

US Nation-Building in Afghanistan



CONOR KEANE

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Why has the US so dramatically failed in Afghanistan since 2001? Dominant explanations have ignored the bureaucratic divisions and personality conflicts inside the US state. This book rectifies this weakness in commentary on Afghanistan by exploring the significant role of these divisions in the US's difficulties in the country that meant the battle was virtually lost before it even began. The main objective of the book is to deepen readers' understanding of the impact of bureaucratic politics on nation-building in Afghanistan, focusing primarily on the Bush administration. It rejects the 'rational actor' model, according to which the US functions as a coherent, monolithic agent. Instead, internal divisions within the foreign policy bureaucracy are explored, to build up a picture of the internal tensions and contradictions that bedevilled US nation-building efforts. The book also contributes to the vexed issue of whether or not the US should engage in nation-building at all, and if so under what conditions.

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Mum, I dedicate this book to you.

1 Introduction

On 11 September 2001 an event occurred that impacted significantly on the shape and nature of US foreign policy. The destruction of the World Trade Center, damage to the Pentagon, and the deaths of almost 3,000 US citizens, could not go unanswered. An overwhelming majority of a stunned US population looked to the government and military for retribution. In this heated political climate, President George W. Bush declared a 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT), a protracted conflict against an insubstantial enemy. Richard Myers, the Chairman of the Joint-Chiefs of Staff, described it as 'a different kind of conflict . . . unlike any other in recent American history'.¹ This would be a conflict without temporal and spatial horizons, where non-state, terrorist actors were as much a target of US military action as the states that harboured them.

Barely a month after 9/11, the first battleground in the GWOT became Afghanistan. Here the Taliban government was sheltering Al Qaeda, the fundamentalist, Islamic terrorist group responsible for the attacks. Bush called for the Taliban to hand over Al Qaeda's leader, Osama Bin Laden, and their refusal to do so precipitated a US invasion. Rallying under the banner of national self-defence, the organs of the US government swiftly mobilized for a military strike aimed at regime change. Following a resounding military victory, however, the ties that bound the foreign policy machine together began to fray, as the realities of the political and military situation unfolded over the coming months and years.

As the Taliban regime crumbled in the face of American military might, some educated Afghans and many more Americans hoped that a stable and representative government could replace it. But a smooth transition to Western-style democracy was always an unlikely, if not altogether utopian, challenge, given Afghanistan's economic underdevelopment, ethno-sectarian fissures, and institutional fragility born of decades of military conflict and authoritarian rule. From 2001 to 2003, the scale and complexity of this challenge was not something the Bush Administration seriously considered. On the one hand, the abstracted rhetoric of long-term political goals and ambitions envisaged the cultivation of a stable, pluralistic and representative Afghan government. On the other hand, the human

1 Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 220.

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and material resources on which such an outcome would be premised were never forthcoming. Consequently, US insouciance in the years immediately after the invasion, thinly disguised beneath the euphemistic language of having a 'light footprint', contributed to the rise of a ferocious and destabilizing insurgency. This heralded the return of the Taliban as a significant political force. As the insurgency intensified, policymakers reappraised the situation and emphasized the need for a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach.

Despite some limited progress, a refurbished, 'whole-of-government' approach to Afghanistan's problems fell far short of its objectives. By 2008, a quarter of Afghanistan's population still did not have access to clean water, and 50 per cent of Afghan children were malnourished. Over six million people required food aid, including approximately 172,000 teachers who were not able to support themselves.² There was also rampant unemployment due to a lack of industrial or farming opportunities. It has been estimated that 60–70 per cent of those who joined the Taliban between 2001 and 2008 did so because of a lack of income.³ By 2010, Afghanistan remained bereft of a national road network, and the highways that the US had constructed were used for drug trafficking and extortion. Schools lacked equipment and sometimes even a schoolroom, and there was little sewerage or electricity infrastructure outside of Kabul.⁴ Recorded acts of violence increased exponentially, from an average of 900 a year between 2002 and 2004, to 8,950 a year by 2008.⁵ This violence at least partly reflected the regrouping and growth of the Taliban after their earlier dispersal. As a consequence of the Taliban's intimidating presence, only a third of schoolchildren in Afghanistan's southern provinces entered schools for food aid.⁶ When the majority of US officials and soldiers withdrew from the country in 2014, they left a volatile and fragmented political environment in their wake, much as the British and Soviets had done before them. This was despite more than a decade of US nation-building efforts in Afghanistan.

Nation-building in Afghanistan reached its zenith, in terms of funding and attention, toward the end of the Bush Administration's second term in office, but it was a stated objective much earlier than this. Bush himself, who had derided the concept during his Presidential campaign, came to accept it as a part of the mission in Afghanistan from April 2002 onward. Nation-building, both as a concept

2 Carlotta Gall, "Hunger and Food Prices Push Afghanistan to the Brink", *New York Times*, May 16, 2008.

3 Robert Crews and Amin Tarzi (eds), *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 345.

4 Michael O'Hanlon and Hassina Sherjan, *Toughing it Out in Afghanistan* (Washington DC: Brookings University Press, 2010).

5 Committee on Armed Services, *Assessment of Security and Stability in Afghanistan and Development in US Strategy and Operations* (House of Representatives, One Hundred Tenth Congress, January 23 2008); Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan 1979 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 342.

6 Alastair Scrutton, "Attacks on Aid Challenge Afghan Reconstruction", *Reuters*, September 18, 2008.

and a practice, is mired in controversy and ambiguity. Some scholars regard its contemporary uses in places such as Afghanistan as little more than an ideological veil for US imperial ambitions.⁷ For others who subscribe to the alleged benefits of nation-building, it is a normative concept that refers to ‘the use of armed force in the aftermath of a conflict to underpin an enduring transition to democracy’.⁸ For many it is simply a synonym for a cluster of related concepts such as ‘nation-building’, ‘peace-building’, and ‘post-conflict operations’, yet others consider each of these activities to be distinct. The pros and cons of these various uses of nation-building and cognate terms will be explored in Chapter 1. For now, nation-building will simply be defined as a set of processes through which a foreign power or powers, by direct intervention and in collaboration with favoured domestic political elites, seek to erect or re-erect a country-wide institutional and material infrastructure that can become the enduring foundation of political stability after a period of armed conflict and civil strife. Hence, nation-building involves a complex of issues including security and pacification, infrastructure development and humanitarian relief, and governance and law and order. Crucially, it can also involve, as it did in Afghanistan, an ideological project to win the active support or tacit consent of the local population for the new or restructured state – what has often been euphemistically labelled as the ‘winning of hearts and minds’. Understood as such, nation-building is always confronted with a unique set of problems and obstacles, arising from the historical specificity of the country in which such projects are pursued.

But the complex requirements of nation-building were neglected and the responsibilities of each US agency, and indeed official, remained undefined or ambiguous. The way in which the activity was approached by the US government also revealed a deep ambivalence at the heart of the foreign policy bureaucracy. With this in mind, the main objective of the current study is to contribute to deepening our understanding of the impact of bureaucratic politics on nation-building in Afghanistan, which clearly has implications for similar interventions elsewhere. The central research question is: Why, and how, did bureaucratic politics contribute to the failings of US nation-building efforts in Afghanistan? However, the subject must first be contextualized.

Current Literature on Nation-Building in Afghanistan

Disorder within the US foreign policy bureaucracy was certainly not the cause of nation-building failure; it was one factor among many. Bureaucratic conflict was

7 Andrew Bacevich, *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War* (New York: Metropolitan books, 2010); Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

8 James Dobbins et al., *The Beginners Guide to Nation-Building* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2007).

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complicated, exacerbated and sometimes even caused by a raft of other issues. These issues include the Bush Administration's approach toward the War on Terror; the invasion of Iraq; a failure to consider the regional consequences of intervention in Afghanistan; fractures within the international nation-building effort; an imbalance of power between the US military and civilian realms; strategic ambiguity; the controversial relationship between nation-building and counter-insurgency, and Afghanistan's historical and cultural nuances.

Scholars such as Daalder and Lindsay argue that the 'Bush revolution in foreign policy' was cloaked in a doctrine of preemption, which required an 'America unbound' to forcefully reshape the international system by aggressively searching for monsters to destroy.⁹ Although this attitude prevailed within the Bush Administration before 9/11, the Global War on Terror (GWOT) invigorated and legitimized foreign policy based on the unilateral projection of military power. For the remainder of Bush's time in office, the GWOT superseded all other foreign policy matters. The attitude of the White House during this period has been described as a combination of arrogance and ignorance.¹⁰ President Bush has been derided for lacking sufficient knowledge of international relations and an understanding of the nuances of global politics. Some observers considered the Bush Administration to be no more than a 'callow instrument of neoconservative ideologies', but this is disputable. 'Assertive nationalists', such as Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, (at least initially) dismissed the neoconservative camp's conviction that it was in the national interest to aggressively encourage authoritarian states to become US-style democracies. However, as Epstein notes, what both factions had in common was faith that military force should unequivocally be used to destroy the enemies of the United States.¹¹ But-tressed by this common belief, and with the help of a compliant President, Bush's inner circle constructed an overarching strategy that convinced, some would say exploited, the US public to support their foreign policy ideology.¹² This came to be known as the Bush Doctrine, which was evoked to justify regime change through armed conquest. During the Bush epoch, more than any other period in history, the United States was characterized as an imperialist power.¹³ The ambitions of the Bush Administration left no room for a White House role in instigating a whole-of-government response to the mission in Afghanistan. This allowed the US bureaucracy to run its own race and little effort was made by the White House to mitigate bureaucratic conflict until near the end of Bush's second term

9 Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2005).

10 Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation-Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia* (New York: Penguin, 2008), xlii.

11 Jason Epstein, "Leviathan", *New York Review of Books*, May 1, 2003, 12. Joshua Marshal, "Remaking the World: Bush and the Neoconservatives", *Foreign Affairs*, 82:6 (2003).

12 Scott A. Bonn, *Mass Deception: Moral Panic and the US War on Iraq* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

13 Rodrigue Tremblay, *The New American Empire: Causes and Consequences for the United States and for the World* (Haverford: Infinity, 2004).

as the conflict with the Taliban-led insurgency intensified.¹⁴ Strachan claims that militarizing nation-building should be attributed to the vague policy mandate that emanated from the White House. The Bush Administration failed to establish 'a tangible link between the policy of its administration and the operational designs of its armed forces'.¹⁵ Without effective guidance counter-insurgency increased policy incoherence, which stoked the flames of bureaucratic conflict.

The US Congress and public's hunger for retribution enabled the Bush Administration to broaden the GWOT from a fight against Al Qaeda to incorporate an 'axis of evil' consisting of Iraq, Iran and North Korea. Creating this troika has been argued as representing a veil that allowed the White House to pursue particular commercial interests; increase US prestige and power in the Middle-East; and reinforce its alliance with Israel.¹⁶ These goals would be realized only through an invasion of Iraq, an undertaking that eclipsed nation-building in Afghanistan. For White House officials such as Paul Wolfowitz, the Undersecretary of Defence, the GWOT's first battleground was simply a side-show to be disregarded in favour of the moral and material rewards that the removal of Saddam Hussein promised. This resulted in a lack of resources, attention or direction toward the US mission in Afghanistan in the first few years after the fall of the Taliban. Nation-building in Afghanistan, Jones observes, was 'hamstrung by the US focus on Iraq'.¹⁷ Neglect in the early stages of the nation-building project, if it could even be defined as such in the first few years, also resulted in unclear goals and responsibilities between the US agencies and officials involved.

Another factor that impacted on the scope and shape of the mission in Afghanistan was the way in which the US approached Pakistan. Before and after the invasion, the Taliban and Al Qaeda were able to travel between Afghanistan and Pakistan with relative impunity, via the notorious Pashtun tribal belt. According to Rashid 'the region had to be seen as a single entity', as the countries within were plagued by many of the same problems. But conducting nation-building in Afghanistan alone, he maintains, simply pushed these problems into neighbouring states.¹⁸ The US failed to pressure the autocratic regimes that littered Central Asia to instigate reforms. In particular, embracing and legitimizing Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's General-Dictator, only sowed seeds of animosity toward US intervention in the country's affairs among the populace. This, in turn, prevented Pakistani citizens from resisting the Taliban and other extremists as they

14 Douglas Porch, *Counter-Insurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

15 Hew Strachan, "The Lost Meaning of Strategy", *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 47:3, 33–54.

16 Bruce Cummings, Ervand Abrahamian and Moshe Maoz, *Inventing the Axis of Evil: The Truth about Iran, North Korea and Syria* (New York: New Press: 2004); Stephen Sniegoski, *Transparent Cabal: The Neo-Conservative Agenda, War in the Middle East and the National Interest of Israel* (Virginia: Enigma, 2008).

17 Seth Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), xxii.

18 Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, xlv.

forcefully infiltrated society. In the absence of any nation-building or democratization framework for the region, therefore, Pakistan remained ‘an open back door’ that functioned as a safe haven for the Taliban.¹⁹

Priest and Feith have exposed the way in which the Bush Administration’s conduct of the War on Terror precipitated a greater power imbalance between the military and the civilian branches of the US government. The Pentagon dominated foreign policy while the State Department, USAID and others were marginalized. Relationships with authoritarian states came to be defined by how they could accommodate US military interests, which undermined the State Department’s diplomatic mandate.²⁰ Yet the one element of the military that had experience with nation-building, Army Civil Affairs Units, were neglected and even downgraded. Their capacity to drive development in Afghanistan, therefore, was never realized.²¹

An emphasis on unilateral military power also trumped any adherence to international law or respect for international institutions. US allies, meanwhile, were often perceived by the Bush Administration to be impediments that hamstrung the capacity of the US to act decisively. Cooperation with NATO and the United Nations toward nation-building objectives was neglected in both Afghanistan and Iraq. In the case of the latter a ‘coalition of the willing’ was created that marched to the drumbeat of US interests, rather than a truly collaborative partnership.²² Although there was a more genuine multilateral component to the mission in Afghanistan, the US still refused to seriously consider the opinions of its allies. Cleavages within the international alliance circumscribed many nation-building goals and projects.²³ While some NATO countries criticized the US for an unwillingness to spearhead a multilateral effort, conversely the United States was angered by the failure of many of their allies to effectively combat the Taliban-led insurgency. As the violence escalated in Afghanistan from 2005 onwards, many European troops remained locked within Forward Operating Bases, due to their governments’ reluctance to risk casualties that would be unpopular domestically. The US, British and Canadian military described soldiers from other NATO countries ‘as pot plants . . . of ornamental use only’.²⁴

19 David Loyn, *In Afghanistan: Two Hundred Years of British, Russian and American Occupation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 7.

20 Dana Priest, *The Mission: Waging War and Keeping Peace with America’s Military* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003); Douglas Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: Harper, 2008).

21 Mark Benjamin and Barbara Slavin, “Ghost Soldiers: The Pentagon’s Decade-Long Struggle to Win Hearts and Minds through Civil Affairs”, *The Center for Public Integrity*, February 6, 2011.

22 Ewen Macaskill, “US Claims 45 Nations in ‘Coalition of Willing’”, *The Guardian*, Wednesday, March 19, 2003.

23 Sten Rynning, *NATO in Afghanistan: The Liberal Disconnect* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); David Auerswald and Stephen Saideman, *NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

24 Loyn, *In Afghanistan*, 8; Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, xxiv.

The ambiguous nature of the nation-building enterprise was representative of a lack of commitment, poor policy decisions and an inappropriate allocation of resources. There was also a broad failure to recognize the realities of Afghanistan and to translate rhetoric into action.²⁵ This had far-reaching consequences and previous studies have acknowledged, to varying degrees, the US's incapacity to mobilize its vast resources to promote good governance, provide security or develop infrastructure.²⁶ 'Good governance' was a policy that was never truly manifested in practice, and instead toxic corruption spread throughout the Afghan State. Empowering a centralized government proved to be 'highly corrosive' as it nurtured a crooked and impotent regime, led by Hamid Karzai, which neglected representative governance at a regional and local level, and contributed to, rather than deterred, civil unrest. All levels of government, however, failed to correctly manage resources or effectively implement policies. Consequently, politics was dominated by individuals who were willing to rent themselves out to the highest bidder.²⁷

Efforts to promote security fared no better. Disarmament was not prioritized, which determined that militias emerged through the country to fill the vacuum of security left by the removal of the Taliban regime. Afghanistan's security forces were unable to protect rural villagers. Insecurity was endemic to rural areas, which explains, to some extent, why the Taliban was often greeted as a force of order and stability, rather than with hostility.²⁸ Meanwhile, on the development front, corporate contractors were foolishly employed over experienced international and local NGOs.²⁹ These contractors, in turn, hired mercenaries to protect their projects, a militarization of development that was not well received by the local population or the international aid community.³⁰ In particular, when a deluge of aid was triggered by the emergence of a violent insurgency, quantity trumped quality.

The Taliban were misrepresented and misunderstood by the United States and its allies. After the invasion, the Taliban was not defeated, it had merely deflated. As late as 2005, the US military estimated there were less than 1,000 Taliban fighters left in Afghanistan. US military commander Major General Eric Olson,

25 Edward Girardet, *Killing the Cranes: A Reporter's Journey Through Three Decades of War in Afghanistan* (Chelsea Green, 2011), 382.

26 Bing West, *The Wrong War: Grit, Strategy, and the Way Out of Afghanistan* (New York: Random House, 2011); David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Brian Glyn Williams, *Afghanistan Declassified, A Guide to America's Longest War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

27 Girardet, *Killing the Cranes*, 384–388; Nick Mills, *Karzai: The Failing US Intervention and the Struggle for Afghanistan* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

28 Carlotta Gall, *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001–2014* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2014).

29 Jacob E. Jankowski, *Corruption, Contractors and Warlords in Afghanistan* (New York: Nova, 2011).

30 Antonio Giustozzi, "Privatizing War and Security in Afghanistan: Future or Dead End?", *Economics of Peace and Security Journal*, 1:2 (2007).

described them as ‘a force in decline’.³¹ The Taliban, however, had reorganized and rebranded itself to ignite a protracted insurgency from late 2002 onwards.³² Furthermore, the idea that the Taliban was simply a ruthless terrorist organization, bereft of a tangible purpose besides suppressing the populace, was a misconception that was perpetuated by the Bush Administration’s conception of the GWOT. The fact that the Taliban was essentially a domestic movement and many Afghans saw them as ‘the cleansers of a social and political system gone wrong in Afghanistan, and an Islamic way of life that had been compromised by corruption and infidelity’, was not recognized.³³

Underpinning many of these issues was Afghanistan’s history and culture. A rich body of literature exposes the difficulties this presented for nation-building and that the country’s environmental nuances was something that the United States failed to adequately consider. The Afghani people’s notorious animosity toward foreigners; the fragility and ambiguity of the state structure; an absence of the human capital required for effective governance; and complex ethnic divisions posed a myriad of problems for any would-be nation-builder.³⁴ Yet there seemed to be little acknowledgement or understanding from the US and its allies that they were attempting to impose democracy on a country that has been described as the graveyard of empires.³⁵

Nation-Building and Bureaucratic Politics in Afghanistan

The role of and divisions within the US foreign policy bureaucracy have been relatively understudied compared with the other issues outlined above. The current study addresses this deficit by illuminating the role that distinctive elements within the US bureaucracy played in producing policy preferences and decisions, and in determining how they were or were not implemented. Assessing US nation-building in Afghanistan on this basis provides an ‘alternative pair of spectacles’ that ‘highlights features that might otherwise be overlooked’.³⁶ In particular, it highlights what Max Weber’s famous study of bureaucracy had highlighted for an earlier generation of social scientists, and which still has contemporary relevance: that the hierarchical distribution of power, authority and specialized knowledge within modern, large-scale bureaucratic organizations frequently comes at

31 Eric Olson, quoted in Tim McGirk, “The Taliban on the Run”, *Time*, March 28, 2005.

32 Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University, 2008), 1–8.

33 Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, xxix.

34 Ivan Arreguin-Tofy, “The Meaning of ‘State Failure’: Public Service, Public Servants, and the Contemporary Afghan State”, *International Area Studies Review*, 15:3 (2012), 263–278.

35 William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould, *Invisible History: Afghanistan’s Untold Story* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2009).

36 Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Longman, 1999), 255.

a price.³⁷ That price includes the inflexibility of bureaucratic rationality and the congealing of bureaucratic interests within subsections of a larger organizational whole. This can and frequently does have unintended consequences that impede or preclude the bureaucracy from efficiently fulfilling the functions for which it was developed in the first place.

Classic studies on foreign policy bureaucracy are agreed that bureaucratic forces are diverse and extremely resilient.³⁸ The US foreign policy system ‘is one in which power is disbursed among a wide variety of organisations and individuals’. As the agencies that make up the US foreign policy apparatus are large, relatively autonomous creatures, it is difficult for them to achieve policy coherence on any given issue. Consequently, US foreign policy has ‘become increasingly political and cumbersome with the growth of bureaucracy’.³⁹ These characteristics are all the more problematic when the US engages in nation-building. Oye has convincingly argued that a complex endeavour that involves multiple parties ‘militates against identification and realisation of common interests’.⁴⁰ In reference to nation-building in Afghanistan this was certainly true, as we will see, and a coherent whole-of-government response proved to be elusive.

Effective nation-building lay well beyond the comfort zone of the US foreign policy bureaucracy. None of the three key agencies that were involved – the Department of State, USAID and the Department of Defence – proved themselves capable of taking on an effective leadership role that could overcome bureaucratic divisions. Thus competing and conflicting spheres of influence arose and consolidated so that a variety of factions jockeyed for power. In particular, during the implementation stage US officials tended to act in accordance with beliefs about their own agency’s interests and expectations, rather than the necessities of nation-building. In other words, the requirements of nation-building, and how these requirements were to be understood, were very much shaped by an agency’s position within the bureaucratic structure. This was further complicated by rifts within the agencies themselves and the gulf of understanding between actors in Washington and those in the field.⁴¹

With this in mind, the collective behaviour of US foreign policy agencies, and the individuals who sit within them, can be best understood through the lens of four distinctive but interconnected variables: interests, perception, culture and

37 Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: The Free Press, 1964).

38 I.M. Destler, *Presidents, Bureaucrats and Foreign Policy: The Politics of Organizational Reform* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Morton Halperin and Priscilla Clapp, with Arnold Kanter, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 2006); James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy, What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

39 Garry Clifford, “Bureaucratic politics”, in Michael Hogan and Thomas Paterson, *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 92

40 Kenneth Oye, “Cooperation Under Anarchy: Hypothesis and Strategies”, in Oye (ed), *Cooperation Under Anarchy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 19.

41 ‘The field’ refers to Afghanistan.

power. Firstly, *interests* refer to what is, or what is believed to be, beneficial or detrimental to an agency as a discrete organization. This encompasses tangible, material considerations such as human resourcing, government funding and the agency's expenditure, but also more nebulous considerations such as an agency's prestige and status relative to other agencies. Secondly, and closely bound up with interests, is an organization's *perception* of a given set of problems, and its perception of the merits and demerits of possible solutions to those problems. Perception is influenced by both the form and function of a given organization. To paraphrase the old adage, 'where you stand on particular issues depends on where you sit at the decision-making table'.

Thirdly, perception is shaped by and is an aspect of an agency's relatively distinctive *culture*. Culture here is understood in the dominant anthropological sense of the word, as a shared set of beliefs and practices within a given human group, that predispose members of that group to think and act in ways that conform to dominant group patterns. This does not mean that thinking and acting are determined with mechanical necessity, or that individuals within an organization are unable to apply their own logic and rationality in arriving at positions that differ from those of the organization as a whole. But it does mean that such individual rationality is constrained by the broader, organizational culture in which they are socialized over time, and which sanctions particular beliefs, routines and procedures. Much of this operates at the level of unconscious cognition, and is therefore very resilient over time. Finally, interests, perception and culture all evolve and operate within a broader matrix of *power*. Power is here understood in the traditional Weberian sense as, 'the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests'.⁴² The 'actor' can be an individual or a collective such as a bureaucratic agency, and the successful deployment of power can be based on either compulsion or persuasion, hard or soft power. Taken together, these four variables provide a powerful lens with which to examine the divisions both *between* and *within* US foreign policy agencies, which were so important in shaping nation-building outcomes in Afghanistan.

While bureaucratic division and conflict sit at the centre of this study, there are additional themes. Connected to bureaucratic problems are the broader political mistakes made by the United States government in its approach to Afghanistan, and a profound inconsistency between its expressed rhetorical ambitions on the one hand, and a failure to understand the practical realities of nation-building on the other. At a more general level, the study also makes a contribution to the vexed question of whether or not the US should engage in nation-building at all, and if so under what conditions.

But there are also limits and it is important to clearly state them from the outset. The regional and global dimensions of US foreign policy, for example, are

42 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 53.

not central considerations. They are only dealt with in so far as is necessary to illuminate some key points about the US intervention into Afghanistan. In addition, although there are obvious parallels between the case of Afghanistan and US nation-building activities in Iraq, these are not systematically addressed due to space limitations. The important role played by non-government organizations (NGOs) are also largely absent, as are some issues that, *prima facie*, might also seem to warrant inclusion in a discussion of nation-building in Afghanistan. These include such important issues as refugees, disarmament and US military operations. Finally, many individuals and government factions are involved in Afghanistan. Due to the sheer scale of the task, a totalising account of the machinations of the US foreign policy bureaucracy in Afghanistan, to say nothing of the Afghani government, is impossible. The study instead concentrates on the most relevant issues and examples.

Method and Structure

In terms of primary research, the author conducted a number of comprehensive interviews with high-ranking US officials both in Washington and via correspondence. The interviews revealed interests, loyalties, frustrations and many unique events and experiences not yet in the public realm. Experiencing bureaucratic problems was common, as was the acknowledgement that parochial boundaries existed between and within agencies. Depending on where the interviewees ‘stood and sat’, opinions were often dramatically different. Primary sources also included congressional hearings, which comprised a variety of testimonies from agencies and individuals in Afghanistan. Contemporary media coverage that involved the opinions of high-ranking officials, soldiers and civilians, was also an important source of information, as were government reports that addressed agency behaviour and capacity. In terms of the secondary literature, the study utilizes many first-hand accounts of nation-building in Afghanistan published as books, biographies and memoirs of high-ranking officials, as well as the more analytical political science literature on nation-building, bureaucratic politics and foreign policy.

The remainder of the book is divided into three parts and a conclusion. Part I reviews the relevant literature, connects bureaucratic politics to nation-building, and provides a summary of the history of the Afghan State. Part II focuses on the bureaucratic dimensions of US nation-building in Afghanistan. Part III examines efforts to promote intragovernmental cooperation toward that end. The conclusion draws the threads of my argument together and discusses the broader analytical and political implications of the study.

Part I is composed of two chapters. Chapter 2 begins by discussing the ambiguity that surrounds ‘nation-building’ and its cognate terms, and justifies my own position on this analytical and political vocabulary. It also assesses how the United States has interpreted and approached nation-building in the past and into the present. It continues by providing something of a brief history of the Afghan State, in order to illuminate previous attempts at nation-building in that

country and the resistance that such attempts elicited. Chapter 3 continues the review of the relevant literature, but focuses more specifically on the link between bureaucratic politics and US foreign policy. It includes a review and critique of the rational actor model, according to which states have relatively homogeneous and identifiable interests. In this view, states are rational actors as much as the particular personalities who do their bidding – a proposition that is, in the case of nation-building in Afghanistan, clearly erroneous. On the back of that critique the chapter creates a new bureaucratic politics model, centred around the proposition that agency interests, perceptions, culture and power shape and constrain inter- and intra-agency behaviour, often rendering it irrational in terms of effectively achieving stated goals such as those bound up with nation-building.

Chapter 4 is the first of four chapters that make up Part II. The chapter argues that nation-building in Afghanistan was particularly vulnerable to inter-governmental conflict. It illustrates this by exploring the interaction between the Department of Defence, the Department of State, USAID and the Counter-Bureaucracy.⁴³ This reveals broad currents of discord, but also that a more detailed examination of intragovernmental conflict in Afghanistan is necessary. With this in mind, Chapters 5, 6 and 7 form something of a trio. Each deals with a specific nation-building issue to assess how contrasting interests, perceptions, cultures, and power, between and within agencies, impacted upon policy decisions and implementation. A diverse selection of policies, projects and initiatives is subject to examination, in order to discern the part played by each agency, and to identify the circumstances under which relations within and between agencies changed from one issue to another.

Chapter 5 focuses on security. It provides a detailed account of the competing policies between the State Department and the Military Establishment. It is particularly concerned with how this division played out with respect to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the CIA's interest in supporting Afghanistan warlords, and US involvement with Afghanistan's security forces. Chapter 6 shifts to infrastructure development. The approach of the Pentagon, State Department, USAID and the Counter Bureaucracy are compared and contrasted, and specific road-building, agriculture and education projects are examined. This again reveals deep divisions within the foreign policy bureaucracy overall. Chapter 7 concentrates on law and governance. The US counter-narcotics strategy, the US relationship with the Karzai government and US efforts to construct Afghanistan's legal system are explored.

Part III addresses mechanisms that may have produced a whole-of-government approach. Chapter 8 reviews the instruments that were created by the US government to promote cooperation, and compares them with those advocated by think tanks and academics. It is argued that it was extremely difficult for any of these

43 The Military Establishment and Counter-Bureaucracy are used as umbrella terms. The military establishment includes the Defence Department and the United States Armed Forces whilst the Counter-Bureaucracy encompasses Washington's regulatory and oversight bodies.

initiatives to surmount embedded bureaucratic hurdles or to overcome entrenched agency interests. Chapter 9 conducts a detailed analysis of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams that operated in Afghanistan. These can be understood as microcosms of the greater US nation-building effort.

Chapter 10 draws together the principal findings from the research. It reemphasizes the discovery that bureaucratic divisions were not only extremely important in Afghanistan, but that they provide one of the principal keys to unlocking the riddle of US nation-building failure.



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Part I

Background and Methodology



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2 Nation-Building and the Afghan State

The US's military occupation of Afghanistan, and its subsequent efforts to stabilize the country and promote its political and economic development in a direction satisfactory to the US, came in the immediate wake of similar operations in Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s.¹ Although the scale and the nature of these operations had major differences, they shared a pattern of family resemblance that led many commentators to discuss them under the common mantle of 'nation-building'. Indeed, through the 1990s and into the 2000s a fierce debate raged within US foreign policy and academic circles about just what constituted nation-building, and whether or not the US should engage in such activities.²

Political conservatives typically derided these projects as international social work, condemning the use of the US military to do things other than 'kill people and smash things', as Colonel Fred Peck colourfully put it.³ At the other end of the political spectrum, scholars more critical of US foreign policy motives similarly condemned nation-building, but for very different reasons. They suggested that US nation-building efforts masqueraded under false pretences, serving as rhetorical cover for what were in fact US imperial ambitions.⁴ On the continuum

1 James Dobbins, "America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq", *Survival*, 45:4 (2003), 87–110; Paul Miller, *Armed State Building: Confronting State Failure 1898–2012* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2013); Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan* (London: Vintage, 2003).

2 Karin von Hippel, "Democracy by Force: A Renewed Commitment to Nation-Building", *The Washington Quarterly*, 23:1 (2000), 95–112; Marina Ottaway, "Building", *Foreign Policy*, 132 (2002), 16–24; Francis Fukuyama, "Nation-Building 101", *The Atlantic Monthly*, January–February (2004), 159–162; Gary Dempsey, "Old Folly in a New Disguise: Nation-building to Combat Terrorism", *Policy Analysis*, Report 429, (2002), 1–22; Noah Feldman, *What We Owe Iraq: War and Ethics of Nation-Building* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Mark Berger, "From Nation-Building to State-Building: The Geo-Politics of Development, the Nation-state System and the Changing Global Order", *Third World Quarterly*, 27:1 (2006), 5–25.

3 Carolyn Stephenson, "Nation-Building", *Beyond Intractability*, January 2005. <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/nation-building> (accessed 13/1/2011).

4 Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2010); Tariq Ali, *Bush in Babylon: The Recolonization of Iraq* (London: Verso, 2004); Chalmers Johnson, *Dismantling the Empire: America's Last Best Hope* (New York: Metropolitan