

Book reviews

significantly complicated American containment policy in the late 1950s to the 1960s.

Worse than a monolith is clear, persuasive and expertly researched. However, it is pertinent to note that while a riven bloc was bad news for the United States in the short to mid-run, it turned out to be rather good news over the long run. This point is fully appreciated by Christensen (p. 208), but merits further elaboration. Over the long run, the breakdown of the Sino-Soviet alliance and subsequent conflict clearly and directly bolstered US interests. First, the Sino-Soviet border war of 1969 created a compelling imperative for China to engage in what was at the time a surprising *rapprochement* with the United States in 1972. The alignment of Chinese and American power against the Soviet Union held until the end of the Cold War. Second, the escalating Sino-Soviet conflict created an imperative for the Chinese to take up the role of regional container of the Soviet Union and the Vietnamese. Besides cushioning the effect of American retrenchment from mainland Asia, this freed up resources for the United States to focus on the larger goal of containing the Soviet Union in other areas. So, over the long run, to continue the metaphor, the internecine nature of the Sino-Soviet confrontation made the communist bloc in Cold War Asia something significantly less than a monolith. Overall, this is an excellent work that sets the standard for how to conduct area studies research with theoretical rigour.

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North America

Liberty's surest guardian: American nation-building from the founders to Obama.

By Jeremi Suri. London and New York: Simon & Schuster. 2011. 358pp. Index. \$28.00. ISBN 978 1 43911 912 9. Available as e-book.

It is supremely ironic that while nation-building has been one of the most important problems for US foreign policy-makers over the last century, it has received comparatively little attention from historians. Political scientists and political economists have dominated a field to which, one would think, historians would have a lot to contribute. Aside from a mountain of literature on the failed nation-building project in South Vietnam, however, the subject has received scant historical attention. Even more astonishingly, nobody has thought to look at American nation-building efforts synthetically, across centuries of time and literally a world of space.

Nobody, that is, until now. With *Liberty's surest guardian*, Jeremi Suri has written what must be considered the definitive one-volume historical account of Americans' efforts to transform other societies. In between a tightly argued introduction and conclusion, which tie everything together within a set of general observations and conclusions, Suri uses five chapter-length case-studies, disparate in chronology and geography, to examine his topic: reconstruction in the American South after the Civil War; the colonization of the Philippines; post-Second World War Germany; Vietnam in the 1940s and 1950s; and Afghanistan after 9/11.

Americans sometimes flinch at the thought of reconstructing other nations and societies. In 2000, for example, before her 9/11-induced conversion to the cause, Condoleezza Rice famously derided the Clinton administration's willingness to act as the world's policeman, therapist and social worker. Suri thinks otherwise. To him, nation-building is as unavoidable as it is essential. We live in a world system based on the sovereignty of nation-states, yet we also live in a rapidly globalizing world that makes those very same nation-states increasingly interconnected and interdependent. In such a world, where the United States

is the most powerful nation-state, nurturing a stable system is imperative because it will be the surest route to peace and prosperity. And the best way to nurture it is to help build stable nation-states elsewhere.

Suri's case-studies are fascinating. If his rooting of the American nation-building enterprise in the founding of the United States is original, his discussion of post-Civil War reconstruction in the nation-building tradition is even more so. Most historians of American foreign relations treat the Civil War era as a purely domestic affair with little consequence for foreign policy, a mistake Suri avoids. Yet if *Liberty's surest guardian* has a shortcoming, it too lies within these case-studies. While Suri is clear-eyed about the limitations of nation-building, he is less clear about the general trajectory of its usefulness in historical terms, at least according to his chosen case-studies. For example, while the American founding in the 1780s and 90s, and German reconstruction after 1945 were obviously successful, reconstruction and Vietnam were unmitigated disasters, and Afghanistan and Iraq have been almost total failures with little prospect of improvement in the future. As for the 47-year occupation of the Philippines, Suri's conclusion that American rule was a 'frustratingly incomplete' mixed success is accurate in itself (p. 121), but what does that tell us about nation-building writ large? Are the Philippines better off than other Asian states for having lived under American rule? It would seem not. Consider the Filipinos' neighbours, who had strikingly different forms of governance up to 1946: Thailand always remained independent; Taiwan and South Korea were subjected to Japanese imperial rule; Singapore and Malaysia toiled under British control; and Indonesia chafed under the Dutch. All are at least as stable and prosperous as the Philippines—indeed, one could argue that all of them are better off. Others, such as Burma and North Korea, are in far worse shape. What is the point of nation-building, then, if the results are so sparse and disparate? It is no coincidence that Suri's only unqualified nation-building successes are the eighteenth-century United States, when a people built their own nation as they wished, and post-1945 Germany, when reconstruction efforts had a solid economic and political foundation on which to build and local elites were largely left to get on with the task at hand.

But these are points for further discussion rather than problems with the book. As a rough outline of how American policy-makers can properly embark on nation-building, Suri highlights what he calls 'the five Ps': partners, process, problem-solving, purpose and people. Using history by way of example, his aim is to warn policy-makers away from excessively impatient, optimistic and ideological visions of rebuilding foreign nations with completely different social, religious, cultural and economic backgrounds from those of the United States. Throughout, his analysis is judicious, pragmatic and commonsensical. Officials in Washington would do well to heed his advice.

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The decline and fall of the American republic. By Bruce Ackerman. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press. 2010. 264pp. Index. £19.95. ISBN 978 0 67405 703 6. Available as e-book.

The debate on America's prospective imperial decline—a recurring theme perhaps most famously evoked 25 years ago by Paul Kennedy in his *Rise and fall of the Great Powers* (Random House)—has once again gained new scholarly life, thanks to economic crisis, military misadventures and the looming of new challenger states. This latest book from Bruce Ackerman, a notable constitutional theorist based at Yale is not, however, a contribution to that well-rehearsed 'decline' conversation. Rather, it explores an arguably even