

Development at War

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Armed Humanitarians: The Rise of the Nation Builders

Nathan Hodge

New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2011. 352 pp.

Nathan Hodge makes a compelling argument in this intriguing and well-written book. Since the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, United States military doctrine, development work, and humanitarian relief have become increasingly interwoven, often with disastrous results. As defense planners and military strategists have given increased attention to “stability operations” and counterinsurgency campaigns across the Global South, development and “nation-building” have become central elements of a broader campaign to redirect the futures of “failed states” and defeated regimes. Reasoning that the most dangerous strains of political radicalism will emerge and prevail in societies afflicted by poverty, ethnic conflict, and a lack of opportunity, senior figures in the Pentagon and the State Department have come to view development as a crucial weapon in a struggle of indefinite duration. “What began in late 2001 as a global war on terror,” Hodge writes, “was quietly recast as a campaign of armed social work. And in the process, American foreign policy underwent a tectonic shift” (9).

As Hodge explains, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, U.S. policymakers came to view the challenges of national security through the lens of broad social transformation. Pentagon advisers like Thomas Barnett, for example, advocated that U.S. strategy should be reimagined. In place of the old Cold War divide, Barnett and his colleagues envisioned a world split between a “functioning core” of states integrated into the global economy and a “non-integrating gap” of states that were outside the channels of international trade, commerce, finance, and growth. In Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Latin America, they argued, the United States would have to prepare to confront terrorist threats, respond to humanitarian crises, intervene in failed states, and engage in prolonged tasks of nation-building. As this view took hold at the highest levels of the Pentagon, it resonated strongly with the conviction of a rising generation of military officers that the United States was unprepared for that challenge. The United States might have an unparalleled ability to fight

conventional wars against potential adversaries, but some of the most influential leaders of military policy, including General David Petraeus, believed that the lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq pointed toward the need for a greater counterinsurgency capacity. Because the solutions to such conflicts required a deep engagement in the political, economic, and social terrain, advocates called for a new military mission and a greatly expanded, more versatile force to accomplish it. Development, they insisted, would have to become a central part of U.S. defense strategy.¹

Hodge illustrates the consequences of this approach in convincing detail, and reading his colorful ground-level narratives is a bit like watching a train wreck in slow motion. Following military officers and USAID workers in the field, Hodge's vivid anecdotes reveal the extent to which a combination of practical failures and theoretical fallacies undermined broad, sweeping ambitions. At the operational level, the immediate task of defeating enemies and winning wars sits uneasily alongside the longer-term goals of sustainable development. "Building an effective state and a functioning civil society," Hodge argues, "is a process that takes decades, often generations" (13), yet U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan and Iraq were charged with obtaining rapid results to undermine an insurgency. As a result, questions of democratic accountability were quickly cast aside, a problem that only grew as the military dealt with personnel shortages by contracting projects out to for-profit firms. If the aspirations of local populations for schools, hospitals, roads, and business opportunities frequently ran counter to the immediate desire of U.S. military officers to secure intelligence and provide work for would-be insurgents, massive infrastructure contracts to U.S. firms like Brown and Root often did nothing at all for the local population. Replicating the racial division of labor in wealthy Persian Gulf States, Brown and Root imported Filipinos, Sri Lankans, Indians, and Nepalis to lay brick and serve meals at the massive Bagram air base, leaving Afghans out of the picture altogether. Military priorities also raised questions about the longer-term future of the country. In the 2010 fiscal year, Hodge notes, the United States Congress appropriated \$6.6 billion for the Afghan Security Forces Fund, dwarfing the entire Afghan national budget of \$890 million (289). Whenever the United States finally departs and ends its commitment there, what engines of longer-term economic growth will sustain a large, unemployed, heavily armed pool of young men?

As Hodge makes clear, U.S. attempts to transform development into a weapon of war also ran aground on the question of political legitimacy. Any attempt at sustained development requires the participation of a capable and broadly supported partner, yet finding such a partner has been an intractable problem. In Iraq, as the Coalition Provisional Authority resorted to distributing bags of cash for U.S. commanders to use in an attempt to keep local men on the payroll and out of the insurgency, little was done to try to expand the responsibilities of the new government in development planning. Pervasive corruption in Baghdad only worsened the situation, and with lucrative private contracts to U.S. and international firms absorbing funding, comparatively little aid actually went to the intended recipients. In Kabul, prospects were even bleaker. By 2008, international assistance accounted for up to 90 percent of all public expenditures in Afghanistan, yet the Afghan government could not explain how a full third of all aid to the country, about \$5 billion since 2001, was actually

spent (283). As Hodge rightly reflects, in the absence of an effective and functioning government, U.S.-driven development projects are unlikely to survive the impending American departure.

The U.S. military's turn to development work also created serious tensions with non-government organizations as well. The proponents of PRTs ultimately envisioned a combined effort in which civilian experts, including diplomats, agronomists, and development professionals from the State Department, the Agency for International Development (USAID), and NGOs, would work harmoniously with their military counterparts. As organizations like CARE and Save the Children argued, however, such an arrangement would jeopardize their independence. With senior military officers in charge in the field, aid workers would find their priorities subsumed by security demands. More seriously, as the line between humanitarian service and counterinsurgency blurred, NGOs would forfeit their commitments to neutrality and impartiality, in some cases making access to local populations difficult or impossible. Perceived by locals as active combatants, aid workers would also become targets as well. While some relief workers rejected that view, noting that non-governmental personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq were already being attacked by insurgents, several major organizations remained unwilling to follow the military lead. In Iraq, the International Rescue Committee, WorldVision, and CARE all declined to join a \$35 million program sponsored by USAID to rebuild schools and health clinics, arguing that to participate would undermine their primary mission to provide humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable (75).

For American social scientists, the military's turn toward development raised fundamental questions of independence and integrity as well. To facilitate the counterinsurgency project in Afghanistan and Iraq, military planners created Human Terrain Teams, embedding social scientists within combat units so that they might provide cultural and ethnographic assessments for officers to use in combat decision making. For some scholars who joined the teams, the idea was an attractive one. If their guidance could help soldiers avoid cultural offenses, give officers a better sense of how to respond to local leaders, and identify areas in which threats did not exist, they might be able to reduce the level of violence directed at civilian populations and encourage collaborations that could enhance security while meeting local needs. Others, however, worried about the blurring of "ethnographic research" and "intelligence." As the American Anthropological Association protested, the core ethical directive of their discipline was to first "do no harm" to the people under study. To provide information that would be used to make decisions about targeting populations would obviously violate that principle. Dissenters questioned the quality of the research as well. How meaningful could consent be when an Afghan farmer was questioned by a social scientist in uniform backed by an armed platoon? As Hodge cogently asks, "How much useful ethnographic or cultural information could be extracted under such conditions? Would villagers simply tell researchers what they wanted to hear? How, in the long term, did researchers expect to build rapport with ordinary people when they were swaddled in body armor, and carrying weapons?" (245).

Hodge's analysis is persuasive, and it provides a welcome addition to the critiques

of U.S. policy made by writers like Rajiv Chandrasekaran, Anthony Shadid, and Fred Kaplan. It also builds on the broader reflections about development and security put forward by scholars like Mark Duffield. Hodge is surely correct as well that the trend toward militarized development demands serious public debate. While the level of political violence has certainly declined in Iraq, that result may have more to do with the playing-out of ethnic cleansing and sectarian strife in that country than any sort of developmental success. The quality of life that the Iraqi people will experience in the future, moreover, remains an open question at best. In Afghanistan, ten years of war have failed to achieve any lasting political resolution, as violence has continued to devastate that country's population. As U.S. troop withdrawal begins, moreover, the United States has achieved very little in the way of sustainable development. The enormous expense associated with these wars, carried forward amid a punishing economic recession, also demonstrates the need for a critical public examination of the limits of the U.S. ability to promote development as a weapon of war. In the long run, U.S. policies and military operations cannot create democratic, politically legitimate governments in Afghanistan and Iraq that are capable of alleviating poverty, improving education, providing healthcare, and securing human rights. Ultimately, those goals can only be achieved by Afghans and Iraqis.²

By identifying an important turn in U.S. foreign and military policy, Hodge's book may help promote that realization. Yet his interpretation would have benefited from a greater analysis of the extent to which Afghan and Iraqi actors have brought their own agendas for development into play. Focused on the framing and execution of U.S. policy, Hodge delivers an account in which those on the receiving end of militarized development remain largely silent. His attempt to "tell this story from the point of view of the practitioners" (301) allows him to depict the ambitions and frustrations of American actors on the ground, working in a cultural and political environment that they often poorly understood. But, unfortunately, it also renders Iraqi and Afghan figures as opaque to the reader as they were to the Americans who encountered them in the field. A more complete perspective would recover their voices. What visions of development and structural change did diverse Iraqi and Afghan movements bring to the table? How did they reject, appropriate, or negotiate plans for reconstruction and development with U.S. and coalition forces in addition to the new Iraqi and Afghan governments? Analyzing those competing visions of development and their implementation on the ground would provide an important lens through which to consider the contest over the future of these countries.

Hodge's analysis would also have been enriched by a much greater recognition that the trend he discusses is hardly new. Hodge does reflect on the extent to which U.S. counterinsurgency advocates tried to mine the lessons of Vietnam, drawing on and modifying the village-level "strategic hamlet" programs implemented there. But this barely scratches the surface. Indeed, the phenomenon Hodge analyzes is less a "tectonic shift" than an expansion and renewal of a pattern and mode of thinking that dates well back into the Cold War era. As decolonization expanded following World War II, U.S. policymakers were deeply worried that conditions of poverty and rising nationalist expectations would provide fertile ground for subversive ideologies, giving communists and their supporters an opportunity to derail a supposedly natural

transition toward liberal capitalist democracies. Policies of modernization and development, deployed in tandem with U.S. military and political interventions, were intended to accelerate and direct social change in order to alter the Cold War's essential playing field. In case after case, moreover, the imperatives of security ultimately overrode democratic aspirations. When liberalization created space for political dissent or the promotion of nationalist alternatives to the existing socioeconomic order, oligarchs cast their opponents as subversives and called upon U.S. assistance in an attempt to eliminate any and all opposition. Instead of democratic development, the United States frequently wound up bolstering repressive, dictatorial regimes that had no interest at all in liberal reforms and eagerly waged war on their own people.³

A look backward demonstrates that the uneasy blend of reformist, developmental ambitions with policies of counterinsurgency and coercion is deeply rooted in American policy. During the 1960s, for example, U.S. policymakers expected that rapid improvements in economic growth would help prevent the conditions in which revolutionary movements might gain strength, opening doors for political radicalism and Soviet subversion. In Latin America, those convictions helped give rise to the Alliance for Progress, a massive plan for accelerated regional development. In 1961, the Kennedy administration promised to deliver \$1 billion in public funds for the program in its first year, and to raise \$20 billion from a combination of private investment and international lending through the remainder of the decade. The program's goals, moreover, were framed in decidedly liberal terms. Countries receiving aid were expected to frame national development plans that would alleviate poverty, improve education, expand healthcare, and provide housing in addition to stimulating trade and industry. All of this moreover, was to be coupled with the strengthening of democratic institutions, promoting a "middle-class revolution" that would forge coalitions among professionals, small businessmen, educators, and civil servants in favor of progressive, forward-thinking governments. The region's oligarchies, the theory went, would come to recognize that, as Kennedy put it, "those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable."

In practice, however, the results rarely met expectations. Because U.S. plans gave short shrift to the salience of local political history and context and assumed that the solvent of economic growth would easily transform malleable populations and institutions, they seriously underestimated the extent to which Latin America's conservative elites would reject reformist plans of any kind. In countries like Guatemala, for example, Alliance for Progress funding helped support literacy campaigns, rural cooperatives, and political training programs that gave poor peasants and Indians the resources needed to carve out a measure of independence from the control of large landowners and merchants who exploited them as a dependent plantation labor force. Yet, bent on linking developmental advance with the imperatives of security, the Alliance also delivered a steady flow of U.S. military and counterinsurgency aid to the Guatemalan government. Ultimately, such internal contradictions helped fuel devastating violence. Determined to contain a threat from a newly mobilized population, Guatemalan elites rolled back a decade of land reform, crushed nationalist opponents and rural adversaries, red-baited political dissenters, and used U.S. support to launch a brutal counterinsurgency campaign. The U.S. commitment to liberal reform,

moreover, quickly faded. Between 1961 and 1963, the United States delivered \$4.3 million in military aid to Guatemala. Bolstered by that support, in the fall of 1966, the Guatemalan military launched a “scorched earth” campaign that ultimately killed roughly eight thousand people in peasant communities suspected of being in league with local guerrilla movements. As right-wing death squads began to operate, military collaboration also promoted the kidnapping, disappearance, and murder of activists across the political spectrum. Yet U.S. assistance continued to help shore up a military dictatorship, amplifying the domestic factors that ultimately produced a civil war and ongoing violence that cost the lives of roughly 200,000 people over the next thirty years. While some liberal voices within the U.S. government condemned the intransigence of the Guatemalan ruling class, the fundamental problems were more deeply rooted. Rapidly accelerated development, U.S. policymakers had assumed, was not only achievable in the space of a few years but would also completely redefine local politics and culture, sweeping all before it in a progressive transformation. When those results failed to emerge, moreover, the U.S. commitment to democratic reform quickly faded, and an unyielding commitment to security at all costs was all that remained.⁴

One finds a similar trajectory in cases like that of Iran, where Cold War expectations that rapidly accelerated development would yield improvements in security ultimately foundered as well. As in Guatemala, U.S. policymakers also lacked any real commitment to sustainable democracy, choosing instead to back Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s authoritarian vision of modernization and supporting a government determined to maintain a system of political oppression. Following the U.S.-backed coup that restored his power in 1953, the shah had worked to maintain firm authoritarian control, rejecting calls for greater political freedom, preventing the creation of effective labor unions, and striving to ensure that petroleum revenues continued to climb. Content to support a regime that kept oil flowing and prevented Soviet influence, the United States also provided the shah’s government with an average of \$64.5 million in annual economic aid between 1954 and 1961. By the early 1960s, however, growing popular protests and political mobilization driven by high inflation, poor harvests, and endemic corruption worried Washington. While the shah maintained the support of large landowners and conservative businessmen, his regime appeared increasingly vulnerable and unstable. U.S. government analysts remained divided on what an appropriate American response might be, but ultimately the United States elected to back the shah’s “White Revolution,” a 1963 proposal to restructure Iranian society and politics through land reform, profit-sharing for industrial workers, improved literacy, women’s suffrage, and the sale of state-owned enterprises to entrepreneurs. Reasoning that such a developmental course would create new ties between an awakening peasantry and a “modernizing monarch,” policymakers hoped that such reforms would ultimately prevent radical movements from emerging and enhance security as well. They also turned a blind eye toward the shah’s increasingly repressive practices, standing by as his forces attacked demonstrators and watching from the sidelines as the regime’s security forces expanded the reach of the ruling political party into the countryside. As the shah slowly abandoned land reform and transferred large parcels to Iranian and multinational agribusinesses, peasants often found themselves with little access to credit and holdings far too small to support

their families. By the mid-1970s, as peasants and rural wage laborers moved into overcrowded slums in major cities, alienated, poorly paid migrant workers began to play important roles in supporting the growing political opposition to the shah, joining Islamic leaders and protesters in demanding his removal. All the while, U.S. aid enabled the shah to build the world's fifth-largest military, and Washington continued to back a government with one of the worst human rights records in the world. Instead of ensuring long-term security and stability, the links between development, coercion, and counterinsurgency ultimately helped prepare the ground for another kind of transformation, the Iranian Revolution of 1979.⁵

A close examination of cases like these should give us pause, but in the current climate the idea that security and development can be easily paired as mutual objectives now recasts those older assumptions. Once more, American policymakers have turned toward approaches that they believe will engineer rapid transformations, sweeping aside local institutions, histories, and ways of life. In contrast to the modernization plans of the 1960s, however, which relied heavily on visions of state-led national planning, the recent framework promoted by Washington policymakers is a decidedly neoliberal one. "Development," in such terms, simply occurs when the global map of economic integration expands and the "failed" or "rogue" states are brought into the mainstream of international commerce, finance, and trade. Such a perspective suggests that markets will ultimately produce miraculous results, resolving ethnic and sectarian conflict, raising living standards, preventing the appeals of radical Islam, and fostering responsible, democratic governance. In such a formulation, states don't really have to be built: markets only need to be liberated. Given this perspective, it is hardly surprising that "sustainability" is not a pressing concern in the current policy framework.

As Hodge rightly suggests, a productive national debate over the limits of armed "nation-building" will ultimately have to challenge such a foreshortened view. By reducing the complex challenges of development to an instrumental means by which to achieve security, the need for a serious analysis of the deep structural and historical forces that have left so much of the Global South in crushing poverty is easily pushed aside. As in the past, questions of democracy are also placed on very tenuous ground. To whom, after all, are the "armed humanitarians" deployed in places like Iraq and Afghanistan ultimately accountable? What incentives remain to help promote policies and institutions through which enduring commitments to human rights might be secured? Hodge's insightful account reveals the extent to which such pressing matters have now been pushed beyond the range of consideration. If history is any guide, reducing development to a weapon of war will most likely leave little in the way of lasting benefits for those subjected to it. It also threatens to undermine the ongoing challenge of finding ways to substantially improve the lives of the world's most vulnerable populations.

NOTES

1. For some of the primary sources, see Thomas P. M. Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Putnam, 2004); Sarah Sewall et al., *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

2. Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Anthony Shadid, *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War* (New York: Holt, 2005); Fred Kaplan, *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2008); Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (London: Zed, 2001).

3. On modernization generally, see Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); David Engerman et al., *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); and Michael E. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011).

4. For an excellent treatment of this history, see Stephen M. Streeter, "Nation-Building in the Land of Eternal Counterinsurgency: Guatemala and the Contradictions of the Alliance for Progress," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2006): 57–68. See also Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Latham, *Right Kind of Revolution*, 124–33.

5. On the Iranian case and U.S. policy, see James F. Goode, *The United States and Iran: In the Shadow of Musaddiq* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997); Ali M. Ansari, "The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, 'Modernization' and the Consolidation of Power," *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2001): 1–24; Ali Farazmand, *The State, Bureaucracy, and Revolution in Modern Iran: Agrarian Reforms and Regime Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1989); Latham, *Right Kind of Revolution*, 143–52.