

After the War

BRENT A. STRATHMAN

REVIEW OF JAMES DOBBINS, MICHELE A. POOLE,
AUSTIN LONG, AND BENJAMIN RUNKLE

***After the War: Nation-building
from FDR to George W. Bush***

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As Secretary of State Colin Powell prepared to leave the Bush administration at the end of the first term, he confided to the President that the advisory process was broken. Throughout the planning and implementation of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the secretary was often the odd man out. His inability to impact the decision-making process convinced Powell that something needed to change. The structure of the foreign policy hierarchy limited the range of advice reaching the ear of the President. If the White House did not open up the process to discordant voices, efforts to rebuild Iraq would fail.

The problem identified by Powell—and by the authors of *After the War: Nation-building from FDR to George W. Bush*—is that presidents frequently develop inefficient mechanisms for transmitting expertise. From their first day in office, presidents are inundated with information. The first task of any presidency is to develop a decision-making structure that can process this information and recommend policy. Often this structure will match the decision-making styles and preferences of the president. In the case of the Bush administration, the President developed a system that rewarded loyalty and minimized disagreement. While President Bush maintained his position as the chief executive, other members of the inner circle were responsible for developing or devising strategy and implementing

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policy. In effect, the President eased the demands of decision making by relegating authority to a chosen few—at the cost of limiting debate and the free exchange of information.

The problems associated with staffing a president are not limited to recent administrations. The nature of the White House and the character

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of American democracy complicate the development of an advisory system that operates best when expertise is maintained. The presidency is a battering ram (borrowing the phrase of Stephen Skowronek), and the replacement of advisors with new administrations limits learning. Democratic turnover and the development of new advisory structures breed inexperience and short-term institutional memory. The

expertise of previous administrations is left behind during the transition.

The argument of *After the War* connects the politics of staffing the White House to the nation-building policies of post-World War II presidents. In previous volumes, the authors explored the impact of internal and external actors on nation-building. But as they note in the first chapter of this monograph, the conditions on the ground are not determinative. Instead, the success or failure of a nation-building policy often turns on the match (or mismatch) between the structure of decision making and the personality of the president. A successful policy of nation-building must be coupled with the wise and judicious use of available resources. Unfortunately, the politics of the White House complicates the process, and the staffing of the national security system promotes a lack of learning and inefficiency. The problem is that democracies are good at endorsing nation-building as a solution to national security problems, but are poor at executing the policy.

The book makes its argument through an examination of eight cases of nation-building, ranging from Japan and Germany through Afghanistan and Iraq. Its main theoretic contribution is the application of Alexander George’s collegial, competitive, and formalistic models of advising to the problem of nation-building. All three advising structures have advantages—but only when they match the personality of the president, and only when they allow communication between different bureaucracies.

The book is at its best when describing the connection between presidential personality, the structure of the White House, and the politics behind

nation-building. The successful rebuilding of both Japan and Germany, for example, can be attributed to the environment created by President Roosevelt. Much of the post-war planning in Japan and Germany was fragmented and decentralized. Roosevelt, however, maintained a position of leadership throughout the early phases of the policy. His style promoted communication between different bureaucracies and fostered an environment of introspection. The structure of decision making allowed flexibility, enabling Japan and Germany to follow different paths of redevelopment. As a result, planners were able to match policy to the situation on the ground.

Unfortunately, the experience of nation-building was lost through subsequent administrations. The George H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations had to re-learn how to accomplish nation building. The leadership style of both presidents did not generate effective policy, and the experiences of Haiti and Somalia convinced planners of the need for a new approach. By the time the United States intervened in Kosovo, the Clinton White House had discovered the value of collaboration. The different organizations responsible for nation-building finally realized the task was too complex for any one bureaucracy. Success requires interagency collaboration and a willingness to change standard operating procedures. The earlier mistakes of nation-building taught advisors in the Clinton administration to change their approach. Administrations need to examine their own policies over time, and question the underlying logic of their strategy.

The election of George W. Bush changed the policy of nation building once again. President Bush differed from his predecessors in both style and experience. The President saw himself more as a manager than as a dominant leader. He chose advisors that he could trust—advisors that were loyal and who shared a similar worldview. But most importantly, the President instituted a number of changes to the national security system to maintain this loyalty. These changes reduced the responsibilities and size of the National Security Council, while increasing the power of the vice-president and the secretary of defense.

Bush's lack of experience with foreign policy issues allowed his advisors to dominate the decision-making process. As a result, there were implementation problems, as the U.S. military—not aided by any interagency communication—took on an expanded role in nation-building that it was unable to fulfill. As nation-building efforts switched from Afghanistan to Iraq, the consolidation of power within the administration only magnified mistakes. For example, policy in Afghanistan was developed through inter-agency collaboration. This, in effect, was the lesson from the 1990s: nation building is multifaceted, requiring collaboration among a number

of different bureaucratic authorities. Yet in the case of Iraq, many of the internal debates within the administration were silenced. Most importantly, the responsibility for a post-war Iraq was turned over to the Department of Defense and the purview of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

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Although this administrative change guaranteed loyalty and limited disagreement, the authors rightly note that the cure was much worse than the disease.

In the concluding chapter, the authors turn their attention to policy recommendations. The case studies show the best policies of nation-building emerge from a collegial structure of decision making, populated with experienced advisors. For example, the success of the nation-building policies in Japan and Germany was largely due to Truman’s open leadership style, and

his willingness to rely on an advisory system implemented by his predecessor. The failures of Somalia and Iraq, by contrast, were caused (in part) by inexperienced presidents who wanted to break from the past. The chapter on Afghanistan and Iraq provides a particularly sobering look at how presidents willingly forego institutional memory to pursue their own goals. In effect, nation-building works when institutional memory—and the expertise of previous administrations—is maintained.

Yet, learning is difficult, and the maintenance of institutional memory is hindered by several factors. For the authors, collegiality and interagency cooperation—especially in the form of lateral communication between bureaucracies—are necessary to accomplish a policy as complex as nation-building. Unfortunately, the system of national security is not well-suited for this task. If nation-building is going to be a consistent feature of American foreign policy, then it makes sense to readjust the system to achieve better results. There are, however, bureaucratic, political, and legal limits in place to prevent such a widespread readjustment. Indeed, Congress passed the Goldwater-Nichols Act as a way to guarantee the voice of the military in foreign policy. Twenty years later, advice from the chairman of the Joint Chiefs continues to be eclipsed by other advisors, such as the secretary of defense.

More importantly, presidents operate in the short term. As the authors show, presidents have policy preferences consistent with their own

worldviews. These psychological leanings impact both the character of the foreign policy system, and the policies that emerge from internal debate. In other words, presidents define foreign policy in their own terms. Lessons of nation-building are specific to each leader, and policy is recreated for each administration and foreign policy problem. Inconsistency in nation-building policy is a natural part of presidential politics.

Finally, the volatile character of electoral democracies prevents the transmission of expertise; nation-building and national security policy work best with consistency. Part of the problem of nation-building is tied to the specific qualities of American democracy. Continuity of party control, for example, is correlated with well-functioning systems of policy making and nation-building. But the turnover in leadership—the electoral process itself—prevents continuity. The greatest obstacle to the transmission of expertise is democracy itself.

Presidential advisor Ted Sorenson once commented that each president steps into the dark for every foreign policy decision. The exceptional nature of foreign policy decision making means that each case is different, each foreign policy unique. The biggest contribution of *After the War* is the conclusion that presidential control of foreign policy generates self-defeating errors. Presidents willingly stumble through policies of nation-building. A collegial structure of foreign policy, combined with interagency collaboration and a regular review of policy, can ease the problems of decision making. Unfortunately, leader psychology, the structure of the national security system, and the character of democracies mean that mistakes will be repeated. ■

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