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Nation-Building as Applied History

Lessons from the United States in Afghanistan

Jeremi Suri

For twenty years, the United States fought a ground war in Afghanistan – the longest war in American history. Few of the battles matched the traditional image of soldiers and armaments assembled on opposite sides of a battlefield. Few of the engagements ended in a clear victory or defeat for the United States, or its many adversaries.

The surprising part of the most recent Afghanistan War was not its length and indeterminate results, but how unexpected these phenomena were, especially for policy planners and political pundits. One of the most common misconceptions – rooted in a combination of historical ignorance and political hubris – is that strong powers can impose their will on weaker societies. The historical record clearly shows that local insurgencies often have deep and resilient reservoirs of resistance. They are very difficult to stamp out.[1] They are also too weak to achieve their aims against a powerful foreign force. Insurgencies tend to linger and bleed an occupying power, but they rarely take control of a conflict zone while foreign armies remain in place. More often than not, insurgent resistance undermines political order without replacing it. Insurgents are spoilers, not substitutes for the dominant force. Intervening foreign powers are not destined to fail; they are likely to exert important influence, but at enormous cost and with mixed results.[2]

Afghanistan is a revealing historical case. Warfare in this forbidding terrain was never about decisive 'victory' or 'success'. The mountainous and intemperate landscape, the complex mix of ethnicities and the surrounding presence of interfering groups make it almost impossible to achieve clear and consistent goals. Fragmentation and contradiction are the historical norm in Afghanistan and many other sites of foreign intervention. The experiences of the United States in Central Asia during the last two decades are instructive about what nation-building will continue to mean, in practice, when strong powers intervene abroad in coming years.[3]

I

Although often asserted by pundits, Afghanistan is not a 'graveyard' for foreign armies. The historical record shows that external actors – Islamic, Persian, British, Russian and

American – have been able to achieve limited aims in this territory. Each managed to police relatively secure borders in different time periods, and each conducted a series of profitable relationships with local tribal leaders. Tragedy for the external actors in Afghanistan came, time and again, when foreigners sought to turn access and influence into direct control. The costs of governing Afghanistan from afar are too great for any foreign power, including the United States, to bear.[4]

American policymakers appeared to have an instinctive understanding of this dynamic during the Cold War. Although Washington invested in a series of expensive development projects that produced very mixed results, the United States pursued modest objectives, including the maintenance of basic regional stability, peace between ethnic groups and protection of trade routes. The United States even accepted a large Soviet political and economic presence in the northern half of the country. Washington and Moscow pursued a balanced set of interests in Afghanistan, and they avoided the extended military conflict evident around Korea, Indochina and other Cold War battlefields.[5]

The communist-supported coup in Afghanistan in 1973, followed by another coup in 1978 and the Soviet invasion a year later, destroyed this balance. Fearing a loss of influence and ambitious to exert more direct control, Moscow sought to dominate its southern neighbour as it had not before. This effort united local groups and other regional powers, including the United States, to combat Soviet power. The Soviet Union quickly found itself fighting to defend a small and isolated regime, with a large, organized and popular international opposition. The problem was not the Soviet effort to exert influence, but Moscow's excessive ambitions, as well as its heavy-handed and unsustainable actions.[6]

After the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States, President George W. Bush sought to expand American military and political influence in Afghanistan, for the purpose of defeating Al Qaeda, and overthrowing the Taliban regime that had given Al Qaeda support. This was a difficult, but feasible, agenda for the United States, given its technological capabilities and its unified public determination following the terror strikes on New York and Washington DC. Military operations in Afghanistan at the end of 2001 were effective because they matched American capabilities to a discrete set of challenges, and they drew on a firm domestic consensus. American operations also benefitted from strong international agreement and sympathy.[7]

This three-way match between *capabilities, challenges* and *domestic consensus* is essential for foreign military interventions. The three-way match also provides the foundation for the nation-building activities that frequently follow forced regime change. As a global power, the United States has consistently (and wisely) rejected the burdens of governing foreign societies directly, but it has found itself in the aftermath of an intervention seeking to empower an acceptable local alternative. This is the almost unavoidable pull of nation-building for presidents who send American soldiers abroad to eliminate a threat from a specific territory. The former 'failed state' that nurtured terrorism must become a functioning nation-state that can govern itself in stable and non-threatening ways. Democratic participation is preferable, but not necessary (at least in the short-run) for nation-building to allow for successful regime change, threat elimination and American military withdrawal.[8]

Even presidents, like George W. Bush, who wish to avoid the costs of nation-building, find this dynamic difficult to avoid. In Afghanistan, the overthrow of the Taliban in

November 2001 quickly created demands for American support of a new regime. There was no organic source of order or stability in the country that had been devastated by more than two decades of civil war and Islamic extremism. There was no ready and reliable successor to the Taliban. A new regime had to be created, and the United States had a direct interest, for its own post–11 September security, in making sure that happened. As chief destroyer of the old regime, the United States became the leading external influence on the new government.[9]

Nation-building, in this context, would have been difficult and prone to frustration for any set of American leaders. It was a necessary, but unwanted, task. The Bush administration, however, failed to recognize that it had entered this nation-building process, and it failed to recalibrate its capabilities and expectations accordingly. The president and his closest advisors were filled with fear of Al Qaeda and its Afghan allies, they were flush with their battlefield victory over the Taliban regime and they made policy with the wishful thinking that this battlefield victory would somehow produce lasting protections against the threats that originally motivated their intervention. Wishful thinking – or perhaps non-thinking – crippled American efforts.[10]

In early 2002 the United States faced an unavoidable choice between recalibrating its deployed forces for supporting a stable, self-governing Afghanistan, or departing without any assurance that the country would not return to its pre-war conditions. Like the decision to overthrow the Taliban, this was a strategic choice that required matching capabilities, challenges and a new consensus about what Americans (and their allies) were committed to support in Afghanistan. Nation-building after the Taliban might have failed even with the fullest of American efforts, but the Bush administration did not make a coherent choice to pursue this end or to abandon it. Instead, as I will show, the Bush administration advocated the benefits of nation-building without preparation for the American costs, commitments and sacrifices. The administration also allowed itself to become distracted with another incredibly costly, and unnecessary, war.

After a long process of review in 2009, President Barack Obama fell into a similar trap in Afghanistan. He refused to reject the need for a stable, self-governing Afghanistan, and he attempted to 'surge' American efforts temporarily. Nonetheless, he remained unwilling to prioritize the long-term commitment necessary for any chance of success. President Donald Trump repeated this cycle, with a smaller surge, and then a more precipitate effort to withdraw from the region.

Nation-building requires a deployment of diverse capabilities for decades, not just years. Presidents must recognize that fact and act to embrace long-term commitments, or they must abandon calls for nation-building in countries like Afghanistan. Halfway positions on this issue rarely work. The historical record screams that nation-building is simply not possible on the cheap.[11]

II

Witnessing the destruction wrought by a failing Afghan state, the United States embarked, with little debate in late 2001, on a war to kill the criminals who infested that regime. Americans knew little about Afghanistan and what might replace the Taliban,

but they expected the people of the region to embrace representative government, territorial unity and popular sovereignty – especially after the domestic repression they had recently experienced. Almost instinctively, President George W. Bush encouraged this perception as American soldiers and bombs landed in Afghanistan to dislodge the Taliban's leadership.[12]

Speaking at the US Military Academy on 1 June 2002, Bush described 'an historic opportunity to preserve the peace'. 'We have our best chance since the rise of the nation state in the 17th century to build a world where the great powers compete in peace instead of prepare for war.' Referring to American nation-building in Germany and other countries after the Second World War, he affirmed that 'the tide of liberty is rising in many other nations'. As in the past, Bush pledged that the United States would continue to 'support and reward governments that make the right choices for their own people. In our development aid, in our diplomatic efforts, in our international broadcasting and in our educational assistance, the United States will promote moderation and tolerance and human rights. And we will defend the peace that makes all progress possible.'[13]

All of these values centred on the creation of strong, stable, secure nation-states, beginning in Afghanistan. All of these promises depended on American efforts to support this process, not by imposition, but through a combination of local partnerships, long-term investments and selective deployments of force. Bush and his closest advisors expected that Afghan citizens, liberated from oppressive rule, would embrace representative self-government in a single unified state. With American aid, Afghanistan would nurture new national leaders and institutions, according to Bush's vision. 'America has no empire', the president explained. 'We wish for others only what we wish for ourselves.'[14]

This striking universalism envisioned American-style nation-states sprouting from the ashes of extremism in the Middle East and other regions. Bush fused the progressive assumptions of the American nation-building creed with a global urgency born of the recent attacks. 'More and more civilized nations', Bush asserted, 'find themselves on the same side, united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos.'[15]

This analysis of Afghanistan and other 'failed states' was not new, but it gained priority attention in the United States after 11 September 2001. Throughout the country, observers focused on the problems of foreign development as they had not before – at least since the Vietnam War. The terrorist attacks made it clear that the absence of stable political order in distant societies, with little economic value to the United States, sent shocks far and wide. Failed states in faraway places threatened successful states close to home. With modern technology and communications, foreign turmoil that Americans had previously ignored now demanded immediate action.[16]

Action came through a combination of military and political intervention. On 26 September 2001, two weeks after the terrorist attacks, CIA agents began to land in Afghanistan. US Special Operations Forces soon followed. A ground-based American force of initially a few hundred soldiers and intelligence specialists attached itself to various warlord groups in the north-eastern part of the country – the remnants of the anti-Taliban 'Northern Alliance' – providing additional firepower, logistical

support and, of course, money. Americans dispensed millions of dollars in cash to buy assistance from local leaders. They also adapted with great agility to the challenges of the terrain: riding on horses, living among nomadic groups and showing deference to local tribal and ethnic traditions.[17]

American soldiers accommodated the traditional nature of horse-born fighting, and they married that to the most modern elements of high technology combat. The United States supported, supplemented and often supplanted ground capabilities with the unprecedented speed, flexibility and accuracy of its air power. On 7 October 2001 US aircraft launched from Diego Garcia, countries around the Persian Gulf, and carriers in the Arabian Sea began pummelling Taliban positions in Afghanistan. While on horseback, American ground forces logged into their laptops, sending up-to-date targeting information to the planes overhead. B-1, B-2 and B-52 bombers – the workhorses of the American air arsenal – dropped their bombs, guided with precision navigation technology, on specified locations. They flew approximately 200 missions per day, and they hit as many targets with these flights as they did with 3,000 or more daily missions in the First Persian Gulf War, just a decade earlier. American bombs were lethal, they were ubiquitous and they frequently hit enemy forces, without warning, in difficult-to-reach caves and valleys.[18]

In the first weeks of combat, the United States fired 10,000 bombs and missiles into Afghanistan. These activities – termed 'Operation Enduring Freedom' by the US military – involved a vast web of aircraft and coordinating personnel, but very few Americans on the ground. The military campaign aimed to overthrow the Taliban and empower an alternative political system, dominated by figures with local legitimacy and new ties to Americans. The military campaign was also a new form of close ground–air force coordination with modern communications and precision guidance. The United States would extend its foreign reach and increase its lethality, while avoiding the perils of an intensive occupation. Firepower and accuracy would substitute for deployments of soldiers all across the countryside.

A heavy boot with a 'light footprint' – that combination of overwhelming air power and limited ground intrusion would, American policymakers hoped, allow more opportunities for the citizens of Afghanistan to assert their independence as Washington's allies. That was, of course, the lesson of the Vietnam War. For a generation of military and political figures who came of age in the shadow of America's failed efforts in Southeast Asia, and the domestic acrimony that accompanied those foreign policy failures, new wars required clear limits on the commitment of US soldiers abroad. The Bush administration began the 'War on Terror' with no draft, no calls for sacrifice at home and, most conspicuous, no plans for long-term occupation of Afghanistan or any other country. The goal was to defeat the Taliban, empower a new regime and build a stable nation-state from a distance. Partnerships with local anti-Taliban forces would cover for absent Americans in freed towns and villages.[19]

This was a revolution in warfare to dislodge a dug-in regime distant from American shores. This was also an ambitious effort to seed a new Afghanistan – independent, united and allied with the United States. The American planes dropped food, equipment and other assistance for the anti-Taliban groups. The president pledged that the 'oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America and our

allies'. The bombs from the air would help create openings for liberation on the ground. The tools for reconstruction would accompany the weapons of destruction.[20]

In late 2001 this plan looked brilliant. Operation Enduring Freedom produced a large number of devastating hits on Taliban and Al Qaeda targets, and it created very few civilian casualties – less than 400 confirmed deaths in three months of continuous bombing. Most remarkable, the United States lost only five aircraft in this intense period, without the death of a single American airman. Washington brought extraordinary power against its enemies with an efficiency no one had seen before. American planes hit enemy targets consistently and with very few collateral costs. Citizens of the United States and Afghanistan could contemplate a quick transition from Taliban rule to something much better.[21]

The Taliban fled the capital city of Kabul on the night of 12 November 2001. When a small group of Americans entered the former enemy stronghold the next day, along with a larger contingent of anti-Taliban Afghan soldiers, the residents greeted them with a joy unseen since allied troops liberated Nazi-occupied Paris in August 1944. The popular reaction showed a sincere desire for good government, reform and increased Western influence. Urban Afghan citizens looked like their American counterparts in their exuberant assertions of personal freedom, their embrace of foreign visitors and their demand for representative political voice. For all the superficiality in these images, I remember how deeply moving they were, especially among fearful Americans looking for a vindication of their basic ideals imperilled by terrorism.

This was not a delusion. Diverse observers saw similar things in liberated Kabul. The Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* reported that in defiance of Taliban prohibitions on music, people played patriotic songs and displayed public joy for the overthrow of their oppressors. They carried signs proclaiming, 'Death to Taliban', 'Death to Mulla Omar' and even 'Death to Pakistan'. *The Guardian* newspaper – a critic of Washington's war efforts – reported that children in Kabul chanted, 'Long Live America!' Television news around the world showed pictures of women removing their forced coverings, couples dancing in the streets and striking faces filled with smiles – an absent phenomenon in the dismal days of Taliban rule. The city and its citizens had apparently 'awakened' from a long nightmare. Many viewers far from Afghanistan felt a similar charge of optimism.[22]

III

Afghans from various ethnic and regional groups saw an opportunity for a new future in their country. The decades of violence and civil war since the Soviet invasion of 1979 and the emergence of the Taliban in the 1990s led many citizens to crave rest from the madness. During these decades, millions of Afghans had fled their rural homes for temporary refuge in urban communities and eventual exile in Pakistan, Iran and other foreign lands. With the defeat of the Taliban in late 2001, they began to return in large numbers – as many as three million refugees came home after the beginning of American military operations. These long-suffering Afghans had spent years living abroad, running foreign businesses and working with international aid groups. They

were cosmopolitans of circumstance, still connected to their community roots, but also familiar with the possibilities of national and international institutions.[23] In many cases, global relief organizations had saved their lives. The returning refugees brought their international experiences back to their country, fused with a determination to end the violence that had forced them to flee. To many, a 'normal' nation-state looked like the most promising protector of local communities. Refugees observed effective nation-states abroad, and they recognized their own suffering in their decades of statelessness.

Despite their enduring differences, the people of Afghanistan had a broadly shared purpose after the defeat of the Taliban: to make their war-torn society into a stable nation-state, benefitting from American and other foreign support. Anthropologist Thomas Barfield, who spent more than a decade studying rural Afghan communities, observed that many local groups – at least in 2001 – viewed the United States as a potential ally, not as an invader. They also looked to Washington as a positive contributor to a united, independent Afghan governing system. As Barfield explains, and Afghans recognized, the United States was neither prepared nor willing to govern the region. There simply were not enough Americans in Afghanistan. Instead, Washington planned to help the Afghans rule themselves on terms compatible with the wishes of the people in the region and American interests as well. That was the kind of deal-making politics that pragmatic and war-weary Afghans could understand and embrace. It certainly improved upon the violent exploitation they had felt for so long at the hands of foreign invaders and domestic strongmen.[24]

The model of governance that seemed possible in late 2001 approximated the experience of the region in the middle years of the Cold War, especially 1964 to 1973 – a decade of great possibilities, in retrospect. During this period Afghanistan was a stable, predictable, even progressive place. It had a constitutional government that included a national legislature, a professional administrative class and protected rights for citizens, religions and ethnic groups. It had an expanding educational system (including a somewhat 'radical' university in Kabul), major infrastructural development projects and growing international appeal as a destination for tourists, particularly young adventure-seekers. Annual foreign aid from the Soviet Union and the United States – both sides in the Cold War – surpassed the country's domestic budget. In the early 1970s the future had looked bright for Afghanistan.[25]

Foreign observers and domestic citizens who remembered those years had good reason to look for their return after the removal of the Taliban, and the arrival of promised foreign assistance. This was the motivation behind the conference of Afghan notables assembled under UN auspices in Bonn, Germany from 27 November to 5 December 2001. In a series of meetings the four dominant anti-Taliban groups – the Tadjiks and Uzbeks from Northern Afghanistan (now in control of Kabul), the Afghan emigrés allied to Iran, the Pashtuns surrounding the exiled King Zahir Shah and the Pashtuns with strong ties to Pakistan – worked to create a shared government for Afghanistan. Their goal was to initiate a political process that would produce cooperation and stability in their war-torn country, and security against the return of the Taliban.

James Dobbins, the American diplomat who led Washington's delegation to the conference, recounts that the atmosphere among the participants approximated an

'extended family reunion'. Dobbins contrasts the amity of the Afghans with the mutual hatred of the former Yugoslav factions that the ambassador had addressed in prior years. Unlike the Serbs, Croats and Bosnians who looked back upon generations of conflict, the anti-Taliban groups assembled in Bonn 'recalled earlier eras', according to Dobbins, 'as times of ethnic harmony and national unity'. Afghanistan had a useful history that local and international leaders could invoke for nation-building. In the eyes of its own citizens, this was *not* a country doomed to stateless violence.[26]

The negotiations in Bonn were largely successful. The diverse group of Afghan elders who signed the final agreement at the conference – officially, the 'Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions' – pledged 'to end the tragic conflict in Afghanistan and promote national reconciliation, lasting peace, stability and respect for human rights in the country'. They embraced a vision for 'the independence, national sovereignty and territorial integrity' of their country.[27] The Bonn Agreement was the clearest evidence of a shared commitment to a united, peaceful and representative future among a single Afghan people, under the protection of a functioning government. The agreement served as an initial constitution for a modern nation-state in Afghanistan. It provided a mandate for foreign countries, particularly the United States, to help the impoverished citizens of the region rebuild their society. This document was unthinkable before late 2001 and the overthrow of the Taliban.[28]

The dominant ethnic groups in Afghanistan agreed on three things. First, they affirmed the existence of a single Afghan state with limited powers to maintain country-wide security. They stipulated the creation of an Afghan national security force, trained and supported by the international community. They also included a recognition that the basic infrastructure of the country, especially the roads and tunnels, required central management. The Afghan state envisioned in Bonn was a protector of basic order, like its predecessor in the early 1970s. Second, the conference attendees pledged to cooperate in distributing the large expected infusions of foreign aid. The new government would receive the money from the donors and it would provide external accountability. Within Afghanistan, it would distribute aid to regional organizations, print currency, and float loans. The new government would become the central banker for Afghanistan. The new Supreme Court of Afghanistan would adjudicate disputes over law, property and contracts. Third, and perhaps most important, the rival groups in Bonn embraced a coalition of leaders who would share power. This was the most difficult part of the negotiations. Each group demanded greater representation in the government. In the end, the delegates found agreement around a rough balance of power that matched long-standing traditions. Uzbeks and Tadjiks occupied the key posts in the military and foreign affairs. Iranian-allied Pashtuns continued to dominate internal administration. Within this carefully calibrated framework, the Afghan groups chose a southern Pashtun, Hamid Karzai, for the position of head of state –'Chairman' of the Interim Administration of Afghanistan.

This was a return to the pattern of Afghan governance from the prior century, before the coup against King Zahir Shah in 1973. Like the king, Karzai based his legitimacy on a regime composed of leaders from various regions and ethnicities around the country. Pashtun by background, Karzai represented the most numerous group in Afghanistan,

and the one with an enduring tradition of country-wide authority. Like his Pashtun predecessors, especially Zahir Shah, he self-consciously tied his rule to the consent of the other ethnic stakeholders. Karzai's regime was a hierarchal coalition government, traditional to Afghanistan.[29]

Living in exile since his overthrow, King Zahir Shah had a vital role to play in this process. Due to his age, his distance from contemporary Afghanistan and his own hesitance to resume rule, the king did not join the new government. He granted it his support, however, affirming that it represented a unified collection of Afghan groups. He also opened the meeting of the Afghan tribal leaders in 2002 (the 'Emergency' Loya Jirga) that lent the new government-wide public support and confirmed Hamid Karzai's position as head of state. In early 2004 a second Loya Jirga met to approve a formal constitution. In October of that year, a country-wide election, with little evidence of cheating, elected Karzai president of Afghanistan. Thanks to the cooperation among the Afghan factions, including the king, James Dobbins recounts that 'all the benchmarks laid out in the Bonn Agreement were met more or less on schedule'.[30]

IV

The initial successes in Afghanistan encouraged a self-defeating strategic posture in the Bush administration. This was a prime example of 'victory disease', particularly among fearful, overconfident and historically ignorant Americans. The rapid defeat of the Taliban and the relatively smooth creation of a new regime led many observers to expect more for less in the near future. Despite the expert warnings about the fractious qualities of Afghan society, the United States had worked effectively with groups in the country to transform the government and create a representative political process. Despite the difficulties of conducting military operations in distant and forbidding terrain, a small American force had shown that it could seed local transformations. It seemed so easy, too easy.[31]

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld became a celebrity figure for his blunt advocacy of what he described as a rediscovered American flexibility in war, now married to the most precise and lethal modern technology. On 'the plains of Afghanistan', Rumsfeld wrote, 'the nineteenth century met the twenty-first century'. The United States and its allies combined capabilities 'from the most advanced (such as laser-guided weapons) to the antique (40-year-old B-52s updated with modern electronics) to the most rudimentary (a man with a gun on a horse)'. Strategic 'transformation', for the secretary of defence, meant a sophisticated return to basics – replacing the single enemy obsessions and excessive deployments of the Cold War with unique combinations of resources for maximum effects. A 'more entrepreneurial approach' to force and change would return Americans to what they always did best: political reform, at home and abroad.[32]

The United States would no longer need a large occupation army abroad, according to Rumsfeld. He argued that the United States was best suited to undertake targeted interventions, empowering positive local forces and dismantling their detractors. Washington would re-direct political processes, but then it would let local figures make the decisions, build the institutions and organize the investments. The United States

would act as seed investor with early commitments and limited long-term obligations. The United States would initiate deep change from a careful distance.

This strategy promised grand achievements at bargain costs. It offered the possibility of global influence and security without the burdens of empire. Most of all, it promised that the world would become more like the United States as citizens in other societies made choices encouraged but not imposed by Washington. This superficial and self-serving promise of change on the cheap justified underinvestment of resources in Afghanistan. Rumsfeld and others in the Bush administration had a strong bias to reduce government interference in local decisions, best left to the market in their estimation. In addition, they believed that the United States had undermined its purposes when it became bogged down in the reconstruction of communities. This interpretation applied to poor regions at home and sites of violence abroad, America's inner cities and foreign countries like Afghanistan. For Bush, Rumsfeld and their closest advisors, the United States had to use its power more frequently against evil, but it also had to reject local efforts to tie down American capabilities.[33]

The quick defeat of the Taliban reinforced this neoconservative bias. In late 2001, as the post-Taliban government emerged from the negotiations in Bonn, the Bush administration made it clear that it intended to maintain a 'light footprint' in the region. The US State Department, the United Nations and much of the international community expected that the United States would deploy soldiers as peacekeepers throughout Afghanistan, but the White House rejected this option. 'We don't want to repeat the Soviets' mistakes', Rumsfeld explained. 'There's nothing to be gained by blundering around those mountains and gorges with armor battalions chasing a lightly armed enemy.'[34]

If the United States did not undertake this security role, other allies would not do so either. Policymakers in Washington understood that very well at the time. Bush administration officials had spent their early months in office lambasting their friends, particularly in Europe, for what they criticized as a self-defeating aversion to the use of force against threats. Washington's efforts to reduce its post-Taliban commitments in Afghanistan would only justify more of the same from other powerful societies. The United States led the early war and then it led the retreat.[35]

It deployed only 8,000 additional troops to Afghanistan in 2002. One scholar has pointed out that American troop commitments in the country were smaller, in relation to the size of the Afghan population, than in any major US reconstruction effort since the Second World War. In Germany, for example, Washington deployed 89.3 soldiers for every 1,000 inhabitants. In Afghanistan, the United States and other international contributors stationed only 1.6 soldiers for every 1,000 inhabitants.[36]

Rooting out insurgents, including Al Qaeda, and maintaining stability would have to fall on the shoulders of the new government's military and police units. The problem was that the Afghan military and police existed only on paper. The new government did not have the time, the resources or the expertise to create cohesive security forces during its first months in power. If anything, the chaos of the early days encouraged plundering and corruption, not coherent long-term planning. A light American footprint opened a power vacuum that armed militias – warlords, drug traffickers, Taliban loyalists and Al Qaeda operatives – quickly filled.

Without security, foreign donors turned away from Afghanistan. International pledges made to Karzai's government in the aftermath of the Bonn negotiations failed to materialize fully. Subsequent efforts to procure additional funding for infrastructure, industry and education met resistance from wealthy countries that were hesitant to enter a violent and unpredictable environment. During 2002 and 2003 the Afghan government received an average of only $60 in foreign assistance per citizen – less half of the per capita aid allocation for citizens in post-war Germany, adjusted for inflation. It was far less than the subsidies sent to other countries in transition: Haiti, Mozambique, East Timor and the Solomon Islands, among others.[37]

Inadequate aid to Afghanistan only increased the incentives for corruption among government leaders. They could not buy off all of the major groups, and they feared for their longevity in office. It made sense to hoard resources and invest them in self-protection, not broad social needs. In addition, the paltry international contributions to the country sent a discouraging message to citizens: the United States and its allies were not directly committed to the goals they articulated for Afghanistan. They had abandoned the country after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. It looked like they would do the same again.

Under these circumstances, Afghan men and women had little reason to take risks for a new political future. They had little incentive to abandon the warlords and Taliban figures who promised local protection. An under-financed Afghan state devolved quickly into a collection of warring groups.[38]

V

The spiralling violence and disorder in Afghanistan after 2003 became Barack Obama's War in 2009. Like a prior Democrat four decades earlier, the new president entered the White House with a broad agenda for domestic reform, but also a lingering foreign conflict that he could not easily end. Thanks to the signs of limited recent success with the military 'Surge' in Iraq, Obama could withdraw soldiers from that conflict. In the case of Afghanistan, however, he confronted an immediate crisis that challenged American nation-building efforts throughout the region. The return of the Taliban also threatened to undermine order in neighbouring Pakistan, destabilize that country's nuclear arsenal and re-ignite terrorism near and far.

Echoing Lyndon Johnson's predicament in 1965, Obama in 2009 needed to salvage American goals in a distant country to fortify public confidence in his presidency. If he allowed the Taliban to re-establish power, he would appear weak and traitorous to American aims. If a major terrorist attack on American soil followed the return of the Taliban, his entire presidential agenda would unravel. After a long and acrimonious internal review, on 1 December 2009 the president announced his new strategy. It called for another 'Surge', like Iraq, combined with a regional diplomatic offensive. The United States and its NATO allies enlarged their military forces in Afghanistan from less than 65,000 at the start of Obama's presidency to almost 150,000 by the middle of 2010. American troop deployments increased from approximately 32,000 in January 2009 to more than 90,000 18 months later.[39]

Washington also increased its aid to the region, including Pakistan, and it pushed Afghanistan's neighbour to interdict and destroy Taliban sympathizers. Richard Holbrooke, an experienced negotiator in war-torn regions (including Vietnam and the former Yugoslavia), took the lead as the president's special envoy for this purpose. The US Departments of Defense and State and other civilian agencies also deployed more personnel to Afghanistan. They worked locally – as engineers, farmers, teachers and advisors – to address basic problems and build a sustainable foundation for coordinated national efforts. During Obama's first fifteen months in office the number of these diplomats on the ground more than doubled, deployed in all parts of Afghanistan.[40]

Despite frequent criticisms of President Hamid Karzai's corruption, Obama pledged to work closely with the Afghan leader, building more effective governing institutions and co-opting local groups that had become disaffected from the regime. Recognizing the importance of negotiations with diverse figures, Obama advocated cooperation with neighbouring Iran and even elements of the Taliban that appeared willing to join a national government. 'We will support efforts by the Afghan government', the president announced, 'to open the door to those Taliban who abandon violence and respect the human rights of their fellow citizens.'[41]

These redoubled American commitments in Afghanistan were promising, but they showed few immediate results. By all measures – insurgent attacks, assassinations of government officials, civilian deaths and troop fatalities – Afghanistan became a much more violent and chaotic place between 2010 and 2012. American aerial drone strikes showed some success in targeting Taliban and Al Qaeda figures, but the heavier American footprint on the ground did not increase daily security. Most frustrating, American support for Hamid Karzai and his Pakistani counterpart, Asif Ali Zardari, encouraged more corruption. Karzai and Zardari exploited Washington's dependence on their rule.[42]

President Obama recognized this problem. In response, the White House worked to nurture wider relationships in the region. The president wanted a partnership with local leaders in nation-building, not an American endowment for incompetence, corruption and double-dealing. This was a logical position, and it led the president to announce in December 2009: 'After 18 months, our troops will begin to come home. These are the resources that we need to seize the initiative, while building the Afghan capacity that can allow for a responsible transition of our forces out of Afghanistan.' 'This effort', Obama continued, 'must be based on performance. The days of providing a blank check are over.'[43]

During the 2012 presidential campaign Obama affirmed the continued potential for Afghan nation-building, but he also pledged to remove remaining American military forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. The American commitment was costly and, the president argued, the Afghan population should carry the direct burden for law enforcement and reconstruction. In this political context, a timetable for American withdrawal made sense. The 2014 deadline, however, was unrealistic for the achievement of stated aims. Yet again, an American leader was over-promising and under-committing.

At the end of Obama's presidency 8,400 American soldiers remained in Afghanistan – a small holding force providing security for the Afghan government in Kabul and training for the Afghan army. The United States had essentially abandoned its

nation-building ambitions, although American aid continued to flow into the country. Washington authorized negotiations with Taliban forces, hoping to arrange for a stable government that would not again allow terrorist training on its territory.

Characterizing Obama as weak, President Donald Trump initiated his own mini-surge in US forces, bringing the total number to 14,000 during his first year in office, but that number soon fell again. Trump's strategic aims were incoherent. He promised more brute force against terrorists in Afghanistan: 'obliterating ISIS, crushing Al Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan, and stopping mass terror attacks against America before they emerge.' At the same time, he abandoned any effort to improve the situation on the ground: 'we will no longer use American military might to construct democracies in faraway lands or try to rebuild other countries in our own image. Those days are now over.'[44]

How would the United States defeat its enemies in Afghanistan without helping to build a government that could secure itself against them? Trump never answered that question, and within months of surging American forces he returned to his deeper objections to the US military presence in Central Asia. He undercut his rhetoric of crushing the Taliban by accepting their presence in a new potential government, and demanding a complete withdrawal of all American forces while negotiations were still incomplete. If Obama surged and then cut back, Trump made big threats and then tried to run away. The arc of both strategies ended in the same place: disillusionment with the United States in Afghanistan and rising influence for the Taliban.

When President Joseph Biden announced that the last 3,500 American soldiers would leave Afghanistan by 11 September 2021 – twenty years since the 9/11 terrorist attacks that triggered the American intervention in the first place – he was bowing to an obvious reality. The American public, and most of the nation's leaders, no longer supported nation-building in Afghanistan. The US forces on the ground provided some limited security, but they lacked a clear strategic mission. They were not large enough to defeat the enemy or empower an alternative. They were, however, costly enough to drain American resources and distract from other priorities. For the soldiers, the experience of serving in dangerous terrain, without a clear purpose, was deeply demoralizing – part of a broader cynicism engulfing American politics at the time.[45]

VI

The frustrating twenty years of American intervention in Afghanistan teach many lessons. Foremost among them is that presidential leadership matters enormously. Successful military intervention requires an effective matching of *capabilities* to contemporary *challenges*. Presidents must also build a strong domestic and international *consensus* for their actions. They must persuade in order to lead.

Nation-building efforts after a successful military intervention are difficult to avoid. Destroying one regime raises the inevitable question of what will come next, and how the United States will insure that the successor government is not equally threatening to American interests. Nation-building also reflects the deep American aversion to direct imperial control of foreign possessions, and the desire to empower local leaders

who share US interests and values. Nation-building has been and will remain an integral part of American foreign intervention.

Presidents must recognize this dynamic. They must make certain that war planning before a military intervention involves serious analysis of what the United States is prepared to do after regime change. What kind of government does the United States expect to take over? How will the United States contribute to a new stable, effective and representative regime? Most important: is the United States prepared to make the long-term contributions necessary for better political and social circumstances after completion of initial military operations, when the path to nation-building begins?

Americans have proven that they will rally behind their commander-in-chief to support foreign wars, even for two decades! Americans, however, require leaders who will invoke patriotism in battle only when the nation's core interests are at stake, and the benefits of intervention justify the long-term costs. Leaders must prepare the American government and the people to make the sacrifices necessary for intervention and nation-building if the United States is going to overturn a regime, like the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama made strong arguments for American interests in defeating Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks launched from that region, they offered a persuasive case for American military intervention. They did not, however, prepare the country for the sacrifices necessary to nurture security and stability in Afghanistan. President Donald Trump made matters worse with an incoherent mix of threats and retreats. He confused allies, American military leaders and citizens. President Joseph Biden's decision to withdraw in 2021 was the most direct and honest response to the realities on the ground, after twenty years.

This history highlights the complexities of presidential leadership, foreign policy and nation-building. The initial military intervention in Afghanistan after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks was prudent, but it produced many new challenges that American leaders were unprepared to address. Successful presidential management of a foreign military intervention requires a rare combination of disciplined *focus*, analytical *rigour* and *luck*. Historical analysis does not offer a recipe but an indispensable source base for asking the right questions. After twenty years of war in Afghanistan, we can hope for a little more wisdom about what foreign nation-building really requires. Leaders should intervene abroad rarely, and with sober expectations.

Notes

1 See Jeremy Black, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: A Global History* (London, 2016); Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State* (New York, 2017).

2 See John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, 2002); David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (New York, 2010).

3 See, especially, Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York, 2009).
4 See the superb book on this topic by Thomas Barfield: *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ, 2010).
5 See the old, but still valuable, account in Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton, NJ, 1973). See also Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), ch four.
6 Mohammed Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979–1982* (Berkeley, CA, 1997); Larry P. Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban* (Seattle, 2001); Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, 2nd edn (New Haven, CT, 2002).
7 See Dov S. Zakheim, *A Vulcan's Tale: How the Bush Administration Mismanaged the Reconstruction of Afghanistan* (Washington, DC, 2011), esp. 76–155.
8 This paragraph captures the main argument of my book: *Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama* (New York, 2011).
9 See Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, ch 8.
10 See Fred Kaplan, *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power* (Hoboken, NJ, 2008).
11 See Suri, *Liberty's Surest Guardian*, 266–83.
12 See Ronald E. Neumann, 'Washington Goes to War', in *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, ed. Aaron O'Connell (Chicago, 2017), ch 1.
13 President George W. Bush's Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, 1 June 2002. The text is available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/01/international/02PTEX-WEB.html.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 For examples of newfound attention to development issues and nation-building within the US foreign policy community, see James Dobbins, John G. McGinn, Keith Crane, Seth G. Jones, Rollie Lal, Andrew Rathmell, Rachel Swanger, and Anga Timilsina, *America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA, 2003); Francis Fukuyama, 'Nation-Building 101', *Atlantic Monthly*, January/February 2004; Esther Pan, 'United Nations: Nation-Building', Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, 2 October 2003, http://www.cfr.org/publication/7755/united_nations.html.
17 For an excellent overview of initial American military deployments in Afghanistan see: http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/enduring-freedom_deploy.htm.
18 See President George W. Bush's speech to the nation, 7 October 2001. The text of the speech is available at: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/combating/bush_10-7.html. See also http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/enduring-freedom-ops-air.htm.
19 On the influence of the Vietnam War experience for the key policymakers in the Bush White House, see James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York, 2004).
20 President George W. Bush's speech to the nation, 7 October 2001. See also http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/enduring-freedom-ops-air.htm.
21 See Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, 86–108; http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/enduring-freedom-ops-aciv.htm; http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/enduring-freedom-ops-aloss.htm.

22 See M. Ismail Khan and Danish Karokhel, 'Northern Alliance Troops Enter Kabul', *Dawn*, 14 November 2001, http://www.dawn.com/2001/11/14/top2.htm; James Meek, 'Freedom, Joy – and Fear', *The Guardian*, 14 November 2001, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/nov/14/afghanistan.terrorism12; Keith Richburg, '"Second Life" in Afghan Capital: Kabul Awakens to Find Taliban Gone, Harsh Rules Lifted', *Washington Post*, 14 November 2001.

23 See Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 280–2.

24 Barfield writes of a 'united people in a failed state', *Afghanistan*, 277–82. See also Barfield's discussion of the positive distinction many Afghan citizens drew between the American intervention and prior Soviet and British invasions. Based on interviews, Barfield reports that Afghan citizens looked to the United States for stability and reconstruction after civil war – for nation-building. See Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 275–7. See also Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, 109–50.

25 Barnett Rubin argues that the influx of foreign aid in Afghanistan produced a 'rentier state' dominated by figures who lived off external capital and under-invested in domestic production. Recipients of foreign aid had an incentive to hoard that money for their personal uses, not the needs of the country. See Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven, CT, 1995). Rubin is surely correct, but foreign aid also allowed central leaders to offer rival groups increased resources if they continued to work with the national government. The distribution of foreign aid among different groups encouraged inter-ethnic cooperation. This process broke down in the late 1970s because of poor central leadership and the Soviet invasion. See Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 195–225.

26 James F. Dobbins, *After the Taliban: Nation-Building in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC, 2008), 77–8.

27 See the text of the Bonn Agreement at: http://www.un.org/News/dh/latest/afghan/afghan-agree.htm.

28 Ibid; Dobbins, *After the Taliban*, 77–116.

29 For background on Hamid Karzai and traditional Pashtun political authority in Afghanistan, see Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York, 2008), 3–23; Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 288–94.

30 Quotation from Dobbins, *After the Taliban*, 161.

31 On this point, see Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 61–83; Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, 86–108.

32 Donald Rumsfeld, 'Transforming the Military', *Foreign Affairs* 81 (May/June 2002): 20–32.

33 For an excellent account of the political agenda behind the Bush administration's domestic and foreign policies, see Julian E. Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy: The Politics of National Security from World War II to the War on Terrorism* (New York, 2010), 431–503. See also Kaplan, *Daydream Believers*; Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans*.

34 Rumsfeld quoted in Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, 117.

35 For an essay that powerfully articulated the neoconservative attacks on Europe's alleged military cowardice, see Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York, 2002).

36 Data from Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, 119–20. See also Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 171–218.

37 Data from Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, 120–3.

38 David Kilcullen explains how foreign interventions, with insufficient security and inadequate partners on the ground, encourage local groups to join insurgencies for self-preservation – and sometimes profit. Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York, 2009), esp. 1–38.

39 For the data on foreign troops in Afghanistan, see the 'Afghanistan Index', updated every week, compiled by Ian S. Livingston, Heather L. Messera and Michael O'Hanlon at the Brookings Institution: http://usliberals.about.com/gi/o.htm?zi=1/XJ&zTi=1&sdn=usliberals&cdn=newsissues&tm=85&gps=431_386_1276_852&f=00&tt=2&bt=0&bts=0&zu=http%3A//www.brookings.edu/iraqindex.

40 See the data on civilian personnel in the 'Afghanistan Index'.

41 Speech by President Barack Obama, United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, 1 December 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan.

42 The data on increased violence in Afghanistan is documented in detail in the 'Afghanistan Index'.

43 Speech by President Barack Obama, United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, 1 December 2009.

44 Speech by President Donald Trump, Fort Myer Military Base in Arlington, Virginia, 21 August 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/world/asia/trump-speech-afghanistan.html.

45 For moving reflections on the cynicism induced by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, see veteran Phil Klay's collection of stories: *Redeployment* (New York, 2014.)

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