

# Should we Rebuild 'Failed States' or 'Let Them Fail'?

Written by Michael Williams

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## Should we Rebuild 'Failed States' or 'Let Them Fail'?

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Geoffrey Herbst, declared: “Let them fail” (2004, pp.302-318). Herbst’s sentiment regarding “failed” and “failing” states (2004, pp.302-318) is, however, not one which this essay supports completely. However, in keeping with the essence of Herbst’s argument, this essay will argue *against* the “rebuilding” of “failed” or “failing states”. The countless documented problems associated with state building (see, for example: Lemay Hebert, 2011, pp.190-211) create a situation in which it would be irresponsible to advocate further state building efforts until, at the very least, certain theoretical assumptions which underpin this course of action have been re-evaluated and consensus established. This essay will attempt to hone in on those theoretical assumptions and in so doing, explore their risks, weaknesses and fragilities. This essay will focus on the primacy of the Weberian understanding of the state in Western academic and policy circles and the implications of that dominance on understandings of state building and state failure and the attitudes that it can potentially encourage. A series of questions will be asked: What is the state? What is a “failed state”? What is “state building”? In responding to each of these questions, the essay will attempt to demonstrate how the Weberian definition of the state has come to dominate each concept and how that dominance is to the detriment to the overall legitimacy and arguably effectiveness of state-building efforts.

Of crucial importance to understanding what state-building entails and to identifying which states have failed, is the definition of the state itself. The most-used definition of the modern state is often attributed to Weber and his idea that the state is a human community with a “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (quoted in Lemay-Hebert, 2013, p.2). Weber believed that the formation of modern Western states relied on the strengthening and development of the bureaucratic functions over time (Lemay-Hebert, 2013, p.2). Additionally, Hay and Lister define the modern state as follows:

...an *institutional* complex claiming sovereignty for itself as the supreme political authority within a defined territory for whose governance it is responsible (2006, p. 5). (Emphasis added).

Within the Weberian understanding of the state, the state and the government are seen as being inseparable, to the extent of being seen as one and the same (Aydinli, 2010, p.693). This understanding of the state is pervasive in policy circles. One such example can be seen in a 2010 practice paper from the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) which defines the state as “the principal unit for exercising public authority in modern times” (2010, p.12). In such understandings, institutions become the key component of the state. According to this interpretation, if state institutions (which implement and maintain the state’s control over the territory) fail, then the state as an entity has failed and therefore the institutions and the state need to be rebuilt and restored.

The predominance of the Weberian interpretation of the state is highlighted in the failed state phenomenon. The modern conception of the failed state is believed to have originated with the emergence of a supposedly “benign” security environment in the aftermath of the Cold War, as many U.S national security policy makers proposed a shift in emphasis of defence policy towards how to deal with “weak states” as a key threat to stability and US interests (Mazarr, 2014, p.114). The manner in which the failed state thesis emerged is, in itself, extremely problematic in that it seems to indicate that the sudden absence of a clear threat (from the USSR) led to the new threat being seized upon without much consideration of the empirical evidence of a threat.

Ratner and Helmand are widely credited with having coined the term “failed state” in a 1992 Foreign Policy article

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entitled "Saving Failed States" (pp.3-20) (Foreign Policy is, coincidentally, the same magazine that publishes the annual Fund For Peace Failed State Index). In that article, which served as a foundation for much of the literature regarding failed states, Ratner and Helman defined a "failed nation state" as "utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community" (1992, p.3). The article is particularly illustrative of the neo-colonial attitude that arguably underpins much of the failed state thesis. Ratner (who held a position with the US State Department) and Helman (a former US ambassador to the UN), vilify the "almost exaggerated" (1992, p.9) importance that many non-western states place on the "doctrine of sovereignty" (1992, p.10), deriding the manner in which some states insist on having their sovereignty respected. The trivialisation of the sovereignty of non-western states is indicative of the approach that seems to have been adopted, to a greater or lesser degree, by the West when it comes to failed states. One can see that, from the outset, the failed state thesis was focused "outward" to "them", as opposed to inward to "us" and asked the question: "How can we make them look more like us?". The very notion of ranking states in terms of how they compare to the "ideal" Western model of a state is a clear example of the assumptions made by Western states. The suggestion is clearly that all states must be like Western ones in order to be successful. State building effectively privileges the "modernisation agenda to the detriment of traditionality" (Bereketab, p. 377, 2011) and steamrolls cultural and social differences that are so crucial to the identity of states, nations and their people.

Charles T. Call has been particularly prominent in highlighting the shortcomings of the concept of the failed state, referring, to it as a "fallacy" (2008, p.1491). Call emphasises the broad range of states that have been described as "failed" states, from Colombia to North Korea, East Timor to Iraq and that there is no concrete definition of what exactly a failed state is (2008, p. 1491). Yet the willingness of many policy makers and academics to seek solutions to a problem that has still not been clearly defined is perhaps revealing. Implicit in the lack of effort to define failed states before acting to "resuscitate" them is the idea that it is not necessary to clearly define a failed state precisely because there is never any danger of "us" being seen as a failed state. "We" decide what a failed state is and "we" "know it when we see it".

The Weberian interpretation of a "failed state", with its myopic emphasis on strong institutions, can have potentially dangerous consequences for the human security of the citizens in a state concerned. In spite of the various claims of the advocates of state building, this narrow view can encourage actors to disregard the actual human security of people within a state, provided that a state has successfully maintained its institutions. A key example of this can be found by considering the 2004 World Health Organisation (WHO) statistics regarding specific causes of death in each country and comparing them with the respective rankings of certain countries in the Fund for Peace (FFP) Failed State Index in 2005 (the first such Index published). In 2005, Somalia was ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the FFP Failed State Index (FFP, 2005), and was reported by the WHO in 2004 to have had 58.8 deaths per 100,000 people as a result of injuries related specifically to "war" and 62.1 deaths per 100,000 people as result of injuries related to "war" and "violence" combined (WHO, 2004). South Africa, which does not appear in the 2005 Failed State Index rankings (FFP, 2005) and was not undergoing any civil war, is reported by the WHO to have had 67.9 deaths per 100,000 people as a result of "violence" alone in 2004 (WHO, 2004). Therefore, South Africa, a state generally regarded as having fully functioning state institutions and a democratic system of governance (two of the key aspects that state building efforts attempt to develop), was arguably a more violent and dangerous place to live than Somalia – a state that has been consistently used and accepted as the most clear-cut example of state failure (Call, 2008, p. 1492).

This Weberian-based understanding of state failure led to the emergence of a very specific approach to state building. Although Lemay-Hebert argues that there are two approaches to state building- an institutional approach and a legitimacy approach – he nonetheless acknowledges the predominance of the Weberian, institutional, foundation in much of the academic analysis (2013, p. 6). Paris and Sisk, in attempting to define state building, describe a shift that occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s from "peace-building" to what they call "statebuilding":

...the construction or strengthening of legitimate institutions in countries emerging from civil conflict... (2009, p.1)

The dominance of the institutional approach in statebuilding is further demonstrated by Wolff, who considers the debate not to be whether institutions are the most suitable means of state-building, but which institutions should be targeted (2011, p.1777). With this in mind, one is forced to ask the question of who decides what "good governance"

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entails?

There seems to be a patriarchal assumption made by many Western states and NGOs that it is their responsibility to intervene and “sort out” the problems of “troublesome” states in the so-called “third world”. Di John argues that state failure, although a new “label”, is by no means a new phenomenon in Western thinking, with colonial occupiers taking the idea of “state failure” (although not described using the same wording) very seriously, arguing that it was incumbent upon them to intervene in various states in order to quell the savagery therein (2010, p.11). Furthermore, Biccum highlights, in her analysis of DFID’s promotional literature, that there is no connection made (by DFID in particular) between the poverty that currently exists in many countries and history of colonialism in those countries with poverty depicted as a “new global challenge” devoid of any historical connection (2005, p.1014). The insistence of former colonisers that it is their responsibility, and indeed right, to restructure the internal workings of their (former) colonies suggests a hankering to continue the colonisation tradition by continuing to exert control, either by remote or not-so-remote means.

Many authors have been especially critical of the manner in which state building is often justified from the perspective of “us”, i.e., the more stable, powerful and external entity. Boas and Jennings highlight the fact that many strategy documents from the Western world which reflect on failed states are essentially “self-referential” (Boas & Jennings, 2005, p.388), in that “failed states” only matter when they have the potential to impact on “our” security (Boas & Jennings, 2005, p.388). It seems that in the context of state building, moral values and pragmatic self-interest can be used interchangeably as a justification for action. For example, the DFID strategy paper “Building Stability Overseas Strategy” when explaining “Why does stability matter to the UK”, offers the following headings: “A catastrophe for the individuals and the countries involved...” (2011, p.7) (pointing to human security concerns) and “A threat to our security and prosperity...” (2011, p.8) (explaining how the UK’s security and wealth are adversely affected by state instability). Biccum summarises the uncomfortable combination of various justifications:

... poverty is constructed as both a ‘threat’ to ‘us’ and a moral obligation for ‘us’ which also just happens to coincide with ‘our’ economic interest. (2005, p.1016)

Newman in particular has highlighted the weakness of basing both peace-building and state-building efforts on what he refers to as a “liberal-institutionalist approach”- pointing to the various cases, such as Bosnia and East Timor, in which state building has successfully ensured the establishment of institutions without any actual improvement of the human security of the populations in a weak state (2011, p.1746). It appears that, provided regional and international security is maintained and human security issues remain within the boundaries of a state, the “international community” is less concerned and a strategy of containment is pursued as opposed to real resolution of issues.

The unquestioned dominance of the Weberian understanding of the state also has practical implications in terms of state building efforts as policy makers often seem to disregard the possibility that understandings of the state may vary between countries and cultures. Institutions have become the priority in terms of understanding of the state and have therefore also become the priority in terms of understanding state-building. This prioritisation often comes at the expense of local, traditional systems. This is well illustrated by the following extract from a DFID practice paper:

In fragile contexts it [state building] often reveals tensions between state and non-state actors, with each wanting to exert influence and establish a dominant position. In Afghanistan, state institutions coexist uneasily, with complex local power structures, including tribal and clan groups, religious institutions, armed militias and criminal networks. The dominance of these structures is a significant challenge to the state-building process (2010, p.12).

That the preceding passage has, wittingly or unwittingly, placed local tribal and clan groups and religious institutions into the same category as criminal networks is a feat of cultural insensitivity that would be difficult to match. More importantly however, this effectively illustrates the manner in which local traditional power systems are often marginalised in the process of state-building. These “local power structures”, which perhaps do not exist as prominently in western states or exist in a more “institutionalised” form, are characterised as an obstacle to state-building rather than as the potential building blocks to successful and legitimate governance that they could be. These approaches, based as they are on the promotion of institutional strength, assume that institutions and

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institutional methods are the sole measure of legitimacy in a country – an assumption which has proven to be false in many societies and experiences of state-building. The theoretical underpinning of such culturally insensitive policy approaches lies in the assumption that the Weberian conception of the state is the only viable one.

Therefore when considering state-building efforts and interventions one should ask the question of whether or not they are ethical. If rebuilding is occurring on the basis of interests as opposed to values, then can we be sure that the rebuilding is being done in a way that will improve the human security of the people within the state in question? Do state and regional stability considerations override human security concerns in the eyes of the western world?

If state building is ever to be implemented with any sense of legitimacy and objectivity it needs to move beyond western bias and understanding of a successful state as one composed of strong institutions as, drawing upon the example of South Africa, the success or failure of institutions can have little to no bearing on the human security of the people in a state. As Newman argues, state building and peace building efforts need to be refocused on what best serves the human security of the citizens of a state (2011, pp. 1737-1756), whether that is western-like institutional governance or traditional systems or otherwise should be adapted accordingly. The practice of approaching state-building through the implementation of the same technical, institution-building process regardless of the context in which it is occurring, is no-longer, and arguably never was, viable. Furthermore the very idea of a failed state, with its very clear biases and interpretations of success and failure, should be abandoned or redefined, in order to allow for more objective analysis of the human security in individual countries and how best to approach each issue.

Therefore on the basis of theoretical and conceptual failings, this paper is opposed to the “rebuilding” of “failed” states. It is important to highlight that this does not necessarily signify agreement with Herbst’s somewhat abrasive and sensationalising statement “Let them fail”, or even with the arguments that he posits in support of this statement.

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