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Introduction by Thomas Maddux

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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

In *Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama*, Jeremi Suri has joined a long list of historians and international relations scholars who have searched for the central characteristic, the main motivating force shaping American diplomacy, what Suri refers to as the process of nation-building that became global-nation building. Several recent examples that emphasize America as an imperial nation with territorial and economic expansion as its central driving forces include Philip S. Golub's, *Power, Profit, and Prestige: A History of American Imperial Expansion* and Richard Immerman's *Empire for Liberty: A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz* which emphasizes the centrality of Americans pursuing liberty for themselves and expanding liberty to others.¹ Other historians have given more emphasis to the related sense of exceptionalism and the American encouragement of modernity as defining characteristics from the revolution to the present.

Robert Kagan, for example, in *Dangerous Nation*, emphasizes not only expansionism but also the revolution's unleashing of an ideology and a liberal, commercial society that challenged the Old World. In *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Walter Hixson places emphasis on the "Myth of America," a myth of progress, peacefulness in international relations, superiority in all areas, and a belief in self-determination. For Joan Hoff in *A Faustian Foreign Policy from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush: Dreams of Perfectibility*, the myth of America is the belief from the Puritans through George W. Bush that America is "an exceptional nation with God always on its side," a view that led to a belief in self-righteous superiority, and the importance of protecting America and its principles when they "were perceived to be rejected or under attack."²

Suri does not disagree with the interests and ideals that the scholars above have emphasized in their interpretations, for he suggests, in his response to the reviews, that "many complex and contradictory motives drive American foreign policy" including "concerns about security, economics, culture, race, and gender, among other topics." Suri, however, considers these considerations as subservient to nation-building, the "imagined order of self-governing, peaceful, and prosperous societies that has served as a glue for the various other interests motivating American leaders." To make his argument, Suri begins

¹ See the H-Diplo roundtables Philip S. Golub, *Power, Profit, and Prestige: A History of American Imperial Expansion* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), and Richard Immerman, *Empire for Liberty: A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) on the H-Diplo webpage at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/>

² Joan Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush: Dreams of Perfectibility* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). See also William O. Walker III, *National Security and Core Values in American History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) which emphasizes from colonial origins to the present a "security ethos" that justifies expansionist internationalism and the subordination of domestic rights and liberties. H-Diplo roundtables on Kagan, Hixson, Hoff, and Walker may be found on the H-Diplo webpage at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/>

with the American Revolution as the first example of nation-building which implanted this concept in the emerging national character so deeply that Americans have persisted in this quest, despite a mixture of success and failure and will continue to do so despite contemporary reservations based on the most recent experiences with Iraq and Afghanistan. Suri then examines five more specific examples of nation-building including Reconstruction after the Civil War, the American occupation of the Philippines after the war of 1898, the reconstruction of West Germany after WWII, the Vietnam conflict, and the interventions after 9/11 in Afghanistan and Iraq. In a concluding chapter on the lessons of nation-building, Suri offers five lessons from the American experience, one of “very mixed results”, but Suri believes that the “American nation-building creed remains compelling” (283) and will be revisited.

The reviewers note a number of strengths in Suri’s study and in some of his six case studies. Lewis Gould, for example, notes that Suri has redirected attention to some neglected American officials such as Oliver Otis Howard with the Freedmen’s Bureau during Reconstruction, Herbert Hoover in Germany after WWII, and William Howard Taft’s role as Governor of the Philippines. Jerald Combs points out how Suri effectively emphasizes how the nation-building experience was transferred as “each generation of American leaders looked back at the previous instance of nation-building to inform its own.” Although Suri dislikes assigning labels to historians, Combs does compare Suri’s perspective with idealists, realists and neoconservatives and ends up suggesting the category “‘soft or restrained realism’ because [Suri] emphasizes ‘soft power’ as well as hard military or economic power and calls for restraint and lowering expectations to balance America’s goals with the power available.” Edwin Martini, Chris Tudda and Christopher Fettweis consider some of the case studies such the American Revolution and Reconstruction to be particularly interesting. Martini notes that Suri “makes a strong case for continuity in the history of U.S. nation-building” and recognizes the “limits of inclusion in nation-building efforts” from Native Americans during the Revolution to black Americans during Reconstruction. Tudda expresses reservations on aspects of the case studies but does applaud the analysis of Taft’s role in the Philippine Commission to “create a new, independent Philippine state through education, improved health, and the creation of civil society.”

Several of Suri’s case studies, most notably on Vietnam and post-9/11 occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, receive a more critical response from the reviewers. With respect to Vietnam, Martini questions the focus as Suri devotes more attention to the spring and summer of 1945 than the prolonged U.S. nation-building efforts from 1954 to 1975. In suggesting that Suri “pushes his thesis much too far,” Combs questions whether nation-building is the “dominant template of American foreign policy” in a number of the case studies, most notably Vietnam. Suri’s suggests that U.S. leaders like John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson failed “to negotiate with the leading nation builder Ho Chi Minh, in the way that Nixon and Kissinger finally negotiated with his successors,” but as Combs emphasizes, the “only thing to be negotiated with Ho was American withdrawal from South Vietnam in favor of Communist nation-building on the entire peninsula, not how American nation-building ideas could be implemented there.”

In his assessment of nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan, Suri suggests a contradictory dynamic in which the U.S. left Afghanistan and turned over national-building to the Afghans too quickly whereas in Iraq the U.S. wiped out the institutions that might have facilitated nation-building and not until General David Petraeus' surge strategy did the U.S. implement nation-building. "Nation-building was possible in Afghanistan, but Washington failed to act," suggests Suri, and refers to examples of what the U.S. did in the other case studies: "American leaders did not support a Freedmen's Bureau for Afghanistan, they did not create another Philippine Commission, and they did not finance a Marshall Plan." (245) Combs questions Suri's argument that "nation-building in Afghanistan was and is quite feasible if the United States would stay the course there." Fettweis also criticizes this example and others for not considering the relationship of nation-building to U.S. interests as opposed to its ideals. What are the costs and benefits of nation-building? Fettweis considers the reconstruction of post-war Germany an example where benefits far outweighed costs but "Afghanistan ... is a strategically irrelevant country, where the outcome of nation building is not terribly important to U.S. interests" and Afghans, like many local communities "are happy to take money from Westerners, and have learned to say things that will keep it flowing, but ignore their counsel whenever necessary."

Barack Obama's strategy for Iraq and Afghanistan, especially the latter, receives some attention at the end of Suri's study. Obama's completion of the American withdrawal from Iraq initiated by George Bush would seem to contradict Suri's emphasis on the importance of sustained American commitment of resources to nation-building. Obama's mixture of intensified military involvement in Afghanistan with the "surge" build-up of troops and expanded use of drones against Taliban leaders with the announcement of a plan for American withdrawal as well as efforts to initiate negotiations with the Taliban also challenges Suri's guidelines for successful nation-building (258-265). The reviewers and Suri are not optimistic about the short-term future of U.S. nation-building. Gould, who notes the absence of domestic political considerations on U.S. policy throughout the study, and Martini have doubts about the ability of the U.S. to be an "effective partner, for new and developing states and governments" when its "own economic and political house is in such disarray." Applying his emphasis on relating costs and benefits to U.S. interests, Fettweis rejects Suri's suggestion on the historic strategic importance of Afghanistan and current status as a "vital strategic land base, a crucial regional choke point" (215) and prefers to rely on U.S. Special Forces and drones to weaken Al Qaeda. "The future development of Afghanistan (or lack thereof) will not affect the United States," concludes Fettweis. Under the impact of the Great Recession and intensified partisan political strife, Suri has recognized that a focus on issues such as "nation building, human rights to climate change and energy security" has to give way to a "disciplined return to basics" which he defines as: "maintain the credibility of the dollar as the de facto reserve currency of the world; halt the proliferation of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons; and maintain peaceful relations with China;" what he describes as "targeted internationalism" as the "only viable path to restoring lost leadership."³

³ See Jeremi Suri, "America the Overcommitted," *New York Times*, October 14, 2011.

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Christopher J. Fettweis is assistant professor of political science at Tulane University. He is the author of *Losing Hurts Twice as Bad and Dangerous Times? The International Politics of Great Power Peace*. His current project examines pathological beliefs in U.S. foreign policy, including those inspired by fear, honor, glory and hubris.

Lewis Gould is the Eugene C. Barker Centennial Professor Emeritus in American History at the University of Texas at Austin. He received his Ph.D from Yale University in 1966. His most recent books are *Helen Taft: Our Musical First Lady* (University Press of Kansas, 2010), as editor, *My Dearest Nellie: The Letters of William Howard Taft to Helen Herron Taft, 1909-1912* (University Press of Kansas, 2011) and *Theodore Roosevelt* (Oxford University Press, 2012). He is currently writing *Edith Kermit Roosevelt: Making the Modern First Lady* which will be the final published volume in the eighteen-volume *Modern First Ladies* series that he has edited for the University Press of Kansas.

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(Louisiana State University Press, 2006). LSU will publish his second book, *A Cold War Turning Point: Nixon and China, 1969-1972*, in spring 2012.

Review by Jerald A. Combs, Professor of History Emeritus, San Francisco State University

This book is alternately brilliant and banal, insightful and maddening. The mix is surprising because Jeremi Suri's previous portraits of foreign policy titans like Dwight Eisenhower and Henry Kissinger have been deeply researched, modest, and judicious. In this book, however, Suri has decided to take a real flyer and draw specific lessons from history for the benefit of present political leaders.

Suri argues that nation-building has been the "dominant template" for U.S. foreign policy throughout American history from Washington to Obama.⁽⁶⁾ This policy of nation-building stemmed from America's revolutionary and constitutional experience, according to Suri. Following Gordon Wood, Suri argues that America's revolutionary era was a radical experience.¹ For all the Constitution's limits on popular sovereignty and acceptance of inequality, including slavery, the nation that the founders built was based on a broad, ordered, and increasingly democratic polity. Americans repeated and confirmed this experiment in nation-building as they created new and equal state governments in the western territories.

Suri argues that the founders made this nation-building the basis of American foreign as well as domestic policy. The United States would encourage an international society of independent, like-minded, and cooperative nation states that adopted a rule of constitutional law, representation, and inclusiveness on the American model. Such nations would encourage local autonomy without anarchy and effective authority without empire. "Nothing could be more American than to pursue global peace through the spread of American-style institutions," Suri proclaims. (6)

Suri goes on to insist that this foreign policy was "imperative" rather than a matter of choice because "The spread of the American Revolution was the best security for the American Revolution in a hostile world. If Americans looked only within, they quite reasonably feared that powerful foreign actors would exploit and ultimately destroy them. They were probably correct in this judgment." (19-20). Like-minded constitutional nation-states would seek peace and cooperation with one another, and the United States would benefit from the movement of peoples, goods, and capital that resulted. For these reasons, Suri heartily approves of America's foreign policy of nation-building. (30, 269-270)

To demonstrate America's unbroken support of nation-building, Suri recounts what he considers the five most enduring instances of nation-building in U.S. history – Reconstruction in the American South after the Civil War, the occupation of the Philippines after the Spanish-American War, the occupation of Germany after World War II, the Vietnam War, and the war in Afghanistan. He usefully points out that each generation of American leaders looked back at the previous instance of nation-building to inform its own. Lincoln looked back to the founders to articulate Union aims in the Civil War. William McKinley and William Howard Taft drew on their experiences in Reconstruction to guide

¹ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

their nation-building efforts in the Philippines. Many of the leaders involved in the occupation of Germany had begun their careers in and around the Philippines. The German experience informed policies in Vietnam. And Vietnam not only informed but haunted U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Suri regards the nation-building that took place during Reconstruction and the Philippines as fairly successful, the occupation of Germany and the “Reverse Course” in Japan as quite successful, Vietnam as a total failure, and Afghanistan as failing but salvageable. He tries to draw lessons from these successes and failures to guide American nation-building in Afghanistan and the future. He does so because he insists that such nation-building is not only a necessary and desirable course of action, as noted above, but also feasible. The problem has been “not *what* Americans were trying to do, but *where* and *how* they were trying to do it.” (264) In order to be successful in its nation-building, Suri prescribes a rather banal set of “5 Ps”—Partners (seeking internal and external partners rather than operating unilaterally); Process (trial and error rather than prescriptions); Problem-Solving (solving immediate problems rather than following a blue-print of “moral clarity”); Purpose (setting a larger goal toward which immediate problem solutions will lead); and People (remembering that nation-building is about people because “Large forces do not move history. Human beings move history.” (262) Suri might well have added a sixth P, for Patience, because he emphasizes throughout the book how long nation-building takes. He argues that the biggest calamities in the history of American nation-building—Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, Vietnam, and Pakistan—have come because the United States succumbed to the temptation of trying to create a new people and a new government at breakneck speed. (38) Of Afghanistan, he says that its people “will invest in real partnerships only when they believe that the United States is committed to help for years and decades, not days and months.” (264)

In many ways, Suri’s take on nation-building aligns him with idealists and neoconservatives who endorse an assertive U.S. foreign policy to spread American values. Like them, he subscribes to the democratic theory that liberal states are unlikely to fight one another. He states specifically that he agrees with some of the views of Robert Kagan, whose books embody the neoconservative view of the history of American foreign affairs.² Like idealists and neoconservatives, he rejects the claims of economic and cultural revisionists that American nation-building abroad is imperialism motivated by the need to expand markets and a racist and patriarchal contempt for foreign inferiors. Nation-building is neither altruistic nor imperialistic, Suri says. Instead, it is something in between—a useful middle-ground between imperialism and chaos.

Suri also rejects the realist views of George Kennan and Henry Kissinger, whose criticisms of American moralism he decries as unfair because the creation of American-style nation-states increases American influence, access, and trust and therefore constitutes “realistic

² Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008) and *Dangerous Nation: America’s Place in the World from its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the 20th Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

idealism.” (31-32) Despite Suri’s denunciation of realism, however, he is at least as much a realist as he is an idealist or neoconservative. He falls into the category I have called ‘soft or restrained realism’ because he emphasizes ‘soft power’ as well as hard military or economic power and calls for restraint and lowering expectations to balance America’s goals with the power available. He qualifies his agreement with Robert Kagan by adding, “I place more emphasis on the role of political negotiation. Kagan overemphasizes, I believe, the role of military force.” (31, fn 11) He argues that “The United States does not rule or govern, as much as it leads from the power of its model.” (33) He praises restraint and downplays idealism by arguing that nation-building is possible in places like Iraq and Afghanistan so long as “stability, unity, and representativeness—not democracy—are the defining features.” (264) In line with this soft realist view, the leaders to whom he ascribes the “sophisticated achievements” of American nation-building in the former Confederacy, the Philippines, Germany, and Afghanistan are those who combined their idealism with caution, pragmatism, and a healthy dose of realism. General Otis Howard, head of the Freedman’s Bureau, and John Alvord, his superintendent of education, tried to build a new nation in the South by supporting and educating both freedmen and poor whites. While they succeeded only partly because Reconstruction was too brief and under-resourced, Suri argues that freed slaves and poor whites had more access to education, mobility, and citizenship than before the Civil War and that this relative success served as the model for similar pragmatic leaders like William Howard Taft in the Philippines. Taft was not a full-throated expansionist like Theodore Roosevelt, whom Suri considers atypical of American outlooks on imperialism. Taft was instead a sedentary constitutionalist who sought to build an independent Philippine nation based on representation, a local civil service based on merit, a domestic Philippine police force, and the sort of education Howard and Alvord had set up with the Freedman’s Bureau. Taft in turn served as a model for Herbert Hoover, whose fact-finding tour on behalf of President Truman in 1947 resulted in a report that emphasized partnering with rather than punishing local German leaders and helped lead to the Marshall Plan and other measures that made the Allied occupation of Germany a success. Unfortunately, America’s leaders during the Vietnam War ignored the examples of Taft and Hoover and tried to build a nation in Vietnam after wrongly abandoning America’s proper nation-building role in postwar Southeast Asia to French imperialists, then partnering with inadequate local leaders and inflexibly ignoring the possibility of negotiations with Ho Chi Minh. Only at the end did Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger engage in the first serious negotiations with local leaders to effect American withdrawal. Unfortunately, George W. Bush made mistakes in Afghanistan and Iraq similar to those made in Vietnam. He used military might to destroy or purge all enemy elements and build a new nation instantly and cheaply. His errors were rescued to some extent by another cautious nation-builder, General David Petraeus, whose doctrine of counter-insurgency emphasized protecting civilians, rebuilding infrastructure, and partnering with effective though sometimes unattractive local leaders. Thus, Petraeus joined Howard, Taft, Hoover, and Kissinger as ruthlessly strategic guides to nation-building.

Much of what Suri writes rings true. But he pushes his thesis much too far. Most people regard nation-building as the occupation of a nation and forcible creation of a government during and after a major war. Suri implies as much by selecting six wartime occupations as

the most enduring examples of U.S. nation-building. He also calls Americans a nation-building people because, even though they have made more wars than many others, “they have also tried more often than anyone else to build nations after battle.” (8) But in order to demonstrate that nation-building is the dominant template of American foreign policy, Suri expands the definition of nation-building to include far more than wartime reconstruction. For instance, he praises the founders’ attempts to expand America’s influence abroad in “cautious but significant ways” through “trade, ‘impartial’ relations, and political example” as a form of “nation-building, or what later advocates would call ‘democratic development.’” (20) He also argues that nation-building can take many forms – economic and technological aid to post-conflict societies like Bosnia, Cambodia, and East Timor, support for liberalizing institutions in developing nations like Egypt, Ukraine, and China, as well as more forceful measures in war-torn societies like Afghanistan and Iraq.

It is useful to be reminded that America’s foreign policy ideals are related to nation-building even in peace-time. But it is misleading to call nation-building the dominant template of American diplomacy and thus imply that Americans assign a high priority to nation-building in making foreign policy decisions. The United States appropriates only a pittance for foreign aid and even that is controversial. The United States regularly relies on the stability provided by foreign dictators against Communists, Islamic fundamentalists, or others who might disrupt U.S. relations with other nations. It has installed or supported dictators in Latin America not because it wanted to nation-build on the cheap, as Suri maintains, but because it wanted to avoid nation-building almost entirely. American politicians who argue against nation-building do not do so because they disagree with the desire of most Americans to encourage peaceful democratic regimes abroad, but because they object to risking war or substantial treasure in pursuit of that ideal.

Lincoln did not enter the Civil War to build a new nation in the South. He sought to prevent the expansion of slavery into the Western territories. He moved to eliminate slavery and build a free-labor society in the Confederacy only when that seemed possible and necessary to win the war. In any case, it seems a stretch to consider Reconstruction any kind of a success story based on the temporary accomplishments of the Freedman’s Bureau.

As for the Philippines, McKinley only reluctantly occupied them to prevent Manila harbor from falling into rival hands. He would happily have taken only Manila if that had seemed feasible. But he feared that he could not secure Manila unless he pacified and controlled the remainder of the islands, and so he dredged up the White Man’s burden to rationalize taking them all. Meanwhile, Suri exaggerates the benevolence of nation-building in the Philippines by relegating discussion of the brutal warfare that accompanied it to a single paragraph praising the civilian takeover of power from an Army that relied on increasing force, divide-and-conquer tactics, and “instances of torture.” (96)

Suri’s argument regarding World War II and Germany seems unexceptional, but his description of the failure in Vietnam is highly questionable. He argues that the primary problem of American nation-building in Vietnam, along with the abandonment of southeast Asia to French imperialism immediately after World War II, was the failure of Kennedy and Johnson to negotiate with the leading local nation-builder, Ho Chi Minh, in the way the

Nixon and Kissinger finally negotiated with his successors. But the only thing to be negotiated with Ho was American withdrawal from South Vietnam in favor of Communist nation-building on the entire peninsula, not how American nation-building ideas could be implemented there. Perhaps his point is that Americans should favor viable nation states even if they have nothing to do with the American model, but that seems to run contrary to most of his narrative.

Finally, Suri argues that George W. Bush failed in Afghanistan because he tried to nation-build quickly and cheaply with minimum American forces. But it is difficult to believe that he expected Afghanistan to be a stable, representative, and inclusive if not democratic nation when he quickly withdrew American troops and sent them to Iraq. Suri argues that nation-building in Afghanistan was and is quite feasible if the United States will stay course there, but his analysis vastly underplays the problems posed by Pakistan to any sort of nation-building acceptable to the United States.

In short, by exaggerating the importance to American foreign policy of nation-building as that term is usually understood, Suri befuddles what otherwise is an informed and thought-provoking book.

Jeremi Suri undertakes an impassioned defense of nation-building in *Liberty's Surest Guardian*. While it is a bit bizarre for a scholar to suggest, as he does, that “serious studies of the topic are nearly impossible to find” (45), surely there is room for more analysis of what is an increasingly significant issue in U.S. foreign policy.¹ Few topics in today’s strategic circles are as important, complex and controversial; any study that attempts to synthesize the lessons of past attempts to guide today’s leaders, as this one admirably does, is certainly to be welcomed. Suri’s work is neither pure history nor policy monograph, but an admirable attempt to mix both.

Professor Suri examines six cases of significant American nation-building: In the United States itself after the Revolution, post-Civil War reconstruction, the Philippines a century ago, Germany after World War II, Vietnam and Afghanistan/Iraq. He makes a number of good points along the way, some of which could have used a bit more exploration. For instance, his notion that nation-building changes both the target and country of origin is an interesting one. Suri notes that the American experience in the Philippines had effects on the identity of both countries, helping to establish simultaneously a national identity for the Filipinos and an internationalist one for the United States. That is an interesting point, and perhaps grist for further research.

He is also to be applauded for choosing to examine post-Civil War reconstruction, an experience often overlooked by those studying nation-building. Although some may disagree with the rather rosy picture he paints of its outcome, and perhaps with his assertion that it “proved even more challenging than the bloody military campaigns of the Civil War” (48), Suri offers a helpful reminder to future nation-builders to add reconstruction to their list of precedents.

Unfortunately, the book has a number of weaknesses as well. I will briefly describe what seem to me to be some of the most important, but not before admitting that I am a bit of a skeptic about most nation-building projects. I hope that the following sections, which outline some of the objections that many realists and others might make to Suri’s work, will be taken in the spirit they are intended, as mild academic challenges to a stimulating and thought-provoking book.

First of all, while Suri does a good job explaining the relationship of nation-building to the ideals of the United States, he is on less steady ground discussing its interests. The book does not make much of an attempt to analyze the costs and benefits of the various nation-building projects it reviews. Suri’s confident assertion that nation-building is central to the American character – it is what makes “Americans who they are” (267) – obscures what

¹ Among the serious studies of the topic are James Dobbins, *America’s Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003); James Dobbins, Seth G. Jones, Keith Crane and Beth Cole DeGrasse, *The Beginner’s Guide to Nation-Building* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007); and Francis Fukuyama, ed., *Nation-Building Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

ought to be the central question facing all these ventures: whether or not they were (or are) worthwhile. The devotion of decades of effort, billions of dollars and thousands of lives for minimal tangible benefit does not make for good foreign policy. Without a metric to assess value, there is no limit to the number of adventures upon which the idealists who too often run U.S. foreign policy will embark.

Clearly there are times when nation-building has been worthwhile. Reconstructing the South, if it were ever really attempted, would have been one; post-war Germany is another case where the benefits far outweighed the cost. Not all efforts are equally important, however. Afghanistan, for instance, is a strategically irrelevant country, where the outcome of nation-building is not terribly important to U.S. interests. As long as Al Qaeda and other groups do not find sanctuary there – and there is no reason to believe they will, with U.S. special forces and drones likely to be permanent features of the area – the future development of Afghanistan (or lack thereof) will not affect the United States. All people would like to see it progress in a positive, stable direction, but this hope is only fused with interest in the minds of liberals. Suri states without a hint of irony that Afghanistan has in the past “determined the regional balance of power,” and that “it was – and remains – a vital strategic land base, a crucial regional choke point” (215). It should go without say that the poor, inward-looking society has never mattered much to any balance of power, and it is certainly not vital or crucial to anything in particular. Such hyperbole might be necessary to make the case for continued occupation of Afghanistan (which is clearly a central goal of the book), but it undermines the rest of the analysis.

Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine a society less amenable to nation-building. Afghanistan is home to some of the most conservative, tradition-bound cultures in the world, yet Suri assures us that “the American nation-building creed had found a people as enthusiastic as any other to embrace its political vision and adjust it to their local traditions” (245). If all this were true, then presumably the task would have been rather simple. It seems much more likely that, as with most of attempts at nation-building, local communities have shown little interest in having their societies reshaped by paternalistic, if well-meaning, outsiders. They are happy to take money from Westerners, and have learned to say the things that will keep it flowing, but ignore their counsel whenever necessary.

Suri believes that the U.S. national character demands nation-building abroad. “Americans are – above all else – a ‘nation-building people,’” he writes (129). It is their “nationhood” that drives Americans “to pursue the creation and expansion of similar states” (131). It is natural and inevitable, therefore, and immune to normal standards of assessment. Dissatisfaction in some quarters with nation-building “is unavoidable,” Suri writes, “but alternatives [are] almost impossible” (253). The idea that it is “almost impossible” for the United States to act in its national interest is, to put it mildly, controversial.

Nation-building is possible anywhere, Suri writes, if only the will is present (38). While it may be possible, strictly speaking, success is not always worth the high price. Suri condemns those leaders who “give up” before target nations are built, arguing that while they may consider themselves to be pragmatists in reality they are practicing “politics of

least resistance and the tolerance of the lowest common denominator” (8). A focus on tangible costs and benefits of action would have led him to understand that there are times when it is in the U.S. interest to abandon nations half-built.

This inattention to costs leads to the second problem with Suri’s analysis: He pays too little attention to the military components of nation-building. These ventures are often quite bloody, for both the nation builders and target; security is, after all, a *sine qua non* for success. The prolonged guerrilla wars that have accompanied many American adventures in nation-building play a minor role in Suri’s analysis, as if education reform and constitution-writing are the factors most highly correlated with successful outcomes. The thousands of dead are apparently merely bumps along the road to an American-style system of governance. The Philippine case is the most egregious example: Suri concentrates far more energy on the education system that William Howard Taft helped to institute than the prolonged guerrilla war that occurred simultaneously, failing to mention the deaths of more than 4000 Americans and hundreds of thousands of Filipinos.² The insurrection, during which U.S. troops herded civilians into concentration camps, apparently matters little to the story, as is the case with the other wars that have accompanied American efforts to enlighten the ‘savage’ hinterlands.

Third, Suri overstates the extent to which nation-building is unique to the United States. All political systems seek to replicate themselves, as students of international politics well know, and all great powers attempt to spread the system they operate. The Romans sought to Romanize the barbarians; the English tried to create a miniature England in South Asia; the Soviets installed communist governments wherever the Red Army went. In the process, all tried to make unfriendly states more pliable, cooperative and supportive. It should therefore be no surprise that the American style of nation-building (or what Suri refers to *ad nauseum* as its “nation-building creed”) tries to replicate the American system. He is surely correct in arguing that the United States is the only country to try to Americanize others. While that system is preferable in many ways to those it seeks to replace, the desire to spread itself is not unique. Seen in this context, some form of nation-building is a common feature of great power. Thus although he denies it (162), when Suri writes “nation-building,” he means Americanization. The nations that Americans sought to build, he says, “would come to look like the United States” (170 – eight pages after the denial).

Like many American exceptionalists, Suri rejects the notion that the United States was ever an imperialist power. His chapter on the Philippines is titled “Reconstruction After Empire,” as if one imperial ruler was not replaced with another; empires were something they did, not the United States. That the U.S. empire was less brutal and more liberal than

² There would of course be little need to point out the hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties if Suri’s target were primarily scholars, since most would know that already. But it is clear throughout that he is writing for a popular audience, who at times need to be told the most basic historical points. Consider this caption: “American president Franklin Roosevelt worked closely with British prime minister Winston Churchill to defeat the axis powers in the Second World War” (167). This is not a work written for people with extensive knowledge of the cases.

that of the Spanish does not make it somehow un-imperial. The United States invented nation-building, we are told (269); it is Washington's gift to the world. It is a wonder that sometimes foreigners have failed to recognize their good fortune. "Nation-building has deep international legitimacy," Suri writes, "more than any other contemporary system of political organization...There are no better alternatives" (270). Such assertions have no meaning at all (nation-building is not, after all, a *system*) unless one realizes that what he is really talking about is replicating the United States, albeit with local variations, anywhere its military makes it possible to do so.

Fourth, Suri puts me in the very uncomfortable position of having to defend neoconservatism. He seems to define the ideology as aggressive but cheap, willing to break but not to reconstruct. On page 241, Suri argues that "Bush and his advisors were 'neoconservatives' because they believed, as Rumsfeld promised, in a more forceful American example tied to a stingier civilian pocketbook," even implying later that neocons did not support the surge in Iraq (253). He criticizes what he calls "neoconservative nation-building," which left an "an unbridgeable gap between the rhetoric of political reform and the reality of absent manpower" (243).

This is not only inaccurate and unfair, but it demonstrates a complete misunderstanding of the movement. Neoconservatives have been, if anything, more hawkish about nation-building than most, and especially more than realists. Members of the movement were the architects of the surge (specifically Fred Kagan) and most have never supported ending a mission before nations were completely built. Some analysts do not consider Donald Rumsfeld to be a neocon at all, because he (and Richard Cheney, and even John Bolton) displayed little interest in democracy promotion in Iraq.³ Neoconservatives were the biggest proponents of the war, for which they deserve much blame; but they were not opposed to nation-building, nor did they wish to do it on the cheap. It is not true that the 'conservative' part of neoconservative refers to an unwillingness to spend money in the pursuit of idealistic goals. If anything, neoconservatives tend to ignore costs altogether, arguing that the United States does not spend enough in its efforts to bring about a liberal world order, which forms one of the many disagreements that realists have with the movement. Suri's attempt to distance himself from their ranks is understandable, but unsuccessful; after all, many liberals were as gung-ho about invading Iraq as were those neocons inside the Bush Administration.⁴ Moralists tend to end up with blood on their

³ Among those who question whether Rumsfeld was really ever a neoconservative – and perhaps good places to begin learning about what neoconservatism as an ideology of foreign policy actually is – include Jacob Heilbrunn, *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons* (New York: Doubleday, 2008); and Justin Vaïsse, "Why Neoconservatism Still Matters," Brookings Institution Policy Paper, No. 20, May 2010. One can also consult primary neocon sources: Robert Kagan, "Neocon Nation: Neoconservatism, c. 1776," *World Affairs*, Vol. 170, No. 4 (Spring 2008), pp. 13-35; and Irving Kristol, "The Neoconservative Persuasion: What It Was, and What It Is," *The Weekly Standard*, Vol. 8, No. 47 (August 25, 2003).

⁴ The long list of liberal hawks includes Michael O'Hanlon, Thomas Friedman, Paul Berman, Peter Beinart, Ivo Daalder, Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden and Madeleine Albright. See especially Kenneth Pollack, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2002).

hands. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. was criticizing communists when he wrote that “those who are convinced that they have a monopoly on The Truth always feel that they are saving the world when they slaughter heretics. Their objective remains that of making the world over in the image of their dogmatic ideology. The goal is a monolithic world, organized on the principle of infallibility.”⁵ Today’s American nation-builders might benefit by asking themselves whether or not this also applies to them.

Finally, the policy recommendations are rather thin gruel. Suri’s final chapter includes an alliterative list of lessons (partners, process, problem-solving, purpose, people), which I doubt will prove helpful to future nation-builders. Indeed throughout the book Suri appears to fear that his readers are incapable of remembering anything from previous chapters, and are in need of having connections hammered home with remorseless zeal. Those seeking practical how-to advice will be disappointed.

Overall, Suri’s book is thought-provoking but ultimately unconvincing in its call to build a world of compliant, friendly, Americanized nations. In her analysis of the folly of Vietnam, Barbara Tuchman called nation-building “the most presumptuous of all the illusions,” and expressed amazement that the descendents of settlers to a virgin land “failed to learn from their success that elsewhere, too, only the inhabitants can make the process work.”⁶ It is comforting, but illusory, to think otherwise.

⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “One Against the Many,” in Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Morton White, eds., *Paths of American Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), p. 538.

⁶ Barabara Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Try to Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), p. 375.

In the 2000 presidential election, Republican candidate George W. Bush criticized the process he called nation building and disavowed its use for his prospective administration. A year later, responding to the attacks of 9/11/2001, the Bush administration embarked on two such endeavors, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. The initiative that Bush launched in Afghanistan has continued under President Barack Obama while the United States is still extricating itself from the nation-building process in Iraq.

Jeremi Suri regards what happened to George W. Bush in Afghanistan and Iraq as part of a long and on the whole positive tradition of nation-building in American history. “The willingness to use force for revolutionary purposes remains pervasive in the American experience,” Suri contends (15). In his provocative and thoughtful analysis, Suri endeavors to understand efforts to transform both domestic and foreign societies as an integral part of the nation’s history. He also provides guidelines for successful nation building that American policymakers should adopt to achieve more positive results in the future.

To illustrate the process of nation building in action, Suri identifies six specific examples. He discusses how the faith in nation building evolved from the Revolutionary era. Case studies then examine the work of the Freedmen’s Bureau after the Civil War, the record of William Howard Taft in the Philippines between 1900 and 1904, the impact of Herbert Hoover on the rebuilding of Germany after World War II, the American experience in Vietnam, and the failure of nation building in that country. A concluding case study considers the experience of nation building after the attacks of 9/11. The final chapter offers a kind of primer about how successful interventions in other nations should occur. “Nation-building,” he concludes, “requires a disciplined focus on purpose.” (281)

Suri’s cast of characters is intriguing. He delves into the work of Oliver Otis Howard with the Freedmen’s Bureau and has much that is interesting to say about the role of Herbert Hoover in the reconstruction of Germany after World War II. His treatment of William Howard Taft in the Philippines should do something to refocus attention on this key phase of the future president’s career. More than any other single episode, Taft’s performance as Governor of the Philippines established his reputation as a national figure with qualifications for the White House. Suri’s lucid comments underscore the need for a good modern biography of Taft.

The result is an interesting and important book that challenges the usual thinking about nation building. Suri makes a powerful case that the impulse he describes draws on deep currents in American history. For this non-diplomatic historian, his relative lack of interest in domestic political considerations limits the book’s reach. Some discussion of the dispute between Andrew Johnson and Congressional Republicans over the Freedmen’s Bureau would have added more context about the way that ill-fated agency was prevented from reaching anything like its full potential.

In the case of the Philippines more could have been said about the *ad hoc* manner in which

the policy of the McKinley administration emerged out of naval war planning for an attack on the archipelago. McKinley came late to the implications of acquiring the islands and sometimes seemed taken aback about how far he had extended presidential authority using the war powers.

It is tempting to read back into a day-to-day process a greater purposefulness about nation building in the Philippines than was there at the time.

While neither triumphant nor chauvinistic in his analysis, Suri does see nation building as a positive aspect of the American character. It reflects the success of the country in validating its own institutions and demonstrating the success of the democratic experiment. Yet the enduring power of the idea of the cohesive American nation spreading its governmental bounty to the world's political institutions may be less than it seemed just a few years ago.

Many of the key elements of the powerful nation that emerged from the Civil War and the Gilded Age are now under attack. The idea of national citizenship for all born or naturalized in the United States, embodied in the Fourteenth Amendment, has been called into question by opponents of immigration. Thus, a key principle of the Civil War settlement, in many respects the peace terms of that conflict, is now in jeopardy from the Republicans who once had championed and endorsed this constitutional change.

Underlying the nation that went abroad to spread the guarantees of liberty was a sense that the American government and the constitutional order had an innate legitimacy. With the end of the Civil War, any kind of direct challenge to the national cohesion seemed a vanished relic of the ante-bellum period.

Now, as the recent battle over raising the debt ceiling revealed, the issue of whether Republicans regard Democratic presidents as legitimate has once again reemerged. The Grand Old Party has doubted the patriotism and right to govern of its political rivals in the past, but this new form of assault on the legitimacy of another political party seems more virulent and intense than ever. As the political fabric of the United States frays, the credibility of the country as a nation-building sponsor will likely suffer. Suri's book, for all of its forward looking advice for more and better nation building, may in fact be a testament to an era in American foreign policy that is being eclipsed because of the deterioration of any kind of democratic consensus.

For several weeks in the fall of 2000, Texas Governor and Republican Candidate for President George W. Bush railed against American nation-building. In a debate with Vice President and Democratic nominee Al Gore, Bush argued, “I don’t think our troops ought to be used for what’s called nation-building,” adding that the U.S. should not operate “a kind of nation-building corps.” Just prior to the election Bush reinforced the point, saying he was “worried about an opponent who uses nation building and the military in the same sentence. See, our view of the military is for our military to be properly prepared to fight and win war and, therefore, prevent war from happening in the first place.”¹

Four years later, running for reelection and bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, Bush admitted to NBC’s Tim Russert that the United States was now actively engaged in nation-building efforts in those countries, because “the best way to secure America for the long term is to promote freedom and a free society and to encourage democracy.” Completing this transformation in his second inaugural address, President Bush laid out an expansive view of interventionism and nation-building in which he declared it “the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in the world.”²

Pointing out such contradictions became particularly popular among his critics during Bush’s disastrous second term, but as Jeremi Suri explains in *Liberty’s Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama*, the contradictions Bush came to embody are in many ways simply the latest in a long line of ambivalence about the American experience with nation-building. “Nothing could be more American,” Suri writes in his introduction, “than to pursue global peace through the spread of American-style institutions.” This idea, for Suri, is deeply rooted in the American experience, dating back to the Revolution. This tendency to “shine the light of democracy on the entire world,” he also notes, is regularly heightened when American citizens feel threatened, as so many did after September 11. “The clear pattern,” Suri argues, “is that in moments of crisis the images, claims, and ambitions of the Revolution win out over more cautious voices” (6, 14-15). For Suri, it’s not really a question of whether or not Americans *should* nation-build; it’s that they simply can’t help ourselves. Americans are a nation-building people, and, since they have nation-built before and will nation-build again, they should figure out what has worked well, and what has not.

Suri, as he in his other works, asks big questions in this book and seeks to provide big

¹ “Second Presidential Debate Between Governor Bush and Vice President Gore,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2000; “U.S. Shifts Emphasis in Afghanistan to Security and Road Building,” *New York Times*, November 12, 2002. “Nation-Building, This Time in Africa,” *New York Times*, July 6, 2003.

² NBC’s “Meet The Press” Interview with President Bush, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/kfiles/b28200.html> (accessed 12 January 2012); Bush’s second inaugural quoted in Suri, 14, 201.

answers, synthesizing a large volume of nation-building history into six case studies and attempting to distill the lessons from those experiences into what he labels “the 5 Ps” of American-nation building: partnerships, process, problem-solving, purpose, and people. Inevitably, such a selective synthesis will leave out some important details, and a book aimed as much at policymakers as historians (as this one seems to be) will likely risk oversimplification for the sake of extracting larger lessons. Still, Suri offers a number of useful and interesting examples to highlight his argument, and provides smart policy conclusions at the end of the study. While historians will no doubt quibble over some of the details and conclusions of the individual case studies, few will argue that the United States, and a number of nations around the world, would be better off if policymakers would learn, and follow, the lessons Suri reveals.

To begin with, Suri is to be commended for including such an interesting range of case studies, many of which are not intuitive choices. Particularly instructive, enlightening, and controversial is Suri’s chapter on the creation of the United States after the American Revolution and on reconstruction after the American Civil War. Going back to the framing of the new nation by the likes of Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and, especially, James Madison, Suri argues that the Madisonian ideal of “the sacred union of nation and state,” merging diverse constituencies into “a single coherent people,” with a “single, united, and effective state,” traveled first westward as American settlers conquered the North American continent and, later, abroad, as the increasingly powerful United States of America became more willing to use its power and influence to create and maintain a “society of states” in the international arena (29). Both of these tendencies have created significant contradictions and problems, as Suri admits. The failure to deal with the issue of slavery at the founding moment of the sacred union sowed the seeds of the Civil War, and American desires to impose their vision on others have regularly failed—often violently and catastrophically. Still, Suri makes a convincing argument that the central tenets of United States nation-building were forged in America’s own revolutionary aftermath, a usable past that was immediately put to work in the service of spreading the American creed.

Suri’s treatment of Reconstruction is equally engrossing, illustrating the most salient points of his argument and raising some important lingering questions. His description of the confederate South as an occupied, conquered, “failed state” serves as a useful reminder that Reconstruction was indeed a foreign occupation, enforced by military force and political power, that sought to recreate, reintegrate, and reconstruct, “a single American people in a unified nation” (61). Suri again makes a strong case for continuity in the history of U.S. nation-building, showing how Reconstruction created a model for future occupations and served as a formative experience for a generation of potential leaders who would, in the years to come, attempt to translate the experience into a variety of nation-building efforts around the world. Especially useful in this and other chapters is Suri’s discussion of fostering the growth of public schools. Examining efforts by the Freedmen’s Bureau, Suri argues that the establishment of schools for recently emancipated slaves marked an important turn back toward the idea of a single, unified people integrated into a single, unified state. The use of education as an incubator for citizenship would be replicated in future nation-building efforts abroad.

The obvious sticking point in these first two case studies is that both the new nation and the newly reunited nation were based largely on exclusion. While Suri consistently acknowledges the limits of inclusion in nation-building efforts, his tendency is to emphasize the virtues of partial consensus over the perils of unresolved conflict. For instance, in describing the new institutions created by the U.S. constitution, he notes that “most residents of North America were, of course, excluded from Madison’s and Hamilton’s definitions of the people and the nation,” but argues that such points, while important “often receive too much emphasis in a twenty-first century context that embraces, at least rhetorically, strong presumptions about inclusiveness” (18). As for the American South, Suri similarly acknowledges the unfinished work of Reconstruction, as “racist Southern leaders” worked to stem the tide of equality for black Americans, which, while regrettable, should not detract from the many positive nation-building efforts of the period (81).

Suri is careful never to fall into the trap of simplifying his examples into clear examples of successes and failures. Nation-building, he rightfully argues, is always messy and nearly always ambivalent. Given the centrality of precisely these questions of inclusion and abandonment to future nation-building adventures, however, one wishes he had been less quick to dismiss them. Take, for example, the questions of sectarianism that are so central to efforts, by the United States, and by the Shi’a, Sunni, and Kurds themselves, to forge a single, united Iraq. Surely the mixed legacies of excluding some groups at the expense of other in early American nation-building have something to teach us about similar contemporary efforts. What might the failure to deal with slavery and sectionalism, and the eventual Civil War that resolved those issues, have to teach U.S. policymakers about the difficulties in forging a power-sharing agreement in the Iraqi government? What lessons should be gleaned from the tradeoff made for the abandonment of African-Americans and the rise of white terror groups at the end of Reconstruction, when the U.S. now confronts the possibility of handing Afghanistan back over the Taliban? (After all, racist Southern leaders were hardly the only ones to blame for abandoning reconstruction.) Such considerations are not tangential to the history of American nation-building; indeed they are central, and the difficult lessons to be learned from them deserve more attention than Suri provides.

The chapters that follow come back to examples that are more familiar to historians of foreign relations: the Philippines, Germany after World War Two, Vietnam, and Afghanistan. Even on this more predictable terrain, however, Suri manages both to find interesting angles and instructive lessons. In the Philippines, he follows closely the administration of the U.S. occupation by William Howard Taft, drawing out lessons about the integration of diverse groups through the development of political parties modeled on urban American politics, and once again showing the importance of mass, public education which, Suri argues, while far from a panacea, provided the foundation for promoting national unity. As with other cases, Suri seems intent on emphasizing the positive over the negative (in this case describing precious little of the violent counter-insurgency waged by the U.S. against Philippine rebels), but he also, to his credit, refuses to pass blanket judgments on the lengthy effort, calling it “frustratingly incomplete,” rather than simply an outright success or failure (123). The chapter on West Germany will likely not surprise

many historians in either its content or verdict, but nevertheless offers a cogent analysis on why this effort largely succeeded. In this case, Suri shows, Americans (most notably former President Herbert Hoover) “worked from the ground up, closely partnering with local actors,” and those partnerships matched “local needs with global interests.” (162) In describing the choices, compromises, programs, and institutions that helped make those partnerships effective (particularly the billions in aid from the Marshall Plan), Suri reinforces several key points from his introductory chapter about the importance of promoting, and integrating a ‘society of states’ in the international arena.

The chapter on Vietnam is arguably the most unexpected in its approach. Eschewing almost all discussion on actual U.S. nation-building efforts in Southeast Asia, Suri focuses instead largely on previous, missed opportunities at and just after the end of World War Two. In a chapter that runs for forty-five pages, the first thirty-four focus on the spring and summer of 1945 alone. Although Suri makes a persuasive case that the only local actors capable of effectively operating as nation-builders were the Viet Minh (a partnership that quickly became untenable in the rigid ideological atmosphere of the early Cold War), it would have been interesting to learn more of Suri’s thoughts on specific programs and institutions developed with American input during the 1950s and 60s. Even if the overall effort was doomed to failure given the poor leadership and lack of support for American partners in South Vietnam, were there economic, agricultural, or educational programs that could otherwise have been effective?

The concluding chapter on Afghanistan also connects well with the larger themes of the book. In it Suri makes the argument that nation-building appears to be failing there because the U.S., as in Vietnam, has been unable to find effective local partners with broad popular support and, unlike in Germany, has been unable (or unwilling) to demonstrate to the Afghan people that it is committed to a long-term partnership, particularly after taking its focus away for the misguided war in Iraq. Conspicuously absent in these last two chapters is any discussion of schools as a tool for nation-building. Given the central, and insightful role they play in earlier chapters, the often-repeated arguments about “sending Afghan girls to schools” as a virtue of the American occupation of Afghanistan, and the resistance to such efforts by local groups such as the Taliban, I found myself wanting to hear more about educational institutions in these final chapters.

Among the many strengths of this book, Suri makes a convincing argument that nation-building is ultimately about effective leadership. Tracing the careers and actions of figures such as Taft, Hoover, General Otis Howard, and, perhaps more controversially, General David Petraeus, Suri demonstrates that such “transitional diplomats,” can be effective leaders in nation-building efforts, particularly when they are flexible, experimental, and, above all, humble. “This might be the most important historical insight,” Suri writes in his conclusion: “Americans credit themselves with accomplishing great deeds, but their successes have come when they have avoided dominance and intimidation.” Nation-building, he concludes “requires the humility of partnerships, not the arrogance of bullying” (273).

All of these potentially useful lessons, however, bring us back to the disappointing reality of

contemporary American politics. Given how difficult it has been over the past several years for political leaders in Washington to forge effective policymaking partnerships among themselves, what is the likelihood of developing such relationships in Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya, or Syria? Given the seeming inability of American policymakers to put country above party in domestic political debates, what is the likelihood of finding a Hoover or a Taft to lead such efforts abroad? As with so many things in American politics today, the signs are not good. Can a nation whose own economic and political house is in such disarray continue to be an effective model, or an effective partner, for new and developing states and governments?

Suri's book demonstrates that nation-building successes, big and small, are indeed possible, but that Americans remain "in search of creative nation-builders at home and abroad" (283). For all of its historical lessons, then, the most important policy implications raised by this book seem to me less about what guidelines to follow in future nation-building efforts than how to identify, educate, and train future nation-builders. Given his new position as the Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Global Leadership, History, and Public Policy at the University of Texas, I suspect Professor Suri has some thoughts on these matters. I thus conclude with my own hope that a sequel is soon forthcoming, in which he reveals a new doctrine of creative nation-building education for the twenty-first century.

Note: The views presented here are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State or the United States Government.

As regular readers of H-Diplo and its roundtables and attendees and participants at Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) annual meetings know, the issues of 'Empire,' 'Imperialism,' and 'American Exceptionalism' have been debated repeatedly by historians of American foreign relations over the past four decades. In the last five years alone, roundtables featuring some of our profession's leading scholars have reviewed books that examine the extent to which empire has defined and still defines American foreign policy by Robert Kagan, Walter Hixson, David Hendrickson, Andrew Bacevich, William O. Walker III, Lloyd Gardner, and Philip S. Golub, just to name a few. (see <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/>) Numerous panels at SHAFR conferences have also examined this question.

Jeremi Suri has now joined the fray with his provocative new monograph, *Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama*, and from the title alone, the reader can divine that Suri offers a much more benign, and indeed for the most part, complimentary, version of the history of American foreign policy over the last two hundred years that contrasts sharply with the theses of many of the scholars noted above.¹ Suri argues that "American exceptionalism became the normal expectation for citizens" (p. 2) and that George Washington's original, "radical" call for blending diverse societies, or "nations," into a coherent whole has resonated with his successors.² American leaders pushed for the replication of this model because they believed that this would best protect the nation's safety from internal and external enemies.

Suri analyzes six nation-building 'projects' that American leaders have embraced over the past two centuries. The Founding of the United States, post-Civil War Reconstruction, and overseas interventions in the Philippines, Germany, Vietnam, and Afghanistan and Iraq, he contends, "created the memories, the precedents, and the patterns that shaped policy in other places." (6) Indeed, he argues that these case studies "connect our present to our past" and can guide future policymakers when they contemplate overseas intervention. (7)

While the case studies are very interesting, and certain to provoke as much controversy as his overall thesis, some are more persuasive than others. His first chapter on the Founders, their emphasis on the building of nation-states based on popular sovereignty, and their

¹ For recent sharper, more critical views of American foreign relations that emphasizes the belligerence of American expansion, see Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008) and William O. Walker III, *National Security and Core Values in American History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

² Robert Kagan also argues that the traditional interpretation of Washington's Farewell Address as an endorsement of "isolationism" is incorrect. See his *Dangerous Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

influence on all their successors, is very compelling, especially because it is based on the seminal works on the subject by Edmund Morgan, Gordon Wood, and others.³ In particular, Suri cites the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose arguments about establishing “perpetual peace” through the creation of republican governments who would cooperate in the international arena influenced Thomas Jefferson. (30) Jefferson believed that governments with like-minded interests would obviate the need for war. Suri contends that this form of nation-building is best called “realistic idealism,” (32) because exporting American ideals abroad had the added blessing of spreading liberal republicanism, or democracy, worldwide.

At the same time, Suri also notes that since nation-building on the American model is so difficult and time-consuming, American leaders often jettisoned the ideals of the Revolution by backing authoritarian strongmen who theoretically could provide stability in troubled countries or regions. These leaders, including numerous dictators in Latin America and the Middle East, not only repressed their own people but also were often corrupt, inefficient, and overthrown by even more authoritarian or military leaders, thus making a mockery of American’s hope for stability. Nevertheless, Suri does point out that American leaders sincerely tried to influence, or institute, change in these governments.

However, readers who expect either an analysis of the negative aspects of American continental expansion, such as the Indian wars and the fact that the various Compromises, which were enacted in order to preserve the union allowed slavery to expand (the ultimate slap in the face to the idea of popular sovereignty), or even the situating of this behavior in the larger context of America’s imperfect maturation, will be disappointed to say the least.

Chapter two, which examines Reconstruction after the Civil War, is even more problematic. While I admire Suri’s analysis of the Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission and the Freedmen’s Bureau and his contention that these bodies helped implement “the most intensive and aggressive nation-building endeavor of the nineteenth century” in the post-war South, (p. 48) his analysis is at best incomplete. While the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution theoretically gave blacks equal rights, Reconstruction epitomizes the North’s failure to stay the course and actually proves Suri’s point that Americans often do not like to finish the messy work of nation-building. Suri argues that these Amendments, the Freedmen’s Bureau’s introduction of innovative educational strategies to the newly-freed blacks, and the federal government’s new role in ensuring that these changes were actually implemented helped created a more perfect union and “a single multiracial American people.” (79) In *relative* terms, which Suri uses by comparing the new but brief atmosphere to that of the antebellum South, this might be true. And yet, not only did the federal government essentially abandon Reconstruction in 1877, but the Supreme Court’s 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision instituted ‘separate but equal’ educational facilities on a national basis for nearly 70 years. The Ku Klux Klan, lynchings, the establishment of the White

³ See Edmund Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988) and Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

Citizen Councils, and the stark separation of the races that many southerners embraced for decades do not appear at all in Suri's analysis.

Chapter three, an analysis of the American occupation of the Philippines after the war of 1898, will certainly raise some eyebrows, as Suri argues--convincingly, I may add--that the United States remained ambivalent about becoming an 'empire' after it defeated Spain. Not only did a substantial anti-war group exist, but even after McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt decided to build a new nation in the Philippines, Suri demonstrates that while American policymakers shared some of the traditional prejudices about "brown peoples," they expended an enormous amount of time and money in sincerely trying to rid its "colony" of its imperial past.⁴ (94-95) Suri also correctly points out that for all of Roosevelt's bluster about the United States becoming a world power, the American military presence in Asia remained small--particularly compared to the British and other European imperialists. Indeed, many Americans lamented the fact that on the eve of both World Wars, the U.S. military was woefully unprepared to effectively fight in either the Asian or European theaters. This hardly sounds like an "imperialist" nation bent on expansion.

Suri's examination of McKinley's Philippines Commission, led by William Howard Taft, is especially convincing. Taft's campaign to create a new, independent, Philippine state through education, improved health, and the creation of civil society mirrored the attempts at nation-building in the Reconstruction South. The fact that the administration removed General Arthur MacArthur, the "virtual dictator" of the colony, from his post, Suri contends, demonstrates that Taft's far more benign and progressive vision won the day. (95-97)

In a similar vein, Chapter four, which examines the American reconstruction of West Germany after World War II, is also persuasive. Suri examines former President Herbert Hoover's rebuilding efforts, as well as the Marshall Plan, and illustrates how the United States, as in the Philippines, spent billions of dollars and millions of hours rebuilding the nation it had just helped defeat. Unlike America's wartime allies, in particular the Soviet Union and many French policymakers, Washington adopted a policy of "transatlantic cooperation" and worked with Germans to establish a new nation. (138) Was American self-interest involved? Of course: a new Germany integrated into a larger Western European entity would create stability, prevent communism from expanding westward, provide new markets for American goods, and help the Europeans rebuild their war-shattered societies. A vital, independent and sovereign West Germany would also aid the United States in its propaganda war with the Soviet Union, especially when one could look across the border to East Germany and see how the communist side lagged.

Those who consider the division of Germany to have exacerbated the early cold war will, naturally, not be pleased with this analysis. And, to be fair, Suri fails to consider the possibility that Western support for a West German state may have contributed to the Soviet Union's insecurity over the next four decades. Nevertheless, the fact that this

⁴ See, for example, Paul Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

experiment in nation-building succeeded beyond anyone's expectations buttresses Suri's thesis.

Chapter five, an analysis of the America's failed intervention in South Vietnam, should not cause any controversy given that it is mainly based on the most recent secondary scholarship. Ever since Neil Sheehan described how the Vietnamese communists led by Ho Chi Minh earned the trust and support of much of the populace, scholars have noted that the United States failed to recognize that its commitment to anti-communism in Indochina became conflated with neo-colonialism.⁵ Suri notes that U.S. policymakers failed to recognize that American attempts at nation-building "appeared counterrevolutionary to many Vietnamese." (195) Furthermore, Washington's support of the unpopular, Catholic, and increasingly authoritarian Ngo Dinh Diem created a credibility gap in Vietnam long before that phrase came to symbolize the American people's discontent with the war.

Suri's last case study is an examination of America's response to the 9/11 terrorist attack, the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq by George W. Bush, and Barack Obama's strategy since he became president in 2009. The fear and shock of the attacks, Suri argues, led the Bush administration to not only counter-attack but also, similar to previous administrations, to attempt to "change a corrupted world" by establishing a new Afghanistan based on the nation-state model. (220) In particular, Suri compares Bush's response to those of Woodrow Wilson and FDR, who respectively advocated "total war" against Germany and, later, against both Germany and Japan to remake the world order. (222) These are apt analogies, and yet it is surprising that Suri did *not* include Wilson's attempt to 'make the world safe for democracy' as one of his case studies about nation-building or incorporate Roosevelt's adoption of 'unconditional warfare' after both Pearl Harbor and Hitler's declaration of war against the United States into his case study about the postwar reconstruction of Germany.

In any event, Suri argues that after the rapid defeat of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, the administration's attempt to foster a spirit of cooperation among the many rival groups of Afghani political leaders during the Bonn Conference of late 2001 initially succeeded. But the United States, in its zeal (I would argued justifiable) to not be perceived as an occupying force, turned over the responsibilities of nation-building too quickly to its allies in Afghanistan. A drawdown of troops in favor of an Afghan security force that only existed on paper encouraged corruption and allowed the Taliban to return. The United States should have implemented a Marshall Plan for Afghanistan and truly rebuilt the country, but Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld successfully argued that Washington should leave

⁵ Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (Vintage Books, 1988). Other recent books that examine Ho's successful cultivation of the Vietnamese people include Robert K. Brigham, *Guerilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

only a 'light footprint' in Afghanistan and let the locals do the work. This abandonment of America's nation-building traditions prevented success in Afghanistan.

The situation in Iraq, Suri argues, proved to be the reverse of the Afghan scenario. The United States initially invaded, occupied, and mistakenly destroyed the existing institutions that would have helped the administration build a new nation. However, General David Petraeus's "surge" strategy was a return to more traditional American nation-building." (p. 253) The surge required that American soldiers and other personnel work closely with Iraqis and develop the type of institutions and relationships that had been established in American South, the Philippines, and West Germany.

Suri concludes with an outline for how future American nation-building should occur. He offers what he calls the "5 Ps of nation-building," or partners, process, problem-solving, purpose, and people, that the United States will need to develop to ensure any kind of success in future endeavors. Suri contends that despite some failures, the American concept of nation-building remains important and, more importantly, worthy of continuing, as long as the United States remains committed to seeing these new projects through. This requires, needless to say, patience and resolve that hopefully our present and future leaders will demonstrate in the years ahead.

Even as scholars, we are all tied to labels. When I was in graduate school, professors often presented historiographical debates as “traditionalists” versus “revisionists” (and “post-revisionists”). Debates between “cultural history,” “social history,” and “international history” were also common. Now it seems that the historical profession has finally moved beyond these labels, but I am sad to find that we have not abandoned some of the other old political signposts. We seem insistent on placing people in “conservative” and “radical” categories. Even more troubling, we remain determined to identify alleged “triumphalism” among scholars who dare to see some merit in the policy aims of state leaders, including a few Republicans.

I have come to the conclusion that these labels (and others frequently deployed by historians) are diversions at best, misrepresentations at worst. It is, of course, easier to categorize than to think, easier to describe simply than to read carefully. For this reason, I prohibit labels of this kind from my graduate seminars and the dissertations that I supervise. I want my students to think across artificial boundaries. I want them to appreciate different points of view. I want them to find their own scholarly voice between the categories that often divide their predecessors. These are the goals that animate my own research. In interrogating big and complex historical questions, I try to find answers that are coherent, ecumenical, and synthetic of different viewpoints. Despite the pressures around us, a strong analytical thesis need not be unidimensional in its methodology or its politics.

The commentators in this H-Diplo forum clearly appreciate all of these points. I am grateful to them. They are practitioners of complex and thoughtful scholarly research. They have generously devoted their time to reading my most recent book, and they have written insightful, fair, and wide-ranging critiques. They generally avoid labels and they collectively capture the content of my key contentions.

My book argues that for more than two centuries American citizens have pursued a consistent global vision that makes nation-states the main hinges for political order. This vision has rejected traditional forms of empire, but it has simultaneously demanded credible sources of authority in place of international anarchy. The American pursuit of nation-states has, I argue, encouraged efforts to overthrow “degenerate” regimes, replacing them with governments that can claim to serve their people. Americans envision new nation-states – including democracies and popular dictatorships – as participants in a peaceful international system of similar states.

American nation-building, in this sense, is not about empire or freedom. It is not about imposition or democracy. American nation-building is a project of political ordering designed, in realistic and idealist terms, to empower people to make their own choices in ways that will serve them and the United States at the same time. American nation-building is the presumption that institutional homogeneity across societies can provide space, security, and sovereignty for culturally heterogeneous groups.

In practice, this vision has meant that American power has pursued the construction of political institutions that create unified states, with single representative governments, clearly defined boundaries, and encompassing definitions of unitary “peoples.” My book analyses how this impulse shaped the formation of the United States and the initial Westward expansion, Southern Reconstruction after the Civil War, the occupation of the Philippines, the reconstruction of Western Germany, the extended conflict in Vietnam, and the recent war in Afghanistan. In each of these cases, I argue that the American nation-building vision has influenced policy since it has produced very mixed results. Political transformation occurred in each context, but with results that departed from expectations.

That is the final point of my book: nation-building plays a powerful role in American thinking, but it has mixed effects, even in the best of circumstances. My book does not advocate or reject nation-building. It only predicts that Americans will try it again, soon. My book lays out some basic policy recommendations to prepare for the next nation-building case, and perhaps to minimize some of America’s own worst tendencies. My plea is for self-restraint as much as anything else.

The reviewers for this forum accurately assess these arguments, and I think they fairly point to the strengths and weaknesses of the book. Among many excellent observations, they raise three main critiques that I would like to address.

First, Jerald Combs questions how central nation-building has really been to American policy-making. He correctly reminds readers: “The United States appropriates only a pittance for foreign aid and even that is controversial. The United States regularly relies on the stability provided by foreign dictators against Communists, Islamic fundamentalists, or others who might disrupt U.S. relations with other nations.” Christopher Fettweis makes the point that all great powers seek to replicate their institutions abroad. For him, there is nothing unique or especially significant in American nation-building. Reflecting on the U.S. occupation of the Philippines in particular, Lewis Gould sees more “ad hoc” decision-making than visionary planning.

Many complex and contradictory motives drive American foreign policy. We have a rich historical literature that examines the origins of expansion in concerns about security, economics, culture, race, and gender, among other topics. My focus on nation-building does not negate the importance of these other forces. Instead, my book argues that these forces have operated within an American imagining that envisions a world of states, not empires; powerful representative regimes, not truly unregulated markets. This is the “natural order” that policy-makers from Washington to Obama have sought to encourage in varying degrees. They have consistently under-invested in tools for imperial management (colonial offices, trained area experts, and postwar planning) and they have also under-invested in seeds for unbounded local autonomy (foreign aid, grass-roots organization, and political experimentation). Americans have focused on defeating disorderly groups and empowering figures who claim to bring diverse people together within functioning state institutions. This is why I argue in my book that U.S. policy frequently encourages support for dictators who look to Americans like nation-builders – promising unity, development,

and self-rule. Nation-building is the imagined order of self-governing, peaceful, and prosperous societies that has served as a glue for the various other interests motivating American leaders.

Second, the commentators emphasize the historic brutality of nation-building and its frequent failures. Christopher Tudda points to the American Indian wars and the enforcement of slavery within the United States. He also argues that the resilience of Jim Crow after Southern Reconstruction shows how little was accomplished, even from one of the bloodiest modern nation-building wars. Edwin Martini echoes this point eloquently, emphasizing the enduring presence of sectarianism in many places where Americans pursued nation-building projects. Martini also reminds readers of the profound American failures in Vietnam, despite the decades of blood and treasure expended on the Southeast Asian landscape. Fettweis builds on these insights to argue that a rigorous cost-benefit analysis should lead policy-makers and scholars to reject nation-building. Jerald Combs agrees with this sensible assessment.

I see a lot of merit in these comments. Nation-building is almost always a violent process with many victims. The victims often outnumber the beneficiaries. Even the most successful examples of nation-building, including postwar Germany, involve brutality and suffering. My book makes all of these points and perhaps they deserve even more emphasis than I have given them. I do believe, however, that nation-building is about much more. It involves supporting new sources of order, collective identity, and opportunity, as I describe for all of the cases in my book. Nation-building creates hope and possibility. Observers must weigh costs and benefits in each case, as Fettweis wisely argues, but this weighing always involves *both* costs and benefits. Sometimes the benefits really are significant – including the end of slavery in the United States, the creation of civilian administration in the Philippines, democracy in Western Germany, and a post-Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

This argument brings me to the final major theme raised by the reviewers. Writing in the aftermath of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the recent global debt crisis, the commentators are uniformly pessimistic about the future of nation-building in American foreign policy. Martini asks how the United States can prepare for future activities within the “disappointing reality of contemporary American politics.” Gould goes a step further, writing that American foreign policy “is being eclipsed because of the deterioration of any kind of democratic consensus.” Fettweis closes his comments with the claim that nation-building is “illusory” in our contemporary world.

I recognize the reasons for this pessimism, but I remain cautiously optimistic. My book is an effort to blend historical and policy analysis in order to see beyond our immediate political environment. Nation-building has a long history in the United States and, for this reason, it is unlikely to disappear as an engine of American action. Time and again leaders have faced pressures to turn away from this tradition, but they have returned to it in moments of geopolitical crisis, as was the case after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. The same dynamic is likely to recur in the near future.

Among other things, Americans are a nation-building people. If they reflect on this history, Americans have the opportunity to be better prepared when their soldiers once again find themselves occupying a far-away country that they barely understand, but still hope to reconstruct. Although the United States might prefer to stand apart from the difficult questions of nation-building, these questions will continue to present challenges and opportunities that American leaders will surely seize. My book hopes to encourage a little caution, a little patience, and a little wisdom too. I thank the commentators in this forum for sharing their wisdom with me and all of our readers.

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