

WHERE HAVE ALL THE NATION BUILDERS GONE?

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, SEP 26 2009

Six months ago the US military was being praised by many security specialists as finally having gotten it – understanding that its future was counter-insurgency best practices which means nation building under fire from insurgents in the world's toughest neighborhoods. Yes, it had taken a while, but the military's top leadership had finally seen the light. Future war was fighting insurgencies, and counter-insurgency was an inter-agency military/civilian team effort requiring skills in building governments, putting in the national plumbing—lights, roads, sewerage, schools—and protecting the citizens from insurgents while training the local military to conduct security operations and to think and behave democratically.

General Petraeus wrote the manual. All the big think tanks and study groups had called it. America needed to nation build to fight terrorism. Secretary Gates had cut the programs of the old thinkers who wanted Cold War type systems instead of signing up the new fight. The neo-cons had been banished, but their democracy spreading anti-al Qaeda strategy had melded nearly seamlessly with liberal internationalist doctrine stating that our moral obligation was to create a better world by helping rid far away places of oppressive, intolerant regimes.

Afghanistan was to be the test case. Iraq was the bad war, but Afghanistan was the good one. Our allies were there, NATO somehow being tricked to show up. The UN was there. Humanitarian groups were there. Next door was a threaten Pakistan, the Muslim nation with nuclear weapons and an extremist presence. We had to get Afghanistan right. The new administration was for it. The new security team was filled with advocates recruited from the think tanks and academia, people who had done the articles and conference volumes on the subject. Most of the correspondents covering the war were on board. There was consensus as consensus exists these days.

And today it all seems so long ago. There is hardly anyone beyond the few neo-cons left standing and some Republican commentators who is willing to endorse the military's plan for the full nation building deal. Counter-insurgent advocates are silent. Liberal interventionists are silent. We only hear how corrupt the Afghan government is and how backward Afghanistan is as if this is news. The Obama administration is supposedly mulling its options, ignoring the nation building goals it was talking up for Afghanistan in March.

I think the health care debate did it. The Obama administration is having a much harder fight to gain enactment of health care reform than seemed likely in the spring. The big Democrat majorities it has in Congress are apparently not big enough to get it done. The cost of reform is being questioned especially after the series of expensive bail outs for the nation's banks, housing market, and auto industry. War and domestic reform don't mix well. In the modern parade of Democrat Party presidents, President Franklin Roosevelt did reform first then war, President Harry Truman did war, not reform, President Lyndon Johnson tried reform and war simultaneously, and essentially lost both and a Democrat majority for a generation, President Jimmy Carter did nothing, and President Clinton tried but gave up on both reform and war. I think President Obama is going to give up on the war, not surrendering outright but finding a way to make the war less important politically than reform or less visible until reform is secure. Most of the nation builders are loyal Democrats and will hold their tongues. The war has been postponed.

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About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.