RECONSTRUCTION: A Damaging Fantasy?

Amitai Etzioni

FRANK-WALTER STEINMEIER, the German foreign minister, took a break from his diplomatic duties during a recent visit to Washington, D.C., to attend a dinner with a small group of intellectuals and discuss what American society will be like circa 2050. The dinner conversation was a stimulating and affable give and take, until dessert was served and a discussion of Afghanistan began. One of the American dinner guests suggested that the conceit that the West could reconstruct Afghanistan was highly unrealistic—and so was the notion that the U.S. could do this in other countries from Iraq to East Timor to Haiti. Indeed, he argued, the resulting failures were damaging to the West's resolve and credibility. Steinmeier's aide responded passionately, arguing that reconstruction in Afghanistan was progressing very well indeed. He pointed to the 2,000 schools that have been built since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion, to the vast increase in the number of children educated (including 1.5 million girls), and to the 4,000 kilometers of brand new paved roads.

As the German aide's remarks indicate, while support for military intervention in Afghanistan is waning in Germany (and in Europe in general), support for reconstruction remains strong. According to a German Marshall Fund survey, 64 percent of Europeans support reconstruction efforts, but only 30 percent support their troops engaging in combat.

In effect, although rarely put in these terms, a division of labor is evolving inside of the NATO mission: the military side of the operation is increasingly falling to the United States, while other nations are focusing their contributions on reconstruction. This division of labor is driven, on the Europeans' part, by a commendable reluctance to kill and be killed, a sense of a moral duty to help a poor people whose nation has been occupied, and the belief that economic development is essential if Afghanistan and other such countries are to wean themselves from the influence of extremists and not serve as havens for terrorists. This view assumes that foreign powers can engage in large-scale social engineering overseas "just as the U.S. and its allies helped reconstruct Germany and Japan after World War II." However, these are deeply flawed notions. A different, humbler, and more realistic approach is called for.

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PHOTOS: The Bamiyan Buddhas (destroyed by the Taliban) and the World Trade Center (destroyed by Al-Qaeda), juxtaposed above, are emblematic of the psychic gulf between world views, ancient and modern, religious and secular, East and West. Today, their ruins remind us of the irrationality of extremism and the difficulty of rehabilitating societies that embrace it.

Limits of Social Engineering

The neoconservatives are much discredited these days; they are widely held to be responsible for the doctrine that led to the reckless 2003 invasion of Iraq. Their doctrine centered around the concept that foreign powers can readily turn state-controlled economies into free markets, and tyrannies into democracies. These same neocons gained a wide following in the 1980s by insisting that

large-scale social engineering usually failed. Then, they were pointing to American cities where, one might add, the projects were undertaken under much more favorable circumstances than in Afghanistan.

The neocons alleged that most of the liberal Great Society programs introduced in the United States in the 1960s failed; the government failed to eradicate poverty, to help minorities catch up, to improve public schools, and to stop drug abuse. The neocons said that it was wrong to assume that a combination of well-meaning civil servants and oodles of money can solve social problems. Even so, in 2003 the same neocons applied basically the same liberal approach to far away Afghanistan and Iraq.

Champions of reconstruction also ignore the bitter lessons of foreign aid in general. An extensive 2006 report on the scores of billions of dollars that the World Bank invested since the mid 1990s in economic development shows that despite the bank's best efforts, the "achievement of sustained increases in per capita income, essential for poverty reduction, continues to elude a considerable number of countries." Out of 25 aid-recipient countries covered by the report, more than half (14) had the same or worsening rates of per capita income from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. Moreover, the nations that received most of the aid (especially in Africa) developed least, while the nations that received very little aid grew very fast (especially China, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan). Other nations found foreign aid a "poisoned gift" because it promoted dependency on foreigners, undermined indigenous endeavors, and disproportionately benefited those gifted at proposal writing and courting foundation and foreign aid representatives, rather than local entrepreneurs and businessmen.

Above all, the World Bank and other students of development have discovered—surprisingly recently—that large parts of the funds provided are wasted because of widespread and high-level corruption. In *The White Man's Burden*, William Easterly systematically debunks the idea that increased aid expenditures in and of themselves can alleviate poverty or modernize failed or failing states, and points to the key roles that bad government and corruption play in these debacles. Steve Knack of the World Bank showed that, "huge aid revenues may even spur further bureaucratization and worsen corruption." Others found that mismanagement, sheer incompetence, and weak government were almost as debilitating.

One should add that not all the waste and corruption is local. Large portions of the aid budgeted for Afghanistan and other such countries are handed over to non-governmental organizations subject to little accountability, or spent on extraordinary profits to Western contractors and corporations for high-fee Western consultants. (American law requires that 100 percent of food for American foreign aid be purchased from United States farmers, and that U.S. freight carriers ship 75 percent of it.)

A 2008 study by *The Economist* found that one of the main reasons that Afghanistan's development is proceeding so poorly is the widespread corruption, cronyism and tribalism, lack of accountability, and gross mismanagement. *The Economist* recommended that the West lean on the president, Hamid Karzai, to introduce reforms. One cannot but wonder: How should Mr. Karzai proceed? Should he call in all the ministers and ask them to cease to take bribes and stop allocating public funds to their favorites? Fire them and replace them—and with whom? And if

Gold Coin of King Kanishka: Afghanistan 2000 years ago was the cultural crossroads of Eastern and Western civilization, thanks largely to Alexander the Great who subdued the region over 300 years earlier. Tribes driven from the borders of northern China settled in Afghanistan and assimilated Greek culture as the Kushans. This golden coin from Kaniska's Kushan empire (127 C.E.) displays Greek letters in a Persian dialect, reminding us of the confluence of cultures and religions in Kushan capitals at Balkh, Kabul, Begram, and Peshawar. Afghanistan under the Kushans became a center of Shaivism, Zoroastrianism, and later of Buddhist expansion into east Asia. Kushan descendents carved the Bamiyan Buddhas in the 6th century, dressing them in Hellenic tunics. Their multi-cultural legacy became a fertile conduit for the spread of Islam in the 7th century. Until Afghanistan was ravaged by the Mongols in the 13th century, and later by Turks under Tamerlane and by the Moguls of India, the region was a beacon to civilization. Once it was the home of fabulous libraries and famous philosophers, tradesmen, and artists, but the region's deeply ingrained ethnic and cultural divisions have hampered its recovery for centuries. Reconstruction will prove a monumental task.

he did, what about their staffs? Many of the police, judges, jailors, customs officers, and civil servants in Afghanistan regularly accept bribes and grant strong preference to members of their family, clan, and tribal group. Most are poorly trained and have no professional traditions to fall back on. How is a president (even backed up by foreign powers) to change these deeply ingrained habits and culture?

One may argue that such reforms occurred in other countries, including in the West. Indeed, social scientists could do a great service to developing nations if they conducted a thorough study of how those nations succeeded in curbing corruption and gross mismanagement. The study would probably show that the process took decades, if not generations, and that it entailed a major change in social forces (such as the rise of a sizable middle class) and major changes in the education system—among other major societal changes. Such changes cannot be forced and must be largely endemic.

The same holds true for the reform of schools. Afghanistan now has many more schools and more students in them than a few years back, but educational reform requires much more than constructing buildings and filling classrooms. Also needed is a massive retraining of Afghan teachers, who themselves often have little modern education (especially in science and math) and little taste for modern teaching methods, preferring that children learn by rote from old texts. Retraining thousands of teachers (or preparing new ones) requires teachers' colleges or other such sizeable educational facilities that are currently unavailable. It also requires that the principals, school administrators, the various bureaucrats in charge of education—and even the parents—accept the new ways of teaching and the new content. None of this comes easily.

Traditional habits and values have been followed for centuries and are deeply ingrained in the other elements of the economy, polity, and society. Changing them is often a slow and difficult process that outsiders cannot impose—let alone rush along. Given that the United States has been unable to reform its own public schools from Washington D.C. to Los Angeles, why should we assume it can do so in Afghanistan? Given that the French are unable to cope with Muslim minorities in the outskirts of Paris, why would we expect them to do so in the outskirts of Kandahar? Nor have other European nations shown great success in social reforms at home. Despite a trillion dollar investment by Germany in the "new lands" (formerly East Germany), the region is still lagging on many fronts, 18 years after unification.

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Many conditions that are unlikely to be reproduced elsewhere led to successful reconstruction in Germany and Japan after World War II. First, both nations had surrendered after defeat in a war and fully submitted to occupation. Second, many facilitating factors were much more established than they are in countries in which social engineering is now being attempted. There was no danger that Japan or Germany would break up due to a civil war among ethnic groups, as is the case in Afghanistan and Iraq. No effort had to be expended on building national unity. On the contrary, strong national unity was a major reason change could be introduced with relative ease. Other favorable factors included competent government personnel and a low level of corruption. In *Liberal America and the Third World,* Robert Packenham cites, as core factors, the presence of "technical and financial expertise, relatively highly institutionalized political parties, skillful and visionary politicians, well-educated populations, [and] strong national identifications." And, crucially, there was a strong culture of self-restraint present in both Japan and Germany that favored hard work and high levels of saving, essential for building up local assets and keeping costs down.

Conditions in the donor countries were different as well. In 1948, the first year of the Marshall Plan, aid to the 16 European countries involved totaled 13 percent of the U.S. budget. In comparison, the United States currently spends less than one percent of its budget on foreign aid and not all of it is dedicated to economic development. Other nations are doing better, but the total funds dedicated to foreign aid are still much smaller than those committed to

reconstruction at the end of World War II. In short, the current tasks are much more onerous, and the resources available are meager in comparison.

Max Weber, a sociological giant, established the importance of culture (a polite term for values) when he demonstrated that Protestants were more imbued than Catholics with the values that lead to hard work and high levels of saving, essential for the rise of modern capitalist economies. For decades, developments in Catholic countries (such as those in Southern Europe and Latin America) lagged behind the Protestant Anglo-Saxon nations and those in northwest Europe. These differences declined only when Catholics became more like Protestants.

Culture is also a major factor that explains the striking difference between various rates of development, especially between the South Asian "tigers" (that received little aid) and African and Arab states that received a lot of it. The thesis is *not* that these latter states cannot be developed because of some genetically innate characteristics of the people living there, but because their cultures stress other values, especially traditional religious values and communal and tribal bonds. These cultures can change, but, as the record shows, only slowly, and the changes involved cannot be rushed by outsiders.

When all is said and done, one must expect that reconstruction in nations such as Afghanistan will be very slow and highly taxing on all involved.

Economic Development Does Not Stop Terrorism

One may say that the West has no choice but to help develop Afghanistan and other such nations because if the masses involved do not have jobs and a decent income or own some land and homes, Afghanistan and the other nations will be fertile ground in which to grow terrorists. This is said to be especially true in undeveloped countries in which there are large numbers of young people because of the high birth rate and declining death rates.

Despite a widely held notion among progressive people that terrorism is linked to poverty and that development is the best antidote, most data show that there is no correlation between the two. For instance, a widely cited study by Alan Krueger and Jitka Maleckova of the National Bureau of Economic Research concludes, "The evidence we have assembled and reviewed suggests there is little direct connection between poverty, education and participation in terrorism and politically motivated violence."

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The 9/11 terrorists who attacked the American homelands came from middle class backgrounds, and several studied at universities. Bin Laden is a billionaire. F. Gregory Gause pointed out that "the academic literature on the relationship between terrorism and other sociopolitical indicators, such as democracy, is surprisingly scant."

Mahmud of Ghazni wrought an extensive empire in the late 10th century from regions of modern-day Afghanistan. He extended his realm into Iran, northwest India, and the lands of modern Pakistan. Mahmud is celebrated in Afghanistan and Pakistan as an Islamic hero. In India he is remembered as a war criminal and a piratical raider bent upon enslaving the Hindu population and destroying its culture. He is especially reviled for destroying sacred statues and icons of Buddhism in northern India. The Taliban seemed to imitate Mahmud in destroying the Bamiyan Buddhas. The name Hindu Kush, named for Mahmud's "slaughter of the Hindus," recalls the hatreds and cultural enmity that divide the region's inhabitants. These deep ethnic animosities are difficult for the West to understand, and they underscore the significant challenges of a Western cultural reconstruction.

Moral Obligations: Not to Squander

Ethics often persuade individuals and nations who are privileged, whose incomes are well above those of other people or nations and who benefit from the past exploitation of former colonies, that they have a moral obligation to help the less fortunate. Some hold that this obligation is particularly strong for occupied nations because of the damage the occupiers do. When Colin Powell was the secretary of state, he reportedly quoted a Pottery Barn home furnishings store rule—"You break it, you own it"—and applied it to occupied states.

The fact is that Pottery Barn has no such rule. Nor is it obvious that when the West overthrows a tyrannical government of the kind imposed by the Taliban or Saddam, it owes anything else to the liberated people. Indeed, one may hold that they owe the West a resounding vote of gratitude. The extent that one agrees that the occupiers should make those occupied countries whole—for instance pay for doors that have been broken down in the search for terrorists—is limited by what the term "reconstruction" actually means. That is, restoring the conditions to the status that preceded the occupation—not constructing a whole new economy, polity, and society from A to Z.

Whatever conclusion one reaches on this last question, the occupier clearly has a moral obligation not to squander limited resources. Although this issue is hard to face, the truth is that however the West increases its foreign aid, it will never come close to providing the resources that are needed if it defines development—as the West is doing both in Afghanistan and Iraq—as remaking practically all aspects of the societies involved, including their economies; civil service, education, public health, and welfare systems; security forces; judicial agencies; media; and much else.

It is often argued that the United States had no plan for post-war Iraq. In fact, prior to the 2003 invasion, the State Department had prepared a massive 13-volume study, known as the "The Future of Iraq Project." The study provides plans for reconstruction projects for water, agriculture and environment, public health and humanitarian needs, defense policy and institutions, economy and infrastructure, education, justice, democratic principles and procedures, local government, civil society capacity building, free media, and oil and energy, among many others.

As a result of such a wide-ranging, scattergun approach, scores of projects were started, but very few have been completed. Indeed, many were abandoned because there were not enough funds to complete them. To reiterate, although progressive observers would respond with urgent demands to increase the aid given, however large the budget, there continues to be a great mismatch between the resources needed and those available, and many processes of change take a long time to mature (e.g., acculturation) and cannot be rushed. Once one fully faces this cardinal observation, one must conclude that asking where the limited funds will do the most good—and where they are likely to be wasted or even cause damage—is not merely a practical question, but a key moral one as well. All those who engage in medical triage face this issue, however reluctantly, and those who engage in social engineering must do so as well—that is, establish which projects are beyond repair and should be allowed to die, which are likely to make it on their own, and should not receive funds, and which select few should be given first priority.

What Might Be Done?

Development triage has not been tried and requires considerable deliberations. It cannot be rolled out here; however, it can be illustrated by providing some preliminary indications of suggested guidelines.

Make security the first thing. I have shown elsewhere (in *Security First: For a Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy*, Yale University Press, 2007) that basic security must be provided first. If oil pipelines laid during the day are blown up at night, oil will not

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flow very far. If electricity stations are constructed at great costs but not secured, they are merely another place resources are wasted. If professionals fear terrorists, they will leave the country to work elsewhere, and so on.

The term "basic security" indicates that it is not necessary to overcome all threats; indeed, even in Western cities there is some element of danger from both criminals and terrorists. However, such threats must be kept at a level at which the population feels that it can function and that resources are being put to work and accumulated rather than depleted.

The reverse argument, that development is essential for security and hence must precede it, is erroneous because without basic security, development cannot take place, and because, as we have seen, development per se does not provide security.

Prioritize humanitarian aid. On moral grounds, humanitarian aid should be provided in the form of basic supplies (of the kind provided after natural disasters) whether or not these lead to development, are lost in part to corruption, add to security, or have any other utility.

Go for easy wins. Short-term payoffs must be preferred to long-term ones. Providing better seeds, fertilizers or irrigation pays off within months; planting trees—within years; and primary education—a decade or more. These examples illustrate how difficult it is to accept the conclusions that triage can lead to. However, acting otherwise undermines the goals at hand.

Hone project profiles. Projects that have a high-multiplier effect are to be preferred over those that have low-multiplier effect, those that are labor-intensive and not capital-intensive over those that have the opposite profile, and those that use little energy or renewal energy over those that have the opposite profile.

Limit projects. In each given area, strong preference should be given to the completion of a small number of projects over starting a large number. (This is the opposite of the way development has been approached in Afghanistan and Iraq).

Retain old elements. As a rule, old elements should be left in place and fixed or reformed gradually rather than replaced. This holds true for equipment and for institutions and their staffs. For instance, tribal chiefs (in Afghanistan) and members of the governing party in public service (the Ba'ath in Iraq) should have been allowed to continue their leadership roles, as the United States did at the end of WWII by leaving the emperor in place in Japan.

Frame efforts more humbly. A radically different framing of development is essential. It entails abandoning the oversell and hype, including promises to flip a nation from poverty to affluence, from tyranny to democracy, or from terror to peace. Instead, repeated warnings are best issued to indicate that the road ahead is a long and arduous one. A major lowering of expectations is essential to avoid loss of support from donor countries and aid recipients, to encourage those involved to make whatever contributions they are able to make rather than rely on handouts, and to motivate them to reduce conflict and work out their differences via political channels. A sound indication that the proper framing has been achieved will be when those involved voice surprise that results have exceeded expectations.

Sympathetically imagine effects and perceptions. We rarely discuss the reality that Western social engineers are, in effect, seeking to turn Afghanistan and other such nations into Western societies and that this deeply offends the religious and nationalistic values of most of the people in these societies. The main problem is not that we are undermining the old values and the social relationships built around them, but that we do not address the resulting values vacuum. Instead, in effect, we promote Western forms of hedonistic materialism or consumerism; we measure progress by the increase in income per capita or the number of washing machines or TV sets the population owns. These values do not address spiritual, social, and moral issues that devout Afghanis care about. What is necessary is for their traditional values to be replaced or (more practically, transformed) into different, but positive social moral values, of the kind favored by moderate Muslims. What these new social moral values might be and how they can be fostered is a major and complex topic that cannot be treated here in passing. However, the fact that we are not addressing this problem is a major reason Western ideas of economic development are not as welcome there as we, their advocates, expect them to be.

One may well provide different criteria to guide reconstruction triage. The record, however, leaves no doubt that an overly ambitious and scattergun

approach is very likely to fail, and there are serious doubts about its moral worth because it leads to the squandering of scarce resources and increased alienation. In reconstruction, as in many other areas of human pursuit, less is more. If the Europeans are to take the lead in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, and if that country is to serve as a model for the development of other such nations, this cause would be better served if those who lead show humility, embrace triage, and replace hype with achievements that exceed promises, rather than greatly lag behind them. ***MR***

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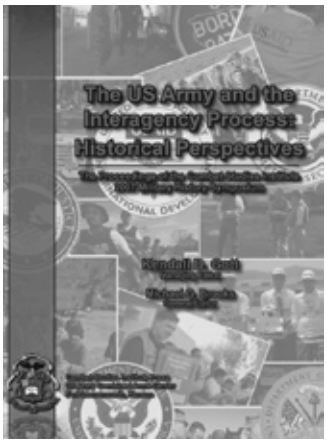

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