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# IS NATION-BUILDING A MYTH?

## Nation-Building is an Oxymoron

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M. Chris Mason

ABSTRACT: Nations are not built. They form almost imperceptibly from within over long spans of historical time. Since the end of World War II, no country that was not a nation has ever won a counterinsurgency or suppressed a civil war. *Field Manual 3-24 Counterinsurgency* is wrong because it is premised on the false assumption that support for an existing government can be increased during a civil war/insurgency as a result of the counterinsurgents' actions. There is no historical evidence to support this assumption.

Four times since 1963, in Vietnam, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq, the US military has been sent to do what was literally impossible. A total of 64,969 American military personnel have died so far in these Quixotic misadventures. Adding to the tragedy of these failures is the sense of futility that the fundamental lesson has not been learned. Arguments continue about tactics in these wars, and debates go on about how success was possible if we had done this or that; if we had just sent in more troops, for example, or kept them there longer, or local corruption had been reduced, or there had been less restrictive rules of engagement (ROE). But the United States did not lose these wars because the tactics were wrong, though they were, but because in each case, the United States was attempting to do something impossible: build a nation. To make an analogy, US political and military engagement in these conflicts was like polishing the hubcaps on an old junk car with a broken frame and no engine rotting into the ground at a scrapyard, and thinking the result would be reliable transportation if one just added some mud flaps (i.e., 50,000 more troops) or a chrome tailpipe (i.e., different rules of engagement). In fact, the dead hulk was never going to run, and which polish was used or which accessories were bolted on would not have changed the laws of physics. This essay is an effort to lay out those basic laws of political science before this kind of magical thinking is attempted again.

A nation is a country or a territory in which the great majority of the inhabitants center their personal identities at a national level.<sup>1</sup> For example, "I am German," or "I am Kurdish." This sense of personal identity as a member of a homogenous group in a defined area may be derived in a number of ways. For example, it may be derived ethni-

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1 The author would like to thank Dr. Kalev Sepp at the Naval Postgraduate School, Dr. Tom Marks at the National Defense University, and Dr. Paul Pillar of Georgetown University's Center for Security Studies for their work and intellectual contributions to the writing of this article. The common dictionary definition is "a large aggregate of people united by common descent, history, culture, or language, inhabiting a particular country or territory." *The Merriam Webster Dictionary*.

cally or linguistically, or both. In some cases historically it has derived from religious or sectarian origins. The Sikh empire of South Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries is one example of a nation derived from a religion in the modern era. France and Germany are examples of nations whose inhabitants are genetically similar but whose national identity is primarily derived linguistically and culturally. One group of people says “I am French,” and the other says “I am German,” yet the people of both nations are primarily of Celtic, Germanic, Frank and Gallo-Roman origins. On the other hand, a nation may also be derived ethnically in spite of a common language and a common religion. The languages Uzbek and Turkmen are about 90 percent mutually-intelligible, about the same degree of mutual understanding that typical men from Maine and Georgia had in the United States in 1860, but the Uzbek and Turkmen peoples consider themselves to be separate and distinct nations based on ethnic differences.<sup>2</sup> The key point is this: Without historical exception, however this sense of nationhood is derived, a nation is formed by a slow, evolutionary social process in which a group of people coalesce around a shared national identity within defined geographical borders over a period of centuries.

“Nation-building” is, therefore, an oxymoron. No nation has ever been “built” in recorded history in the sense of this social evolution being accelerated by a political process, much less created at gunpoint by an occupying power, as was attempted, for example, at the end of the 20th century in Vietnam and Somalia, and at beginning of this century in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is because nations are not “built”: they accrete, like stalagmites. Without historical exception, the development of nations has been, and remains, an evolutionary process which occurs over the span of many, many human generations. This is not semantics, or pedantry. This is *the* fundamental underlying law of international political science. It is the one, often-ignored but essential truth of foreign policy, and it should be the cardinal rule determining the nature of US military engagement anywhere on earth, because it will predict negative outcomes with 100 percent accuracy. We may call this fundamental principle of political science—that nations are not built but accrete over historical time—the Nation Rule.

The First Corollary of the Nation Rule is that no country in world history which was not a nation has ever become a successful democracy. When a country is a nation, democracy becomes possible and *may* become that nation’s system of government—if a number of other necessary social preconditions are met. Obviously, democracy is not an inevitable outcome of being a nation. Cuba and China, for example, are modern nations (again, a country or territory in which the great majority of the people self-identify at the level of the nation, whether it is recognized as a country or not) but they are dictatorships. The other precursors of democracy, in addition to nationhood, include, but are not limited to, a level of basic universal literacy, a functioning and reasonably fair, uncorrupt, and prompt justice system, a set of universally-acknowledged social values which prioritize and protect individual legal and civil rights over those of a collective, a shared sense of social fairness, and basic trust in

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2 Robert Lindsay, “Mutual Intelligibility Among the Turkic Languages,” *Beyond Highbrow*, January 4, 2010, <https://robertlindsay.wordpress.com/2010/01/04/mutual-intelligibility-among-the-turkic-languages>.

one's fellow citizens. A country whose families live within walled forts and post armed guards at night against their neighbors, for example, self-evidently lacks the basic social trust which is an essential precursor of democracy. Even in a society which has all of these things, democracy may still fail, as it did spectacularly in Weimar Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s, for example. Like nation formation, democracy, too, is a long and winding evolutionary road with many possible detours to ruin.

The other basic elements of democracy may exist to somewhat greater or somewhat lesser extents, but the inescapable central truth of this corollary is that without the existence of a nation upon which to build, these other precursors cannot grow and evolve into the fabric of society which can be a democracy. Nationhood is literally the foundation of democracy, the *sine qua non* upon which the complex socioeconomic building blocks of sustainable representative government are gradually built over a period of centuries. Historically, there are no exceptions. The rejection of history and the vast body of empirical evidence derived from centuries of human experience in favor of another opinion is the dictionary definition of magical thinking—"the belief that... one's thought, words, or actions can achieve specific physical effects in a manner not governed by the principles of ordinary transmission of energy or information."<sup>3</sup> In layman's terms, magical thinking is the belief that wanting something to be possible makes it possible, or that wanting a thing to happen can make it happen, in violation of fundamental principles of political science or a unanimity of historical experience which proves it to be impossible. Unfortunately, it is practiced all too frequently by politicians, military leaders and diplomats.

In seeking to find an exception to the timespan of the Nation Rule, one is tempted to put forward the United States as an example of a multiethnic and multilingual country which became a nation in the space of only a century or so. However, the United States was formed *before* diversity of languages and ethnicities reached a statistically significant level. At the time of the founding of the United States in the 1770s, the white population of North America on the eastern seaboard was predominantly Anglo-Saxon in ethnic origin, and the use of English was nearly universal, despite pockets of (largely bilingual) Dutch and German settlers. All of the delegates to the Continental Congress of 1776, for example, were native English speakers. The Americans of 1776 were in fact largely transplanted Englishmen, by no means all of whom wanted independence, who arrived as products of the same long line of political evolution which flowed through the Magna Carta, the Enlightenment, and English common law. And the United States of course suffered through a terrible civil war before a true national sense of identity emerged.

So the United States is not an exception to the lengthy timeline of nation formation, although in formulating foreign policy we often project a cultural assumption to the contrary and imagine that if we Americans can all get along, other countries can too. Once formed, nations can and do continue to evolve and mature politically and often become more multiethnic—although as the current influx of Syrian

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<sup>3</sup> Leonard Zusne and Warren H. Jones, *Anomalous Psychology: A Study of Magical Thinking* (Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum, 1989), 13.

refugees into Europe clearly shows, this is frequently a contested process. In rare cases, independent nations with their own constitutions and common interests may join to form a federation, such as Switzerland, for example, where politically-independent and self-governing French, Italian and German-speaking nations have evolved a sense of loyalty to the Swiss Federation and identify as Swiss.<sup>4</sup> This process occurred over nearly a millennium.

The term “nation-building” is often carelessly misused to mean the process of encouraging broader respect for civil rights and enhancing democracy within a young, existing nation, which is properly called state building. Unlike nation-building, which is impossible, state building is not only possible but usually beneficial to the collective world community of democratic nations. As has been often pointed out, democracies rarely go to war with one another. When a country is a nation, and all the necessary precursors of democracy are present, it is possible for foreign powers to encourage a fledgling democracy with an array of support for the democratic process, from providing election observers and monitors, to financial support to educational programs designed to enhance understanding of the political process, to incentives and pressure for inclusiveness, protection of minorities and observance of civil rights.

Not understanding the Nation Rule and its First Corollary have led the United States into tragedy on several occasions since the end of World War II, most notably in Vietnam and again in the 21st century in Iraq and Afghanistan. Neither Iraq nor Afghanistan are nations, and in both countries only a tiny handful of western-educated politicians claim otherwise, too often as a vehicle for pushing their personal agendas. Unfortunately, these citizen outliers are usually the only Iraqis and Afghans with whom US leaders ever come into contact, which can create a very erroneous sense of those countries. In fact, there was never any chance of establishing a sustainable liberal democracy in either Iraq or Afghanistan because of the Nation Rule and its First Corollary. Only a profound ignorance of those countries or magical thinking could have led anyone to think that democracy would be sustainable in either. Not only are Iraq and Afghanistan patently not nations, they also both lack virtually all of the other precursors of a democratic society.

### **The Nation Rule and Counterinsurgency**

This brings us to the subject of “counterinsurgency,” which is what a government in power calls a civil war. The dictionary definition of a civil war is simply “a war between citizens of the same country.” If a country is a nation, one of those groups will be small, but even small groups can wage civil wars which are bloody and protracted. The civil wars in Nepal and in India (against the Naxalite movement) are good examples of this. The government in power typically refers to a rebellion by some of its citizens as an “insurgency,” and to the rebels as “bandits.” If the United States government supports the government of that country, it uses the same terminology. If the United States supports the rebels, however, it calls the conflict a civil war. The current conflict in Syria, for example, is referred to by the US government as a civil war, because

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<sup>4</sup> Norman Berdichevsky, *Nations, Language and Citizenship* (London: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2004), 92.

the United States does not support the Bashar al-Assad regime and does not want al-Assad to win the conflict and remain in power. Conversely, the United States supports the current government of Afghanistan, and refers to its current civil war with the Taliban as an “insurgency.” But both the Taliban and the people fighting them in Afghanistan are inarguably “citizens of the same country,” so there is no possible way that Afghanistan today does not meet the dictionary definition of a civil war. Semantics employing words with deeply embedded meaning forms an integral part of the strategic messaging intended to create and frame the discourse within which US foreign policy is conducted.

“Counterinsurgency” is not a hoary principle of warfare whose origins are lost in the mists of time. The first use of the word counterinsurgency in the English language was in 1962.<sup>5</sup> The term is in fact a creation of Kennedy administration wordsmiths seeking to put a trendy and politically-palatable name to the fight against the communist nationalists led by Ho Chi Minh in the civil war then taking place within South Vietnam. On the other side of that civil war at that time were US-backed South Vietnam and those loyal to South Vietnamese dictator Ngo Dinh Diem. The Kennedy administration supported the government of South Vietnam and invented the word counterinsurgency to represent its doctrine of defense support to both South Vietnam and Laos. The doctrine itself may have been shaped by the Eisenhower administration in the eighteen months before Kennedy took office, as historian R.B. Smith suggests, but the word itself was first used in 1962, and it is therefore a child of the Kennedy administration.<sup>6</sup> Counterinsurgency is not a strategy, it is a bundle of political-military tactics used by the government in power and its international supporters to try to win a civil war.

Few topics have generated more discussion, more debate, and more publications within security policy circles in the past ten years than this word counterinsurgency and its accompanying doctrine. Scholars and practitioners have weighed in with books and articles both praising the *US Army Field Manual 3-24, Counterinsurgency* and inveighing against it. It is a large body of literature. Virtually all of it, however, misses the fundamental strategic fact: No “counterinsurgency,” or suppression of a civil war, has succeeded since the end of World War II in a country which was not a nation. The Vietnam War is included in this analysis, since citizens in South Vietnam fought against each other. Vietnam was of course a larger nation divided north and south, and thus also in that sense a civil war. Success in this case is defined as “the ruling power at the beginning of the conflict remained the ruling power, or shared some power after the end of armed hostilities.” This is the Second Corollary of the Nation Rule: Wars can be won by countries which are not democracies, but they are not won by countries which are not nations. (The Iraq–Iran War of 1980–1988, which cost the lives of nearly a half a million people, does not qualify as an exception to the Second Corollary because it ended in a stalemate.)

The Third Corollary of the Nation Rule, and for a discussion of counterinsurgency the most important, is that since World War II, no

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<sup>5</sup> “Counterinsurgency,” *Merriam-Webster*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/counterinsurgency>.

<sup>6</sup> R.B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1983), 185.

country which was not a nation, and no nation with a government perceived by less than 85 to 90 percent of its population to be the sole legitimate ruling authority has *ever* won a civil war/counterinsurgency. Ever. If the goal of counterinsurgency doctrine is to increase the level of legitimacy or support for the ruling government, then it is an abject failure. That has never happened. No counterinsurgency in history has ever resulted in an increase in legitimacy for the national government. There is no historical evidence of this, and mountains of historical evidence demonstrating that both the legitimacy of central governments and the willingness of the people to absorb the costs of the war decline during a civil war.<sup>7</sup> To paraphrase former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, “you go to war with the government you have.”<sup>8</sup>

Invariably, government actions to defeat the rebelling group erode allegiance to the state, reduce support for the war, and decrease the legitimacy of the government. Curtailed civil liberties, the inconveniences, stress and dangers of heightened security, the hardships of periodic or continuing shortages of goods, services and utilities such as water and electricity, the higher taxes usually imposed to pay for the war, conscription of youth, casualties to relatives serving in the forces of both sides, and the destruction of homes and property all degrade acceptance of government authority and damage its legitimacy. No one living in a war zone being pummeled by these inevitable side effects of war increases their support for their government because of the delivery of a school or a well. Rebel atrocities may cause a temporary spike in popular support for the war, but the trend line is always downward. You start with the allegiance you have: It can go down as a result of poor policies and inept security measures, but it never goes up. And historically, every nation which has had the allegiance of less than 85 to 90 percent of its population at the outbreak of a civil conflict has lost the war. Having 85 percent support or better does not *ensure* success. It is possible to have that much support and lose. As Martin van Creveld notes, “attempts by post-1945 armed forces to suppress guerrillas...have constituted a long, almost unbroken record of failure.”<sup>9</sup> However, without nationhood and legitimacy, the insurgents will always win.

Empirical data proves this: When a country is not a nation, the government loses. When a country is a nation and the government is not perceived as legitimate and worth dying for by 85 to 90 percent of the population, the government loses. Empirical data also proves that counterinsurgency tactics intended to increase support for a country’s government, such as the “clear, hold and build” tactics intended to increase support for the Afghan government, for example, are a total

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7 For an excellent survey of this large body of literature, see Bethany Lacina, *Public Support for Domestic Counterinsurgency: Evidence from Thailand* (Rochester: University of Rochester, 2015), [http://harris.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/Lacina\\_CivilWarCasualties\\_Spring2015\\_1.pdf](http://harris.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/Lacina_CivilWarCasualties_Spring2015_1.pdf).

8 “Rumsfeld: You Go to War with the Army You Have,” YouTube Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jPgIjRvzQw>.

9 Martin van Creveld, *The Changing Face of War: Combat from the Marne to Iraq* (New York: Presidio Press, 2008), 219.

failure, and that tactics based on “sweeping operations” don’t work at all.<sup>10</sup>

When a country is a nation, and its government is perceived as legitimate by the great majority of its people, what works in counterinsurgency are two things: First, isolating the people from the guerillas and vice versa by stationing a small garrison in every village to reinforce and support a village militia, like the Marine Corps’ Combined Action Program (CAP) in Vietnam. This is a static, defensive mission which atomizes most battalions into squads and results in a war run by squad leaders. For this reason, the US Army hates it, but it works. No village protected by a CAP element in Vietnam was ever retaken by the Viet Cong. Second, regular and aggressive patrolling around villages and towns by military forces (not by weak and poorly armed police) in order to prevent guerillas from massing in numbers which could threaten local defenses, and thus provide a dynamic ring of security around civilians. This was never done in Afghanistan, where the US military preferred instead a Groundhog Day loop of ineffectual battalion-sized “sweeping operations.” The Taliban simply attrited US forces during these operations with improvised explosive devices, mines, and snipers, and flowed back into the “swept” areas as soon as US forces left. Local forces left behind were simply too weak or too corrupt to resist in Afghanistan, as they also were in Vietnam. The only thing which battalion-scale sweeping operations accomplished was demonstrating tactical proficiency in maneuvering a battalion.

A common error in the analysis of civil war/insurgency is the conflation of “popular support” and “legitimacy of governance,” a mistake made, for example, by the Rand Corporation study authored by Seth Jones in 2008.<sup>11</sup> Much of the literature of counterinsurgency is a discussion of “popular support.” However, popular support as such, which is further often reduced to “popularity,” and measured by opinion polls, is actually irrelevant. What matters is a much more subtle attribute: the extent to which a government is believed to have the legitimate authority to rule and be obeyed. They are quite different things. For example, let’s say I am a poor citizen of a country which is not a nation and which is experimenting with democracy. In an election, I vote for a candidate, but another candidate from another ethnic group commits massive fraud, steals the election, and takes power (as happened in Afghanistan in 2014, for example).<sup>12</sup> I do not perceive that person as having legitimate authority over me, or to be the legitimate government of my country. If that person then gives me \$1,000, I may briefly have a better opinion of him. He may briefly be more popular with me. However, and this is critical, it will *not* make him more legitimate in my eyes, or increase the likelihood of me joining his army, or increase even slightly my willingness to fight and die to keep him in power. Popularity may be measured with

10 Dr. Jennifer Brick, *The Political Economy of Customary Village Organizations in Rural Afghanistan* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008), <https://www.bu.edu/aiaa/brick.pdf>. Statistical survey conducted by University of Pittsburgh led by Dr. Jennifer Brick, discussion with Dr. Brick 2011, “Afghanistan: USAID ‘Stability’ Programs Increased Support For Taliban,” *Breitbart News*, November 2, 2015, <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/11/02/afghanistan-usaid-stability-programs-increased-support-taliban>.

11 Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND\\_MG595.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG595.pdf).

12 Chris Mason, “Fraud and Folly in Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy*, September 23, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/23/fraud-and-folly-in-afghanistan>.



polling; legitimacy may not. Opinion polling in counterinsurgency is thus worthless, even if fear and cultural norms do not prevent people from answering honestly.

Another common but false cultural assumption is that legitimacy of governance only comes from democracy. Because the United States has always been a democracy, few of us can conceive of a legitimate government being derived any other way. But as Max Weber wrote a century ago, the legal basis for legitimacy of governance (of which democracy is one form) is only one of a number of ways in which governmental authority may be derived and respected. Legitimacy may also come from religious leadership, for example, or from a line of kings. The Emperor of Japan in the late nineteenth century had absolute legitimacy of governance. His right to rule Japan was literally unquestioned, and to fight and die for the emperor was the highest honor to which a citizen could ever aspire. Today in communist China, the legitimate authority of the communist party is virtually unchallenged apart from a very small number of political dissenters, and few Chinese would ever think of disobeying the edicts of the party, or hesitate to fight in the military, or refuse to follow orders leading to death in battle. Neither the Japanese Army or the Chinese Army suffers from mass attrition, or mass desertions, or mass cowardice in battle, something which is almost universally true historically of the armies of nations, however their legitimacy is derived. But democracy is not an essential element for success in a civil war/counterinsurgency, nor is the popularity of the government, but both being a nation, and the perception of 85 to 90 percent of the population that their government has legitimate authority over them and is worth fighting for are essential elements of success. Again, there are no exceptions. This chart of a number of post-World War II examples illustrates this point:

CONFLICT	NATION?	LEGITIMACY	OUTCOME
Malaya	Yes	90%	Gov't Won
Afghanistan 79-89	No	10%	Gov't Lost
Afghanistan 01-15	No	30%	Gov't Lost
Northern Ireland*	Yes	91-99%	Gov't Won
Iraq 2003-15	No	40%	Gov't Lost
Peru 1980-2000	Yes	95%	Gov't Won
Vietnam 1964-1975	Yes	50%	Gov't Lost
Columbia vs FMLN	Yes	98%	Gov't Won
Nepal vs Maoists	Yes	95%	Gov't Won
Sudan	No	50%	Gov't Lost

This chart illustrates the relationship between nationhood, legitimate government and the outcome of civil wars.\* The civil war in Northern Ireland is not covered in the article text due to space limitations. However, Ireland is certainly a nation, as defined for this article. Support for the IRA is also difficult to gauge, but in the 1987 Irish general election the IRA won only 1.7 percent of the vote. As recently as 2011, the political wing of the IRA, *Sinn Fein*, still only won 9.9 percent of the vote in the Irish general election.

A strategic overview of these civil wars examining the Nation Rule and its corollaries will be instructive. A good first example is the civil war which was fought in Nepal from 1996 to 2006. Nepal is a nation—a country in which the great majority of the people self-identify at the national level. The Communist Party of Nepal fought a Maoist “people’s war” and sought to create a communist government. The Maoists had the support of a small minority of the Nepali people, certainly less than 10 percent,<sup>13</sup> and the government, while not entirely popular, was considered legitimate by a large majority. In the end, Nepal did not become communist, or become two countries. It stayed together as one country, changes were made to the system of government, popular representation was improved, grievances were addressed, and to the enormous credit of the Nepali people, that nation is putting those terrible years behind it.

Another example of a civil war brought to a successful conclusion in a nation was the war against the *Sendero Luminoso*, or Shining Path, in Peru from 1980 to roughly 2000. The rebellion was (and it still exists in minimal form) initially a “charismatic leader” guerilla movement with a Maoist communist ideology which, like the Maoist movement in Nepal, claimed to struggle for the poor and dispossessed. The movement’s first leader was Abimael Guzmán. At its peak, the *Sendero Luminoso* did not have more than 15 percent popular support.<sup>14</sup> Peru is a nation, and its government is perceived by the majority as legitimate. As a result, despite the use of some poor government tactics which eroded support in several provinces, the government was able to suppress the movement, and it caught a lucky break when it captured Abimael Guzmán in 1992 and his successor, Óscar Ramírez in 1999, effectively decimating the threat.

The Marxist rebellion in Colombia, which grew out of *la violencia* and the socialist movements of the 1930s, is a good example of how even a small number of guerillas can keep fighting for decades, only to be defeated by demographics. Colombia also meets the Nation Rule, and the FARC, which emerged as the predominant rebel group in Colombia around 1964, only had and has the support of about two percent of the Colombian population.<sup>15</sup> It also was initially able to maintain a small but steady flow of recruits from the rural areas with a Marxist message of land reform in a country where 50 percent of the arable land is owned by less than one percent of the population.<sup>16</sup> The war has gone on for more than half a century, claiming the lives of some 220,000 Colombians.<sup>17</sup> Successive Colombian governments were either unwilling or unable to

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13 Actual support for the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) movement, abbreviated as CPN(M), is difficult to calculate, but a Nepalese government report released in 2003 stated a strength of 31,500 combatants, 48,000 militia, 150,500 active cadres and 100,000 sympathizers, a total of some 300,000 Nepalese. Even allowing this report to be wrong by a factor of ten still yields only 3,000,000 supporters, or 11 percent of a total population of around 27 million. The actual figure at the height of the conflict was probably no more than five percent.

14 Charles D. Kenney, *Fujimori’s Coup and the Breakdown of Democracy in Latin America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2004).

15 Alfredo Rangel, “The FARC’s Escalating Demands; Ongoing Attacks and Intransigence Demonstrate that It Doesn’t Really Want Peace,” *Americas Quarterly*, Fall 2013, <http://www.americas-quarterly.org/content/farcs-escalating-demands-ongoing-attacks-and-intransigence-demonstrate-it-doesnt-really>.

16 Teo Ballvé, “Colombia’s Chance for Peace,” *New York Times*, May 23, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/24/opinion/colombias-chance-for-peace.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/24/opinion/colombias-chance-for-peace.html?_r=0).

17 *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* (The National Center for Historical Memory), <http://www.centrodememorialhistorica.gov.co/en/about-the-national-center-about-the-national-center>.

dismantle the power of Colombia's tiny clique of wealthy landowning families and implement real agrarian reforms which would undercut the FARC's peasant appeal. However, over the last half-century, the bulk of Colombia's population has shifted from the rural areas (which the government could not control) to the urban areas (which it can). The percentage of the population living in urban areas doubled from 31 percent in 1937 to 62 percent in 1972 to nearly 80 percent today, and the FARC has virtually no support in the urban areas of Colombia.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the slow death of the FARC is not so much a result of military action as it is an accident of changing urban demographics combined with a half a century of sustained investment in health care and education in the rural areas.

A textbook proof of the Nation Rule and its corollaries is the Malayan Emergency, the term used for the civil war which took place inside the British colony of Malaya in the 1950s (The insurance company Lloyds of London would not have covered the insured losses of the British plantation owners in the colony if it had been called a "war," so it was called an "emergency" instead). The British army today loves to cite its success in suppressing the civil war there as an example of how it "knows how to do counterinsurgency," and attribute its success to its tactics. In fact, this civil war was like a game of Monopoly in which one player starts the game owning every property on the Monopoly game board and has two hotels on every property, and the other player starts the game owning one utility, such as the Electric Company. The outcome was predetermined, if the British did not foul it up too badly. In the event, they nearly did.

In the first place, Malaya was a British colony. There was no "host government" to deal with, as there was in Saigon, Baghdad, and Kabul. It would be like the United States combatting a civil war in Puerto Rico. The British not only controlled every aspect of military and political policy in the territory, they could relieve anyone in any position at any time, make any law, and enforce any regulation they wished to. They *were* the government. The Ministry of Defense was not in a foreign country, in Kabul or Saigon, it was in London. The enormous advantage which this conveyed to the British is almost incalculable. Second, the colony of Malaya was (and still is, as the nation of Malaysia today), a territory in which approximately 90 percent of the inhabitants are ethnically Malay and speak the Malay language, and 10 percent are ethnically Chinese and speak Chinese.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Malaya was a nation. Almost without a single exception, the guerillas seeking to overthrow British colonial rule were from the 10 percent ethnic Chinese minority. They were disliked by virtually all the ethnic Malays (and frequently discriminated against by them, which led to some legitimate grievances). However, under no circumstances did the ethnic Malays want to be ruled by the Chinese minority, and they virtually unanimously supported British rule.

The British essentially guaranteed this loyalty by promising independence to the colony with an ethnically-Malay ruling government

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18 Carmen Elisa and Elssy Bonilla, "The Demographic Transition in Colombia," United Nations University, <http://archive.unu.edu/unupress/unupbooks/uu10we/uu10we09.htm>; and United Nations, Population Division, "World Population Prospects," <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp>.

19 T. Dugdale-Pointon, "The Malayan Emergency (1947-1960)," August 26, 2007, [http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/wars\\_malaya.html](http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/wars_malaya.html).

as soon as the “emergency” was over. So all the Malays had to do to gain their independence was defeat the minority Chinese guerillas they hated. Thus the British began their suppression of this insurgency/civil war with the absolute loyalty and active assistance of 90 percent of the population, *and* the capability of the rawest new British Army arrival from Liverpool to visually identify anyone who could possibly be a guerilla from his facial features at a distance of 30 yards, as Chinese and Malays have very different physiognomies. Furthermore, the Chinese population of the colony was confined to very small, very well-known, and very ethnically homogenous rural areas, and they had no support outside these areas. In short, the British had every conceivable military and political advantage—the entire Monopoly game board—before the war started. And it was still a hard fight which lasted 12 years and cost the lives of some 10,000 people.<sup>20</sup> The notion that because of this experience the British “know how to do counterinsurgency” is inane.

In stark contrast to the successful outcomes in Peru, Nepal, Colombia, and Malaya (from the government point of view) are the failed US efforts in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. Vietnam was a nation divided in half, and Iraq and Afghanistan have never been and probably never will be nations. In all three cases, civil wars were temporarily stalemated militarily by powerful American forces at enormous cost; however, in all cases, the central government lacked legitimacy and neither the government in Saigon, Baghdad, or Kabul ever came anywhere near the 85 to 90 percent legitimacy threshold. The Afghan government, on its best day in the last 14 years, has had the support of perhaps 30 percent of the population. Today it is less than 20 percent.<sup>21</sup> Support for the South Vietnamese governments of the emperor Bo Dai, then President Diem, and then his various military successors after 1963 similarly never exceeded 50 percent of the total population, and it steadily declined between 1960 and 1975. The Sunnis, Shi’a, Kurds, and other minority groups of Iraq today can scarcely agree on what time of day it is, much less a government, and it was only Saddam Hussein’s brutal totalitarian dictatorship which kept that country together within its British colonial-era boundaries.<sup>22</sup> Forests have been cleared to make the paper for books and articles about which tactics worked and did not work in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, but at the strategic level of war, all three were lost politically before they began because (1) the countries did not meet the Nation Rule, and (2) they did not have governments perceived as legitimate by 85 to 90 percent of their citizens.

Another example of a failed counterinsurgency or unsuccessful civil war is the conflict which raged in the Sudan, the so-called Second Sudanese Civil War, from 1983 to 2005 (which was essentially a continuation of the First Sudanese Civil War fought from 1955 to 1972). Like so many of the world’s trouble spots today, Sudan, formerly Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, was another 19th-century creation of European colonial mapmakers. It became independent in 1956, but it was never a nation. The southern

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20 Indeed, the war flared up again in the 1960s, again waged by Chinese guerillas, and last another 22 years before being suppressed again.

21 Chris Mason, *The Strategic Lessons Unlearned from Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2015), 66.

22 “With Iraq Mired in Turmoil, Some Call for Partitioning the Country,” *New York Times*, April 28, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/29/world/middleeast/with-iraq-mired-in-turmoil-some-call-for-partitioning-the-country.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/29/world/middleeast/with-iraq-mired-in-turmoil-some-call-for-partitioning-the-country.html?_r=0).

part of the country (today South Sudan) was predominantly Christian and animist, and is ethnically and linguistically African. The northern part of the country (today North Sudan) was predominantly Muslim and ethnically Arab. Because the bureaucrats at the United Nations and the US State Department effectively consider the re-drawing of world maps to be institutional failure, enormous diplomatic efforts were expended to keep these two nations together in one country as the civil war raged, and it resulted in the deaths of some two million people.<sup>23</sup> If the world powers which approached the problem from the standpoint of keeping that country together at all costs had instead simply recognized that it was in fact two separate nations, much of this tragedy could have been prevented. As it was, the unsuccessful “counterinsurgency” failed because Sudan as it was created in 1956 was not a nation. Now it is two nations, a historical wrong caused by British colonialism has been righted, and both nations may now begin the aching slow process of state-building essentially from ground zero.

### Conclusion

Nation-building is impossible. Nations are not built. They form almost imperceptibly from inside over long spans of historical time. All of the civil wars, or “insurgencies,” which have been fought since the end of World War II can be analyzed and fully understood using the Nation Rule and its corollaries. *Field Manual 3-24* is wrong. It makes the false assumption that support for an existing government can be increased during a civil war/insurgency as a result of the counterinsurgents’ actions and activities. There is no historical evidence or empirical data of any kind to support such an assumption. Two exhaustive studies of the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, for example, show there was, in one study, statistically zero increase in support for the national government after the delivery of “clear, hold, and build” efforts such as schools, roads, and clinics. In the second study, the increase in support where it occurred was so small as to be statistically irrelevant, and in a greater number of cases, the “delivery of government services” actually led to an increase in instability and a loss government legitimacy by upending preexisting village political economies.

The lesson from these principles is obvious:

(A) if a country is a nation, and...

(B) the government of that nation is perceived by 85 to 90 percent of its population to have the legitimate authority to rule over them and inspire, coerce or compel obedience, then...

it is *possible* for the national government to win a civil war if:

(1) it makes most of the right political moves to prevent excessive erosion of legitimacy, and...

(2) it separates the people from the guerillas and does not make many military mistakes, such as massacres of civilians, habitat destruction, or the always unpopular mass relocation of villagers, and...

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23 “US Committee for Refugees, 2001,” Archived December 10, 2004 on the *Internet Archive*.

(3) it gets a couple lucky breaks in the fog of war—an important rebel leader being captured at a routine traffic stop, for example, or a raid on a low-level guerilla cell finding high-level intelligence materials. (The war in Peru against the *Sendero Luminoso* turned on just such a chance event.)<sup>24</sup>

If both A and B are not true at the beginning of the conflict, then government failure is certain. If A *and* B are true, and the government does (1) and (2), above, and gets a lucky break or two, success in the conflict is possible. But the notion of “winning hearts and minds” with such tactics as “clear, hold, and build” is dead wrong. There are no historical cases of a government increasing its legitimacy during a civil war, much less increasing it from a sub-critical mass below 85 to 90 percent to above critical mass. “Nation-building” and “counterinsurgency” in Vietnam, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq were tragic, multi-trillion dollar failures because the Nation Rule and its three immutable Corollaries were not respected. More damning for the US military is that failed tactics were repeated over and over again in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, long after it was clear they did not work, and it stubbornly clung to doctrine long after it was clear it was wrong.

Before elected leaders commit US military forces to war in a foreign country, military leaders need to make an objective determination whether the country is a nation, and if so, whether its government is accepted as legitimate by 85 to 90 percent of its citizens, and if so, whether all of the other precursors of democracy are present. If not, the military must have a viable plan for getting back out of the failed-state quagmire which will inevitably follow. Installing a government which we conjured into being and then proclaimed to be legitimate when none of those things was true in Vietnam, Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan was the dictionary definition of magical thinking. The determination of a country’s social capital cannot be obtained from the likes of Ngô Đình Diem, Ahmed Chalabi and Hamid Karzai and their coteries, or from first-generation Americans with their own axes to grind. It cannot be obtained from political appointees with policy agendas to pursue. Nor can it be obtained from the State Department, whose institutional dogma holds that history and culture are irrelevant and that every country can be a democracy within its existing borders after the magic spell of an election is cast. Rather, such determinations must be derived from the consensus of the men and women who have spent their professional lives studying the country in question. In Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, those men and women were not simply disregarded, they were literally deliberately barred from policy discussions because their views did not agree with what policy-makers wanted to do.<sup>25</sup> Too many Americans in the last half-century have paid with their lives for the folly of disregarding the Nation Rule.

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24 The leader of the *Sendero Luminoso*, Abimael Guzman, was captured in 1992 after a government agent found an empty tube of psoriasis medicine in a trash dumpster outside a ballet studio. Guzman was known to suffer from psoriasis. The ensuing capture of Guzman and several other rebel leaders decimated the charismatic leader movement.

25 Mason, *The Strategic Lessons Unlearned from Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan*, 193-196.

