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Facing the Facts: The Failure of Nation Assistance

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Counterinsurgency attracted renewed interest in the early 1980s as part of a broader effort to reverse the deterioration of our strategic position. Although the strategic situation was new, the counterinsurgency policy and strategy we followed was not. In fact, they were identical to those that formed the backdrop to our initial involvement in Vietnam. Terms such as “nation-building” connoted in the early 1980s what they had 20 years before: underdevelopment causes conflict and this cause must be treated or the counterinsurgency effort will not succeed. Now termed “nation assistance,” this idea persists as an integral part of our doctrine for counterinsurgency and has even become, through mistaking a part for the whole, integral to our general doctrine for low-intensity conflict (or “operations other than war,” the term now used in joint and Army doctrine).¹ This is a misfortune. However designated, this idea is a bad one, and should be expunged from policy, doctrine, and practice. To understand why, we must go back to the moment before it became an article of faith, when its assumptions were still visible.

On 28 June 1961, W. W. Rostow stood before the graduating class of the Army Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg. Then Deputy Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, he had come to explain what the new Administration was going to do about guerrilla warfare in the underdeveloped areas. While still a Senator, President Kennedy had publicly raised the issue of how the United States should respond to the revolutions flaring up amid the debris of empires destroyed in the aftermath of World War II. It had been a theme of his presidential campaign and one of the first national security issues he turned to upon entering office. For his part, Rostow had published in 1960 *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, which discussed these revolutions in the context of economic history, explained their connection to development and modernization, and suggested a policy for dealing with them. In the graduation address, Rostow summarized his book’s argument and described the new Administration’s policy.²

Rostow reminded his audience in four words why the Kennedy Administration took guerrilla warfare seriously: Cuba, Congo, Laos, and Vietnam. In each of these cases, Rostow argued, the international communist movement had exploited through guerrilla warfare and other means "the inherent instabilities of the underdeveloped areas," breaching Cold War truce lines. According to Rostow, these four examples could not be understood solely by reference to communist organization or willingness to use force and terror, although these were important. True understanding of these revolutionary wars required understanding "the great revolutionary process" of modernization that underlay them, for "the guerrilla warfare problem . . . is a product of that revolutionary process."

According to Rostow's analysis, modernization occurred when economic growth and technological development became self-sustaining. This self-sustaining growth transformed traditional society, eventually producing a society marked by high levels of mass consumption. North America and Europe were examples of such societies, to be joined soon, Rostow thought, by other societies in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. This "revolution of modernization," according to Rostow, was deeply disturbing to those societies undergoing it. "The introduction of modern technology brings about not merely new methods of production but a new style of family life, new links between the villages and the cities, the beginnings of national politics, and a new relationship to the world outside." These profound changes allowed men and women to realize that "new possibilities are open to them" and encouraged them to "express old resentments and new hopes." It was this fluid, transitional state that communists sought to exploit. "They are the scavengers of the modernization process," hoping to persuade "hesitant men faced by great transitional problems that the communist model should be adopted" as the best way to handle these problems, "even at the cost of surrendering human liberty."

For Rostow, the communist model represented not the natural result of economic growth but its perversion. Economic growth and technological development should increase freedom and individual autonomy, he argued, not limit them as the communist model did. Communism was deformed development, or, as Rostow put it, "communism is best understood as a disease of the transition to modernization." This disease affected not only

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transitional societies but the developed world as well. If not checked, the communist disease would eventually make the world unsafe for democracy. "We are struggling," Rostow told the graduates, "to maintain an environment on the world scene which will permit our open society to survive and flourish."

How was the United States to carry on this struggle? How was it to counter the disease of communism that ultimately threatened America's own well-being? Rostow answered simply: "Modern societies must be built, and we are prepared to help build them." Fighting the guerrillas, while necessary, was not sufficient. The United States had to address the whole process of modernization, in all its economic, political, and social aspects, in order to help steer it toward its goal of freedom and individual autonomy. This required "aiding the long-run development of those nations which are serious about modernizing their economy and their social life," as well as a willingness "to seek out and engage the ultimate source of the aggression" that such nations confronted. It required "programs of village development, communications, and indoctrination," and soldiers prepared "to work with understanding . . . in the whole creative process of modernization." The answer was to build modern, prosperous, democratic nations out of traditional materials.

Nation-building thus became the guiding principle of the Kennedy Administration's anti-guerrilla policy. This response was codified in National Security Action Memorandum 182 (24 August 1962), "U.S. Overseas Internal Defense Policy," which remained in effect until the early 1970s.³ These ideas and this policy were resuscitated in the early 1980s as another administration confronted the guerrilla warfare problem.

The continuing influence of these ideas is unfortunate because their endurance is out of all proportion to their validity. In the years since Rostow spoke at the Special Warfare School, a host of problems has emerged with the notion of modernization and its use as a framework for understanding counterinsurgency and low-intensity conflict. For example, the goals of modernization collide among themselves in ways that frustrate our desire to help build modern, democratic, prosperous nations. Democratization and economic liberalization are not necessarily compatible, as the experience of various African and former Warsaw Pact countries indicates. To an important degree, therefore, modernization is a choice between democracy and prosperity. But both poorer democratic and wealthier authoritarian states could suffer from the resentment and frustrated hopes that Rostow argued led to conflict. This is particularly true in the case of prospering countries, since economic growth initially increases inequity.⁴ Thus, in promoting modernization through nation assistance, we may achieve results the opposite of those we intend as a consequence not of failed programs but of the very nature of modernization.

Even if the goals of modernization do not conflict in a particular instance, modernization remains a problematic basis for dealing with low-

intensity conflict. Modernization theory assumes that the logic of economic development produces modern, democratic, prosperous nations. Indeed, we seem often to have assumed that history would replicate around the world versions of the United States. This assumption is unfounded or rather founded on a false universalism. Our ideal of a "wealthy, equitable, democratic, stable, and autonomous" society, like the notion of development itself, is not indigenous to most of the world, which may conceive of the good society as one that is "simple, austere, hierarchical, authoritarian, disciplined, and martial." Our efforts to build a nation, a good society as we conceive it, may founder because our image of the good society "may not constitute a meaningful model or reference" for those we are assisting.⁵

This is one reason why we have had such difficulty with various "friends" in our nation-building or assistance efforts. We do not speak the same language. Our principles, our notions of what a good society is, are not necessarily in agreement with theirs. This is not a problem we can solve by being more culturally aware. Rather, true cultural awareness would reveal these differences and give us some sense of how resistant to change they are. In fact, their persistence underlies one of the greatest weaknesses of our nation-building policies. They tend to assume that the leaders in what we hope are developing countries share our image of a good society and our commitment to bringing it about. That they often do not, and that the reforms we advocate often threaten their or their families' interests, explains why they resist our efforts.⁶ In Vietnam, faced with this resistance, we assumed more and more of the burden ourselves, contradicting one of Rostow's cardinal rules: "The primary responsibility for dealing with guerilla warfare . . . cannot be American."

The deficiencies of nation assistance as a policy for dealing with low-intensity conflict would not be overcome even if the goals of modernization were compatible or we found true friends overseas who shared our image of the good society and were willing to work with us to realize it. The policy of nation assistance has had from the beginning too narrow a view of why men are willing to fight and die. It has argued that conflict results from "root causes," as they are often called, and has largely understood these causes to be economic. Rostow admitted in *The Stages of Economic Growth* that "the behavior of societies is not uniquely determined by economic considerations," and his analysis took due account of political, cultural, and social factors. But, as befitted an economic historian, his focus was economic. After all, modernization in his view resulted from the interplay of economic growth and technology, and it was amid the problems of modernization that the United States and the Soviet Union would compete. Indeed, competition with the Soviet Union probably explains much of the original economic emphasis of nation assistance. Of the five issues that led Rostow to write *The Stages of Economic Growth*, which he intended as a replacement for the Communist

Manifesto, four dealt with US-Soviet competition.⁷ This competition, as Rostow told the graduates, turned on the Soviet and Chinese claim that communism and central planning were the best road to economic progress. In a peculiar sort of mirror imaging, as Rostow's analysis became policy, we adopted the view of our enemy, placing disproportionate emphasis on economic considerations. This overemphasis, present in virtually all subsequent discussions of nation assistance, was encouraged by the general climate in which academics discussed development. All post-World War II theories of development "identified the preeminent evil as economic."⁸

Having witnessed the growth of Islamic fundamentalism and the resurgence of ethnic conflict in the world, we should understand now that economics, although a possible cause of discontent, is not a sufficient, necessary, or often even good explanation of why men are willing to fight and die. Men are willing to suffer economic loss and risk their lives for the sake of ethnic autonomy or their god. In neither of these cases has anyone been able to find a necessary connection between this willingness to sacrifice and a particular class or economic interest or condition. Such conflict is not only non-economic in character, it lacks any connection to the process of modernization. On the contrary, it is often caused not by exploiting modernization but by consciously opposing it. Some religious or ethnic groups, for example, resist nation-building because it means the destruction of their way of life.⁹ Thus, nation assistance, which seeks to encourage and direct modernization, cannot mitigate such conflict. It can only make it worse, as happened in Iran.

There are situations where economic problems appear to be most important in understanding why conflict occurs. El Salvador, Sendero Luminoso's rise in Peru, or some of the conflict in the Philippines might be cited as examples. But in these cases and others, efforts to pin down the relation of various economic conditions to various kinds or degrees of conflict have not produced any clear or consistent rules that would allow a nation-builder to design a program of action with confidence that it would succeed.¹⁰ Poverty may provoke some to fight but so may abundance, if only to overcome the boredom of wealth and safety, as appears to have been the case with certain middle-class Western European terrorists. Income inequality is a plausible but not inevitable cause of conflict. Peasants, like all people, always have grievances but do not always become rebels. There is no reason to believe, therefore, that improving socioeconomic conditions will necessarily decrease or mitigate conflict.

Nation assistance, then, far from being a universally valid technique for preventing low-intensity conflict by treating its supposed root causes, is instead a waste of time and resources. It pursues conflicting goals, falsely assumes we share these conflicting goals with "friends" in underdeveloped countries, rests on a simplistic view of human motivation, and misunderstands

the causes of conflict. In seeking to treat the supposed roots of conflict, therefore, we are likely to achieve nothing and may even harm ourselves and those we seek to help.

Expunging nation assistance from low-intensity conflict doctrine will not only allow us to deal with low-intensity conflict more effectively by removing a distraction, it will also make doctrine more consistent. As it now stands, doctrine discusses nation assistance as if it were applicable to low-intensity conflict generally. However, in discussing all the specific cases of low-intensity conflict except counterinsurgency (combatting terrorism, peacekeeping, and peacetime contingency operations), doctrine does not mention nation assistance or the supposed socioeconomic roots of conflict.¹¹ It ignores these ideas because they are in fact as irrelevant for these kinds of conflict as they are misleading for counterinsurgency.

But what about counterinsurgency? If we do not try to build nations, what can we do? We might take a hint from contemporary analysts of revolutionary violence. They have come increasingly to the conclusion that "exactly who becomes revolutionary, and when, is a preeminently *political* question."¹² Since repression can stifle revolution and broadly based political participation removes the need for it, political structures are crucial in determining the rise and outcome of conflict. Thus if a government wishes to decrease its repressiveness and increase participation in the governing process, we may be able to assist. For example, we may assist by giving technical electoral advice or by supporting public works projects and psychological operations intended, again, not to remove the causes of conflict but to build goodwill toward the government and encourage participation during the difficult transition toward more representative government. We may also be able to assist by supporting internal security.

This approach is not a panacea, nor is it free of problems and pitfalls. We should not assume, for example, that increased participation is identical to free and regular elections. Token gestures toward participation can amount to nothing more than cynical efforts to build goodwill domestically and abroad. Nor should we assume that various forms of participation, or even elections, will be sufficient to deal with ethnic and religious problems. If manageable at all, these may require quite complex measures, including some unacceptable to one group or another (for example, autonomy or preferential treatment).¹³ This brings us to the critical point. In the absence of a genuine commitment on both sides to resolve problems by other than violent means, we will be faced with a choice among assisting suppression, supporting revolution, or accepting stalemate. Depending on circumstances, one of these might be the right choice. Where none is, we may at least console ourselves with the thought that now, with the end of the global threat posed by the Soviet Union, when our advice is not heeded, we have no reason to insist on giving it.

However problematic, this approach to counterinsurgency may occasionally allow us to achieve our objectives. This is more than can be said for efforts based on the hope of building nations.

NOTES

1. For the continuing influence of nation-building or nation-assistance ideas, see Joint Pub 3-07 (Proposed Final Pub), "Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Short of War," November 1992, p. I-10-11, II-1-3, 16, 25, 27, B-3; Joint Pub 3-07.1 (Final Pub), "JTTP for Foreign Internal Defense," March 1993, pp. C-1-2; Joint Pub 3-57 (Test Pub), "Doctrine for Joint Civil Affairs," October 1991, pp. II-9-10; FM 100-20, "Military Operations in Low-Intensity Conflict," December 1990, p. 1-2; "Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America" (Washington, 1984), pp. 22-25; Jerome W. Klingaman, "Policy and Strategy Foundations for Low-Intensity Conflict," CADRE Paper, Airpower Research Institute, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, #AU-ARI-CP-86-2, September 1986, p. 6; Sam C. Sarkesian, "Designing U.S. Forces and Security Assistance for a Low-Intensity Conflict Environment," in Robert L. Pfaltzgraff and Richard H. Schultz, Jr., eds. *U.S. Defense Policy in an Era of Constrained Resources* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1990), p. 227; Terry L. Rice, "Forging Security Through Peace," *Military Review*, 72 (April 1992), 15-16; A. J. Bacevich, et al., *American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1988), p. 45; Steven R. David, "Why the Third World Still Matters," *International Security*, 17 (Winter 1992/93), 158. For a recent collection of essays that, with one exception, support nation assistance, see John W. De Pauw and George A. Luz, eds., *Winning the Peace, The Strategic Implications of Military Civic Action* (New York: Praeger, 1992). Richard D. Downie, "Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine and Policy: Old Wine in a New Bottle," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 15 (January-March 1992), 53-67 provides a good overview of the current state of LIC doctrine and policy. For the terminological change from "low-intensity conflict" to "operations other than war," see, for example, the January 1993 Final Draft version of FM 100-5, *Operations*. This change is presently being reflected throughout the Joint Pub 3-XXXX and AR 100-XXXX series.

2. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), p. 176; Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977), pp. 52-88; W. W. Rostow, "Guerilla Warfare in the Underdeveloped Areas," *Department of State Bulletin*, 7 August 1961, pp. 233-38; W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (3d ed.; New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Rostow are from the article in the *Department of State Bulletin*.

3. For NSAM 182, see D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms, The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988), p. 112.

4. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Goals of Development," in Myron Weiner and Samuel P. Huntington, *Understanding Political Development* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987), pp. 13-14.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

6. Benjamin C. Schwarz, "American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador, The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building," RAND R-4042-USDP (Santa Monica: n.d.), p. 59; Blaufarb, p. 65; Bacevich et al., p. 26.

7. Rostow, *Stages of Economic Growth*, pp. xlii, 106, 150.

8. Huntington, p. 11.

9. For ethnic groups, economic interests, and modernization, see Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985), pp. 73, 120-21, 134-35; see also Walker Connor, "Nation-building or Nation-destroying?" *World Politics*, 24 (April 1972), 319-55. Consider also, Anthony D. Smith, "State-Making and Nation-Building," in John A. Hall, ed., *States in History* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 228-63.

10. Jeff Goodwin and Theda Skocpol, "Explaining Revolutions in the Contemporary Third World," *Politics and Society*, 17 (1989), 489-509; Cynthia McClintock, "Why Peasants Rebel: The Case of Sendero Luminoso," *World Politics*, 36 (October 1984), 48-84; Mark Irving Lichbach, "An Evaluation of 'Does Economic Inequality Breed Political Conflict?'" *Studies*, *World Politics*, 41 (July 1989), 431-70; Theda Skocpol, "What Makes Peasants Revolutionary," *Comparative Politics*, 14 (April 1982), 351-75.

11. Compare Joint Pub 3-07 (Test Pub), "Doctrine for Joint Operations in Low Intensity Conflict," I-3,4,8; II-1,7; III-1,2; IV-1,2,3; and V-1,2,3,4. A similar but less evident contrast is apparent in FM 100-20, *Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict*.

12. Goodwin and Skocpol, p. 495, emphasis not in the original. See also, Charles Tilly, "Does Modernization Breed Revolution?" *Comparative Politics*, 5 (April 1973), 425-47; and Robert Hix, "Why Revolutions Succeed & Fail," *Polity*, 16 (Spring 1984), 423-46.

13. Horowitz, pp. 563-680, discusses various techniques for reducing ethnic conflict.