietnam, counterinsurgency, firepower-addicted soldiers, and weak-willed politicians all received a share of the blame. But perhaps because the sheer scale of U.S. nation-building effort in Vietnam is not commonly understood, the failures of nation-building and the assumptions underlying it went relatively unacknowledged. If the United States is to avoid involving itself in more futile wars after Afghanistan, it is vital that these failures be acknowledged now.

Local politics and history matter so much more than nation-building, with its assumption that a short U.S. occupation can decisively change the course of a foreign country, allows. The United States can use its military force to temporarily stem the tide, but its nation-building efforts rarely manage to change the course of the river. That’s the real Vietnam analogy, and one that we can only hope U.S. policymakers and politicians take away from their latest disaster.

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