

NATION-BUILDING, 12 YEARS LATER

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Remember how central to the 2000 Presidential campaign nation-building was?

It was all in the context of the Kosovo effort, of course, an intervention that elicited horrified cries about Executive overreach from the likes of John Yoo. But at that time, the Republican opposed using our troops for nation-building and the Democrat reservedly spoke in favor of it.

BUSH: Somalia. It started off as a humanitarian mission then changed into a nation-building mission and that's where the mission went wrong. The mission was changed. And as a result, our nation paid a price, and so I don't think our troops ought to be used for what's called nation building. I think our troops ought to be used to fight and win war. I think our troops ought to be used to help overthrow a dictator when it's in our best interests. But in this case, it was a nation-building exercise. And same with Haiti. I wouldn't have supported either.

[snip]

LEHRER: Vice President Gore, do you agree with the Governor's views on nation-building, the use of military, our military for nation-building as he described it then defined it?

GORE: I don't think we agree on that. I would certainly also be judicious in evaluating any potential use of American troops overseas. I think we have to be very reticent about that.

But look, Jim, the world is changing so rapidly. The way I see it, the world's

getting much closer together. Like it or not, we are now – the United States is now the natural leader of the world. All these other countries are looking to us.

[snip]

During the years between World War I and World War II, a great lesson was learned by our military leaders and the people of the United States. The lesson was that in the aftermath of World War I we kind of turned our backs and left them to their own devices and they brewed up a lot of trouble that quickly became World War II. And acting upon that lesson, in the aftermath of our great victory in World War II, we laid down the Marshall Plan, President Truman did; we got intimately involved in building NATO and other structures there. We still have lots of troops in Europe.

And what did we do in the late 40's and 50's and 60's? We were nation building. And it was economic. But it was also military. And the confidence that those countries recovering from the wounds of war had by having troops there, we had civil administrators come in to set up their ways of building their towns back.

[snip]

LEHRER: Some people are now suggesting that if you don't want to use the military to maintain the peace, to do the civil thing, it's it time to consider a civil force of some kind that comes in after the military that builds nations or all of that? Is that on your radar screen?

BUSH: I don't think so. I think what we need to do is convince people who live in the lands they live in to build the nations. Maybe I'm missing something here. I mean we're going to have kind of a nation-building corps from America?

Absolutely not. Our military is meant to fight and win war. That's what it's meant to do and when it gets overextended, morale drops.

And then, after being elected, Bush launched an optional war against Iraq. His Defense Department aggressively undercut State's mandate to rebuild Iraq, and as a result we had chaos for years. We failed, miserably, at nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, there are still more Al Qaeda members in Iraq than there were in Afghanistan on 9/11, and a recent report predicts collapse in Afghanistan after we withdraw.

One of the things we saw in today's Oversight hearing on the Benghazi attack was a difference of opinion about where the balance between security and openness, and where the balance between DOD and State capacities should be.

While I don't think anyone believes she made the right decision in this particular case, the reason State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Programs Charlene Lamb did not approve requests to extend Temporary Duty military officers as part of the security team was because of a commitment to develop a security capacity at State, in this case by training Libyans to take on that role. Eric Nordstrom, who had been Regional Security Officer in Libya, made a compelling argument that the Libyans State was training into the task were not yet ready to take on that security role, and former Special Forces guys would better defend the mission. In the most damning document released by the committee—a July 9 memo requesting an extension of the Temporary Duty personnel—Nordstrom explained:

While post has made a number of procedural enhancements and physical security upgrades, our efforts to normalize security operations have been hindered by the lack of host nation security support, either static or

response, an increase in violence against foreign targets, and GoL delays in issuing firearms permits for our LES state protection/bodyguard units. Despite field expedient physical security upgrades to improve both the temporary Embassy and Villas compound [in Tripoli] neither compound meets OSPB standards. Recognizing the growing challenges to Libya's fragile environment the Department increased Post's danger pay allowance from 25 percent to 30 percent on July 1.

[snip]

Post anticipates supporting operations in Benghazi with at least one permanently assigned RSO employee from Tripoli,, however, would request continued TDY support to fill a minimum of 3 security positions in Benghazi.

(Though his argument to support the claim that it would have made much difference in this case wasn't entirely convincing.)

Other documents released—including the September 11 one I unpacked indirectly in this post (turns out I was even more right than I imagined)—make it clear that the problem was that there is simply no state in Libya yet. Libya has more going for it than, say, Afghanistan when we took over, but it's at a crucial time where it could tip to extremism or start to flourish.

And we can't decide whether to respond by barricading ourselves in, abandoning the effort altogether, or allowing the Libyans to build their capacity alongside us.

We're still over nation-building, 12 years later. But we appear to have no better idea of how to accomplish it than we did then.