

## Commentary and Reply

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# On “State-Building: America’s Foreign Policy Challenge”

Robert J. Bunker

*This commentary responds to Charles J. Sullivan’s article “State-Building: America’s Foreign Policy Challenge” published in the Spring 2016 issue of Parameters (vol. 46, no. 1).*

**D**r. Sullivan’s essay, while well-articulated, urges a specific strategic approach should be undertaken which this commentator argues is not in our nation’s best interests.

Sullivan’s essay focuses on the rise of a new menace—the emergence of radical Sunni-inspired terror states in Iraq, Syria, and Libya linked to ISIL—as well as a reconstitution of Taliban sovereignty over Afghanistan. It paints a very accurate overview of issues stemming from state failure in these four countries as well as themes related to internal sectarian politics, tribalism, external power interference, poorly crafted policies and their unexpected second-order effects, and a host of other political maladies. The author rightfully acknowledges the dismal performance of the United States and its coalition partners in the promotion of state-building—specifically that founded on liberal democratic governance—in these four countries in the recent past as well as the US government’s present recalcitrance to get more deeply involved in civil wars that are seeing raging insurgencies taking place within them.

The author determines the most strategically prudent course of action for the United States is that of “...adhering to a militaristic foreign policy agenda...” to “...combat the rise of new radical-inspired states.” A centerpiece of this agenda would, by necessity, be one focused once again on ‘state-building.’

Sullivan recognizes such a strategic policy is not without its major detractors, including the fact the US government does not currently possess a “workable blueprint” to reconstruct failed states successfully. In addition, as in our successful campaigns, a small US military or coalition garrison would be required indefinitely for stabilization purposes. Still, given the mounting security concerns that now exist, state-building is viewed by the author as our best option when countering ISIL’s terror state in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, and the Taliban’s re-emergence in Afghanistan.

A number of faulty assumptions underpin the author’s strategic policy guidance. One is to suggest the transnational threat represented by an ISIL caliphate spanning Iraq, Syria, and Libya simply does not represent an existential threat to the Westphalian-state form itself. Viewing ISIL as the next generational evolution of the al-Qaeda organization, however, does indeed highlight the fact that this threat now readily

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exists outside of the modern state-centric paradigm. If we are willing to accept we are indeed operating “out of paradigm,” then all past international security assumptions we held as valid—including those related to state-building—need to be questioned.

One such presupposition is we can “orchestrate economic recoveries” in these countries in question. Put differently, we can create viable formal—hence legitimate—economies that will supersede the informal and criminal economies that presently exist, such as the poppy-opium-heroin production centered in Afghanistan. What if we were to instead assume the illicit economy is now actually the dominant economy in certain regions of the world, such as in Afghanistan? If this is indeed the new reality, then we may quickly come to the conclusion an integral component to liberal democratic governance simply cannot be accomplished there and, quite possibly, in some of the other countries.

Another presupposition mentioned is that a professionally trained local military force would be required in areas taken back from ISIL, in Syria, for instance. Even if we forget the immediate \$500 million Free Syrian Army debacle, the United States and its allies would be required to stand up a new force of Syrian fighters who are not polarized along the ends of the spectrum of Islamic radicals and Assad regime loyalists. Such a recruiting pool no longer exists—the Syrian men who have migrated to Europe in search of a better life for themselves and their families have no intentions of going back, and those men who live in refugee camps in neighboring states with their families realize their cause for democratic freedoms is lost.

Additionally, nothing negates a militaristic foreign policy like that advocated in the article for the United States like a nuclear-armed foreign power. Russian forces are now based in Syria, actively engaged in supporting their allied Assad regime against all opposing factions on the ground in the country. While the United States can operate covertly on the margins in Syria, we simply would not risk—nor should we—the escalation potential vis-à-vis Russia resulting from any overt boots-on-the-ground campaign in the country.

Critiques such as these can also be applied to the situation in Iraq, a country fragmented into Kurdish, Sunni, and Shia zones. The chance to engage in state-building for the benefit of a greater Iraq is long past. Given ongoing American tensions with Iran, and its intimate relations with the Shia population in Iraq, the southern region of the country can only be expected to see waning liberal democratic influence over time. Under such conditions, further US investment in Shia infrastructure and development makes little sense. The middle section of the country is partially controlled by ISIL. Additional Sunni territories have some affinity for ISIL, which is viewed as a partial counterbalance to the threat the Shia militias pose in the area. Only in the Kurdish zone do any type of real US state-building futures exist and then, if implemented, the negative impacts on our alliance with Turkey would certainly have to be considered, which may likely preclude such a course of action.

Brevity prevents a critique of state-building and the requirement for deployed American troops on the ground in Libya. Suffice to say, this does not represent a rational course of action on the part of the United States towards the ISIL threat. Competing governments now exist there,

along with roughly 8,000 ISIL fighters attempting to expand their self-proclaimed caliphate. This new quagmire is of immense geo-political significance to Europe and by all rights should fall within its sphere of regional security interest. Hence, Libya should come under European Union mandate, and as part of our Atlantic alliance, its domestic security needs should fall under a European burden-sharing agreement with the United States.

While the emergence of ISIL is a component of a changing world that is exiting the modern state-centric paradigm into something else—and may even represent an existential threat to the Westphalian-state model—the United States cannot become mired in multiple countries with deployed ground forces in support of prohibitively expensive social-engineering projects as a futile exercise in liberal democratic expansion. This is even more the case given our past failures in this regard, and the realization we have no viable strategic state-building plan. We, unfortunately, tend to incrementally “wing-it” once in country by literally throwing money at the problem to the benefit of corrupt local officials and businesses.

With US national debt now over \$19 trillion, the exhaustion of our armed services—especially our army—from more than a decade of constant deployments, the rise of an expansionist China and a bellicose Russian state, and the ongoing gang and cartel problems in the Americas, strategic prudence suggests we should not go “all in” to Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Libya. Rather, we should target, degrade, and undermine ISIL and the Taliban when and where we can in a measured and cost-effective manner. We must also recognize the Assad regime, supported by Iranian and Russian forces, has stabilized its position and does not appear to be in danger of imploding.

If we are entering a new and more dangerous global security era, logic suggests we marshal our strength as the last remaining superpower. Sullivan’s state-building policy guidance, in an absolute best-case scenario, would yield us nothing more than pyrrhic victories. Instead, we should reposition ourselves for continuing global influence and dominance rather than myopically becoming mired in a handful of lost causes for the long-term.

## The Author Replies

Charles J. Sullivan

I wish to extend my sincere thanks to *Parameters* for publishing my article “State-Building: America’s Foreign Policy Challenge” in its Spring 2016 issue. I would also like to thank Dr. Robert J. Bunker for his thoughtful critique of my work. One of the reasons I wrote this article was the hope of initiating (or perhaps reigniting) a discussion on US strategy in the Global War on Terror. In reading Bunker’s critique, I admittedly agree with many of his observations. Indeed, the United States faces a most daunting situation across the Middle East today. Furthermore, as I have already noted, there are many risks involved in the United States adhering to a state-building-oriented strategy. That

said, it is on strategy where Bunker and I differ. He sees state-building as too risky, and he argues America should “reposition” itself so as to maintain “global influence and dominance” in the international system. I appreciate this viewpoint, but I also believe it to be mistaken.

In endorsing a state-building-oriented strategy, I am not thinking in terms of preventing the fall of dominoes across the entirety of the Middle East. Instead, I believe a degradation-oriented approach is an acceptable strategy for the United States to pursue in certain countries where states are either failing or collapsed such as Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen. I also agree other challenges, particularly those involving Russia and China’s hegemonic aspirations have the potential to undermine the United States’ superiority in the international system. Pivoting away from the armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, in particular, may not be a wise decision. Metaphorically speaking, these four countries, in my opinion, represent the dominoes in the Global War on Terror, and what I am suggesting is America should try to stand them back up, if possible.

Syria and Libya have fallen apart, and Afghanistan and Iraq are wobbling. My preference is for America to focus its efforts primarily on Afghanistan and Iraq, but I do not think the United States can disassociate itself from Libya and Syria altogether. I believe state-building is a very bloody and costly foreign policy agenda to pursue, and Washington does not know how to go about rebuilding failed states. Adhering to a state-building-oriented strategy would involve experiencing future setbacks. Yet, I do not foresee acts of political violence within these four countries and elsewhere (as evidenced by the recent occurrence of deadly attacks in the West) letting up if the United States decides to scale down, abandon, or hand-off its state-building efforts. Europe needs America’s help in Libya, and I do not view Russia’s strategy for Syria, Iran’s strategy for Iraq, or Pakistan’s strategy for Afghanistan as sustainable.

I hope my article, along with Bunker’s critique, prove helpful to America’s future military leaders, in terms of laying out the dangers facing the United States today and the strategic options available to them. In all honesty, I very hesitantly argue on behalf of a state-building-oriented strategy. Nevertheless, I see it as America’s best option. Non-state actors like ISIL seek to transform into states. Their respective interests run counter to America’s interests across the Middle East. They have also shown themselves to be lethal adversaries. I thus believe it is in America’s interest to stifle their rise and gradually eliminate them. “Degrading” is what we are (hopefully) trying to do in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria now.

“Destroying” though entails America assisting in the rebuilding of fractured states or building of new states within these countries. Rest assured, such entities need not evolve into consolidated liberal democracies, but they should aspire to govern in an accountable and inclusive manner. Otherwise, this menace facing us will continue to snipe at our interests. In my article, I have laid out a blueprint for how to rebuild these four war-torn countries. In truth, I do not see a light at the end of this tunnel just yet, but I do feel it is best if America keeps pressing forward.

Despite its efforts, the United States does not know how to effectively rebuild failed states. America's military has demonstrated they can "clear" a territory of enemy forces and "hold" it, but what the United States has sought to "build" in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq is apparently not built to last. One of the major limitations of US counterinsurgency policy as it applies to the Global War on Terror lies with the seeming inability of Washington to convince local elites of certain host governments to govern in a more accountable fashion.<sup>1</sup>

That said, the rise of ISIL and the resurgence of the Taliban may have initiated a change in the decision-making calculations of some Afghan, Iraqi, Libyan, and Syrian elites. Watershed events do not happen very often so the United States has to exercise prudent judgment in determining the extent to which America should involve itself in the domestic politics of these four countries. As I stated in my article, dealing with failed states is extremely difficult, for they require a lot of time and effort be devoted to them. Moreover, devoting resources to their betterment may not pay off for the United States in the long run. Still, in spite of these drawbacks, I conclude state-building holds the greatest promise in terms of resolving the intractable conflicts, and of lessening acts of political violence, within these four countries.

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<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the origins, adoption, implementation, and limitations of the United States military's counterinsurgency policy, see Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War, Reprint Edition* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

## On “Rethinking American Grand Strategy: Insights from the Cold War”

William J. Gole

*This commentary is in response to Hal Brand’s article “Rethinking American Grand Strategy: Insights from the Cold War” published in the Winter 2015-16 issue of Parameters (vol. 45, no. 4).*

I approached the article, “Rethinking America’s Grand Strategy: Insights from the Cold War,” by Hal Brands in the Winter issue of *Parameters* with great interest. However, after having read it, I found the case for the value of such a retrospective search for lessons learned unconvincing.

The author’s account of lessons learned rests primarily on the propositions that the Cold War period and the early 21st century are similar enough in their basic characteristics as to suggest a similar “Grand Strategy”; and, that there is such a Grand Strategy that finds broad support within the foreign policy establishment. It is worth noting that “every analogy begins with a lie,” that the underlying facts can never be the same, so analogies are fundamentally flawed and should be viewed with some degree of skepticism. That is not to say analogies are without merit. Rather, it is meant to make the point that the less alike the two scenarios being compared, the heavier the dose of skepticism recommended.

One cannot help but cite some significant differences in the bipolar nature of the Cold War environment and that which exists today. The uncapping of many of the pressures the Cold War contained is among the major forces that have led to a new world order. The new order is characterized by the diffusion of power among multiple regional or, as Samuel Huntington has described, civilizational centers. This shift has had a profound effect on the strategic configuration of the planet. As a result, a basis for comparison of the field where geopolitics is played is questionable at best. This suggests an analogy of its own, and one that better captures the realities involved: the comparison of the two environments as being as different as a boxing match and a game of dodgeball.

In fairness to the author, there are certainly lessons to be gleaned from the Cold War period. However, does the unchallenged continuation of past practice constitute a Grand Strategy? And, does the grafting on of new tactics, also largely unchallenged, represent an affirmation of the Grand Strategy or evidence of ‘drift’ in the absence of a strategic rudder?

A fundamental shortcoming of the use of the Cold War experience as a standard to evaluate existing geopolitical strategy is that it places strategic analysis in the context of ‘what was’, not ‘what is’. Any adjustment to strategy must assess the country’s current strengths and

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weaknesses and the nature of the threats the new world order presents. This includes challenging assumptions that have been embedded in the policies inherited from the past.

In short, continuation of past policy, regardless of its historical success, is a poor substitute for the crafting of a Grand Strategy that reflects the realities of the present.

## The Author Replies

### Hal Brands

In his letter to the editor, William Gole offers a critique of my article, “Rethinking American Grand Strategy: Insights from the Cold War.” In response to his critique, I would simply like to make three brief points.

First, the core of Gole’s critique—that my argument is flawed because it assumes a fundamental continuity between the Cold War and the post-Cold War era—actually misconstrues the point of my article. Nowhere did I argue there was perfect continuity between the two eras; in fact, I acknowledged the differences between them. What I argued, rather, was the perceived lessons of the Cold War unavoidably loom large for policymakers, many of whom came of age during that conflict. Accordingly, it is important to really scrutinize the history and lessons of the Cold War, to ensure that whenever history is used in policy debates today—as it inevitably will be—is it used well rather than poorly.

Second, although I acknowledge there are crucial differences between past and present (as there always are), I reject the idea that the post-Cold War era is too dissimilar from the Cold War era—in terms of American statecraft—to learn useful lessons from that earlier period. As I pointed out, the United States today is having a fundamental debate about whether to remain globally engaged in the future. The Cold War represents the only period prior to the post-Cold War era in which the United States has pursued a globalist grand strategy, and so it seems quite plausible that interrogating this history can reveal useful insights about the nature, the impact, and the value of that global engagement.

Third, Gole apparently feels I draw the wrong historical lessons from the Cold War. But he never specifies the lessons or insights with which he disagrees. Does he disagree with the idea that the history of the Cold War shows that the military balance shapes risk-taking and decision-making? Does he disagree with the idea that the history of the Cold War indicates that stability is not an organic condition of the international system, but must be provided by powerful and principled actors? Does he disagree that the history of the Cold War shows that selective and strategic democracy-promotion can benefit American statecraft? He never actually says which, if any, of these insights he deems incorrect. And that is too bad. I would welcome a debate about whether one should interpret the history of the Cold War differently than I do, but that would require drawing the lines of agreement and disagreement more distinctly than Gole’s letter does.

## On “Making Sense of the ‘Long Wars’ – Advice to the US Army”

G. T. Burke, COL (USA Ret.)

*This commentary is in response to Tami Davis Biddle’s special commentary “Making Sense of the ‘Long Wars’ – Advice to the US Army” published in the Spring 2016 issue of Parameters (vol. 46, no. 1).*

Dr. Biddle is correct to recommend Army senior leaders should better educate themselves regarding communication with civilian decision-makers so as to improve results in future operations. While her special commentary inspired many positive thoughts, I also have several critical comments to pass along.

In paragraph 4, when Dr. Biddle recommends asking probing questions can we be so sure Army senior leaders did not ask—or at least considered asking? In such cases, it is useful for subordinates to consider the most likely, and the best-case or worst-case results when questioning political leadership. Responses could range widely—from approval to censure.

As noted by Dr. Biddle, General Petraeus’ communication skills yielded temporary, finite “means” versus “ways.” Army leadership should work more ways-means balances in its dealings with political leadership.

In the final few paragraphs, Dr. Biddle recommends a “more-is-better” strategy in leader development. While it is nearly impossible to win against a “more-is-better” argument, I will try:

- She is correct: there are areas in which we need a greater understanding of strategic leadership, and one’s education at the US Army War College is not the only time to focus on these areas. I suggest concurrent learning must become the norm and recommend more distance-education programs.
- The push for advanced degrees is fine, but I do not believe they are seen generally as a serious diversion from the “warrior path.” I suggest an examination of general-officer biographies will show all have at least a master’s degree and a significant, and acceptable, amount have had useful “unconventional” assignments.
- Mimicking an Air Force program to rotate captains into the Pentagon is a good idea, except we already have internship and broadening opportunity programs.
- Also, general-officer ranks should seek out mentoring to improve civil-military communication skills—again via modern online methods.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Dr. Biddle’s important and timely recommendations.

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## The Author Replies

Tami Davis Biddle

I am pleased to have an opportunity to respond to COL Burke's comments and recommendations regarding "Making Sense of the 'Long Wars' – Advice to the US Army." I appreciate both his kind words and his thoughtful reading of the essay.

With respect to COL Burke's first question, pertaining to the Bush administration's decision for regime change in Iraq in 2003, it is clear from the history of events there were serious gaps in planning for the post-combat phase of the endeavor. This was a result of several different types of problems. In some instances, important questions were not raised by Army senior leaders. (To consider asking such questions, but then to refrain from doing so is not an option when the stakes are high and lives are at risk.) In other instances, important questions were posed, but perhaps not with sufficient tenaciousness. And sometimes, efforts to raise important questions were simply batted away by administration officials who did not welcome them or wish to engage them. All of these problems reflected a troubled civil-military relationship—one that hampered strategic planning and undermined the effective use of military instruments to achieve political ends. When civil-military relations are sound (and I believe they must be sound for strategy to be successful), both sides will feel free to engage in an open and robust conversation about how to use appropriate ways and means to achieve desired ends.

When senior Army officers encounter pathologies in this all-important relationship, they must re-double their efforts to communicate effectively while staying within the norms of appropriate civil-military discourse. Sometimes this requires raising hard questions repeatedly and through as many appropriate channels as possible. If the questions officers want to ask are central to the successful implementation of what the civilians desire, and if those questions are central to a stable resolution of the problem at hand, then officers have an obligation not to self-censor; however, they must work through channels that are within bounds, and that will not further exacerbate an already troubled interaction. If tenacious and good faith efforts on the military side will not resolve the problem, then officers must be prepared to do the best they can in the circumstances they face—for this is the nature of a representative system that is (and must be) under civilian control. If civilians refuse to heed the professional military advice being offered to them and if things go awry as a result, then the serving administration will face sanctions at the ballot box.

Clearly the civil-military relationship is a two-way street, and civilians hold half of the responsibility for its health and soundness. Fortunately, it has been rare for civilian leaders to turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to their military partners. In the great majority of circumstances, the historical record indicates civilians will readily seek professional military advice and place a high priority on sound civil-military relations. We are fortunate in the United States that this is usually the case.

The civil-military relationship is a challenging and nuanced one that must receive careful thought and ongoing attention from both sides if it is to work as it should. If it is not healthy, then national strategy will not be either. Military officers who are approaching the highest levels of their profession must understand this relationship thoroughly and study it in detail. Happily, there is excellent literature to aid them in this process. As I said in my original essay, senior officers must pay particular attention to the skill set required to “craft clear-headed and sophisticated military advice,” and to “pose options that convey what is feasible with the resources available, and what is not.”

In his comments, COL Burke suggests the augmentation and broadening of officer education can take place principally through distance education. I would agree only up to a point. When distance learning is done well, it can be both effective and efficient—and quite rigorous as well. There is much important content that can be delivered to students in this format, including the study of detailed and well-structured case studies. Students working in this realm can surely hone their written communication skills if they are overseen by qualified and skilled instructors. I would contend many of the skills needed by those who are going to negotiate the upper reaches of the civil-military relationship are those that require development via face-to-face interaction with civilians—in academic settings, in non-DOD government agencies, and in programs with partner nations or international agencies. In these settings, officers can learn to understand and communicate with those who come from non-military backgrounds and cultures.

I contend being able to reach across this divide is more important now than it ever was. Very few civilian leaders in the United States have military experience; indeed, many have had no contact whatever with the military or its culture. They lack a detailed understanding of the challenges that are wholly unique to war and warfighting. These include not only physics, geography, weather, and the limits of the human body—but also the daunting challenges of logistics and communications. In addition, civilians often fail to comprehend the psychological challenges of operating in environments that are uniquely stressful and predisposed to every kind of friction. The only way officers will equip themselves to articulate these issues and convey these challenges (prior to finding themselves in a high-level inter-agency meeting or across from a row of senators) is if they practice these skills in settings where civilians are present.

While many senior officers do have master’s degrees, and while some have had unconventional assignments, I have encountered many officers who have paid a career price for taking opportunities to broaden their horizons and/or for following slightly atypical career paths. In my original essay I explained the reasons for the Army’s high emphasis on tactical and operational skill so I will not revisit it here. I will argue that the modern, 21st-century Army needs people with diverse, wide-ranging skills and bodies of knowledge. Promotion practices must adjust to this pressing reality. And, I would make a special plea for sending more officers into PhD programs—and doing so early in their careers. Such programs allow students to gain true mastery of knowledge that must be fully available to those serving in the military if they are to serve as genuine partners with civilian leaders. This high-level knowledge is

needed not only in technical/mathematical realms like computing and operations research, but also in realms like political science where scholars have, in recent years, done profoundly important work that is helping us to understand not only insurgency movements and terrorists, but also the internal dynamics that operate within civil wars. If the Army does not avail itself of this knowledge by sending its most capable young people out into the academy to acquire it, then it will not be serving the nation as well as it might.

