Enforcing the Peace: Learning from the Imperial Past

edited by Kimberly Zisk Marten

Although it is still too early to determine whether the United States-led regime change in Iraq will be judged ultimately to have been a success or a failure—much will depend on how Americans themselves come to define “victory” in what appears to have become an intractable situation—it is already clear that one of the George W. Bush administration’s critical mistakes was the incredibly high expectations that some officials allowed to be raised in the lead-up to the war. It is simply mind-boggling how any country emerging from decades of brutal totalitarian rule, much less one that did so only to unleash deep ethnic and sectarian cleavages even as rapacious neighbors stood ready to exploit the divisions, could have been expected to become a model of freedom and prosperity in a region buffeted by extremist ideological currents and suffering from overall economic stagnation.

Although the notion that Iraq could have been quickly transformed into an oasis of Jeffersonian (or even Hamiltonian) democracy would have benefited by comparison with Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist nightmare) and a functional economy as the country was secured and made steady progress toward greater political and economic openness over time? In short, as the Iraqis failed to play the roles scripted for them in the neoconservative morality play and Americans began assuming responsibility for everything from the supply of electricity to intertribal mediation to constitution writing, the United States fell victim to that recurrent Achilles’ heel of hegemonic powers, imperial overreach. What can great powers actually achieve by their interventions in failed or failing states? Even if a course of action is possible, does it necessarily follow that it should be undertaken from the viewpoint of the national interests of the intervener and citizens who are the putative objects of the intervention?

These questions underlie the inquiry in Enforcing the Peace: Learning from the Imperial Past by Kimberly Zisk Marten, an associate professor of political science at Barnard College. Although the study was completed in early 2004 and was published at the end of that year—a new edition of the work that incorporates case studies from Afghanistan and Iraq in addition to earlier focuses on interventions in Haiti, Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Timor Leste was just released—its basic thrust is perhaps even timelier today.

What distinguishes Marten’s study from other works that cover the same terrain—the use of military forces by strong liberal democratic states to keep or restore peace and rebuild order in weaker states—is that it does not treat those “nation-building” exercises as novel phenomena of the postcold-war era. Although she notes the differences that set her chosen case studies apart from the traditional cease-fire-monitoring “peacekeeping” of United Nations forces, Marten also finds parallels with an older attempt by Western liberal
democracies to control and remake foreign societies, the colonialism of the turn of the twentieth century.

Although it is clear that there are differences between the imperialism practiced a century ago by liberal states—Marten focuses on Great Britain, France, and the United States—and the interventions that were internationally sanctioned (even if, in the case of Kosovo and Iraq, only after the fact) in the course of the last decade, both sets of operations were pursued for a combination of national security interests and humanitarian concerns that were intertwined and reinforced each other. In the colonial era, Marten writes, “control over foreign territory was justified by the great powers as a way for the civilized nations of the world to bring economic development and political enlightenment to those who would otherwise be without them.” At the same time, she notes, “bringing Euro-American values, institutions, and assistance to new territories was a means to enhance the security of the colonial powers.”

Note the similarity between those motivations and the conclusions of the 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States of America, which noted that “weak states … can pose a[ ]s great [a]danger to our national interests as strong states. Poverty does not make poor people into terrorists and murderers. Yet poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders.” The second edition of the document, published in 2006, went further, elaborating that “weak and impoverished states and ungoverned areas are not only a threat to their people and a burden on regional economies, but are also susceptible to exploitation by terrorists, tyrants, and international criminals.” To cite another example, British diplomat Robert Cooper, who served as a senior adviser to Prime Minister Tony Blair and then as the United Kingdom’s special representative in Afghanistan before going on to become director-general of external and politico-military affairs at the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union, has admitted that “there can be no return to imperialism in its traditional form.” Nonetheless in his book The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-first Century he contends that “a limited form of voluntary empire” involving financial assistance accompanied by international supervision, some form of negotiated trusteeship, and other versions of “soft” intervention may be inevitable “in a world where many states suffer breakdowns.”

Unlike some of her academic colleagues who have not been slow to label even UN-authorized peacekeepers as “imperialists,” Marten is not in principle opposed to such interventions. Her research, however, leads her to a realism concerning their inherent limitations, limitations that arise from both the dynamics of the relationship between the self-interests and the humanitarian impulses motivating the interventions and the complexities of the need to achieve control and democracy simultaneously. Marten notes the ironies of illiberal means to achieve what the West views as desirable, liberal results:

In the Balkans… the international community went in with great political will and became a semi-permanent occupation force. Stability in both Bosnia and Kosovo endures to this day, but does so only because of the continuing presence of foreign military troops, years after the real warfighting has stopped. International oversight is the only thing that keeps these areas on anything close to a liberal, multiethnic path of development. If foreign troops withdrew, both Bosnia and Kosovo would almost certainly reorganize themselves into ethnically divided territories that practiced illiberal policies toward minority groups.
This attempt to control another country’s political development through direct outside intervention is, according to Marten, “both inefficient and unworkable.” She notes that “nowhere have the liberal democratic military peacekeeping operations of the 1990s created liberal democratic societies.” Instead of this unrealistic type of “peacekeeping,” Enforcing the Peace proposes “security-keeping” as the primary objective to be achieved, defining the latter as doing “what it takes to help the new government gain control over the country,” including such public order measures as border control and stopping the flow of arms, contraband, and rebels, as well as facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance but would definitely not include shepherding (or dragging) countries down the paths of democratization or liberalization, even necessarily.

The model that Marten proposes would neither enforce the provisions of a settlement imposed by outsiders like the Dayton Accords for Bosnia nor attempt to coerce ethnic integration on a recalcitrant society as the Kosovo Peacekeeping Force (KFOR) has tried to do. Instead, it is “based on a fundamental belief that outsiders, no matter how well intentioned, cannot credibly force that kind of change on others,” even if they attempt to control election results and tenure in office as international representatives have done in the Balkans since the mid-1990s.

Marten’s military interventions would have as the sole overarching purpose to provide security until a new indigenous government could take over that function itself. The missions would have to involve states with both a strong interest in a stable outcome and the force capacity to undertake the intervention. (Marten prefers one state taking the lead and then choosing its partners over a looser multilateral arrangement, noting that “it is often impossible for various countries and nongovernmental actors, each operating under their own, independent set of liberal democratic norms,” to be effective since they “often champion a mutually incompatible variety of liberal democratic ends” and “do not share a common definition of what they hope to accomplish on the ground.”) The lead intervener would also have to have the determination to stay the course until stability is achieved, which, in the case of Western liberal democracies, involves the political leadership communicating to their publics why providing security to the specific foreign country in question is clearly in the national interest despite casualties, however regrettable.

But how would this “security-keeping” model work in countries that are possibly irreparably divided by historical ethnic or sectarian hatred such as Bosnia, Kosovo, and possibly Iraq? Marten suggests, but unfortunately does not elaborate, that the international community will have to rethink its notions of and criteria for sovereign juridical statehood in the face of clear cases of state failure where it is impossible to imagine a state holding together without outside force. It is certainly an avenue that needs to be explored as I have repeatedly argued with respect to sub-Saharan Africa. Others such as Council on Foreign Relations President Emeritus Leslie Gelb and former U.S. Ambassador to Croatia Peter Galbraith have begun to make similar arguments with respect to Iraq.

Marten’s thesis as applied to Iraq speaks less to the jus ad bellum than the jus post bellum. One could hold that was right given the available intelligence and the historical and political circumstances, to attack Saddam’s regime preemptively before it could oppress its subjects further, threaten regional security, or manufacture weapons of mass destruction and still question the wisdom of trying to develop—virtually overnight, no less—a liberal democracy along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates. Which is more illiberal, to question overly ambitious expectations or to expect that Iraqis—or, perhaps more accurately, the Shia Arab, Sunni Arab, Kurdish, and other ethnic and religious demographic groups living within the territory of Iraq—would place the same
priority on American notions of a democratic polity? Although it is certainly desirable that Iraqi citizens benefit from many of the liberties enjoyed by citizens of Western liberal democracies, Marten’s treatise eloquently demonstrates that it takes both material interest and moral concern on the part of both the intervener and the object of the intervention to sustain the arduous task of achieving peace and security after mass conflict and upheaval.

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**The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11**

edited by Lawrence Wright
New York: Alfred A. Knopf (2006), $27.95 hard cover, 470 pages

The publication in August 2006 of a 470-page book on pre-9/11 Al Qaeda inevitably arouses a certain skepticism. What could there really be left to say about the twice-told tales of Osama bin Laden, his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the other Al Qaeda plotters whose terrorist conspiracy caused the loss of so many lives on American soil? With well-researched, well-written, and well-received books already published on Al Qaeda—ranging from the strategic-minded accounts of former counterterrorist officials such as Michael Scheuer and coauthors Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon to the journalistic coverage of Peter Bergen and Jason Burke to the academic investigations of Rohan Gunaratna and others to the gripping 9/11 Commission Report itself—what was there still to say? What was left for Lawrence Wright, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, to find as he spent the last five years roaming the dusty streets of the Middle East in search of material for *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*?

**A Story**

Wright’s account of the personalities and events leading up to 9/11 offers a narrative as found in great historical accounts: a measured, nuanced tale of twists and turns that provides a new framework for wrapping one’s mind around the varied contingencies that culminated in those horrific attacks. Like most compelling narratives, Wright’s account is driven by its characters. The story commences with Sayyid Qutb, the intellectual grandfather of the Islamist movement, whose reactions to living in America in the 1940s and 1950s generated “ideas that would give birth to what would be called Islamic fundamentalism” (8). Wright draws a compelling picture of a man repulsed by American indulgence and frivolity and even more so by his own attraction to that behavior. In drawing a fascinating parallel between Qutb’s disdain for what he saw as American “perversion” and the shock that America felt upon reading the 1948 Kinsey Report on “Sexual Behavior in the Human Male” detailing the sexual profligacy of a country that thought itself restrained and conservative, Wright makes palpable the experiences and impressions of Qutb that would fascinate and energize Islamic fundamentalists in decades to come (12).

From Qutb the story turns to Zawahiri, whose small “underground cell” of radical Islamists provided a model for the type of terrorist group exemplified by Al Qaeda (40). Wright masterfully depicts the comfortable familial and societal setting in which Zawahiri grew up, at the same time dramatically