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Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama

by Jeremi Suri

Reviewed by Louis J. Nigro, Jr., US Ambassador (Retired), Ph.D, and author of *The New Diplomacy in Italy*

We will be involved in nation building for years to come.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, June 2008

America, it is time to focus on nation building here at home.

President Obama, June 22, 2011

Jeremi Suri's study of America's experience with nation building is an ambitious monograph that addresses a critical contemporary strategic and national security policy issue by putting it into historical perspective. In so doing, Suri makes an original, if not entirely satisfactory, contribution to the history of US diplomacy and foreign policy; to the scholarly debate on "the American way of war"; and to the policy debate over the usefulness and efficacy of nation building as an element in US national security policy and practice.

Suri, who is Professor of History at the University of Texas at Austin, took the title of his book from Washington's 1796 Farewell Address, which is a good place to start for this attempt to define what he considers America's most original and enduring contribution to "grand strategy." The author's thesis is that the Founders' great accomplishment was the first successful attempt to build a nation-state out of its preexisting raw materials—political, demographic, cultural, and economic. For Suri, the nation-building gene is the key strand in America's national DNA and the key to understanding America's engagement with the world since 1776. Nation building created the new United States and dictated its policy of continental expansion, as territories became states of the Union across the continent. Nation building has also characterized the US approach to solving international problems and promoting international stability, becoming in the process America's home-grown "grand strategy" in a dangerous world.

Suri tests and illustrates his thesis by examining five American nation-building experiences. In "Reconstruction after Civil War," Suri describes the national effort to reconstruct a single and more perfect union as "the most intensive and aggressive nation-building endeavor of the nineteenth century." The author focuses on the work of a unique institution, the Freedmen's Bureau, that was the main civilian engine of the Northern effort to bring political, economic, and social development to the backward, "failed state" that was the post-bellum South. He emphasizes that Abraham Lincoln "looked back to . . . the American founding to articulate Union aims in the Civil War." Most historians would not consider Reconstruction of the former Confederacy as successful as Suri does.

In “Reconstruction after Empire,” Suri examines how the United States refused after the Spanish-American War to make the Philippines the first piece of a traditional colonial empire and opted instead to create a new, democratic nation-state and American ally in the Far Pacific, “navigating as Americans always do between opposition to empire and fear of chaos.” Suri concentrates on future President William Howard Taft’s civilian efforts to implement America’s first attempted nation-building project outside the continental United States. He pays little attention to the intensive parallel military effort there.

In “Reconstruction after Fascism,” the author addresses US policy toward Germany after the Second World War, emphasizing the roles of President Truman’s political decisiveness, former President Hoover’s vision for post-war Western Europe, and the Marshall Plan, which institutionalized Truman’s and Hoover’s ideas. The result was a “self-sustaining, sovereign nation-state”—a democratic and prosperous Germany that anchored the US strategy of “containing” the Soviet Union in Europe. This is Suri’s most successful application of his thesis.

In “Reconstruction after Communist Revolution,” the author tackles Vietnam, seeking to explain America’s ultimate strategic failure by its refusal to engage Ho Chi Minh early in the post-war period and to partner with him to apply American nation building experience to unify and develop Vietnam. This requires him to do some creative reimagining of history. In “Reconstruction after September 11,” Suri praises General David Petraeus’s management of the “surge” in Iraq, which he calls “a return to more traditional American nation-building,” after the United States failed to apply those “traditional” methods in Afghanistan soon after the quick military victory there in 2001.

In his “Conclusion: The Future of Nation-building,” he attempts, not very deftly, to lecture the current administration on foreign policy priorities by advancing what he calls “the 5 Ps of national building, and politics in general: Partnerships, Process, Problem-Solving, Purpose, and People.” This is the least satisfactory part of the book.

The book has its faults, but the author makes a timely contribution by using the past to inform and illuminate current scholarly and policy debates on nation building. His imperfect but provocative effort should be followed up with more sustained inquiries by experts, not only into the early nation-building episodes Suri treats, but also other similar US efforts in Cuba, Haiti, and Central America in the early twentieth century, as James Dobbins and various collaborators have done for US nation-building enterprises since the Second World War, including *After the War: Nation-Building from FDR to George W. Bush* (2008); *After the Taliban: Nation-Building in Afghanistan* (2008); and *America’s Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq* (2003).