

Nation Building / Nation Bashing: An Introduction

by Guest Editor Gerda Bikales

In the world that followed the collapse of communism, the phrase “nation-building” came to be used in ways it had not commonly been used before. Beginning with America’s humanitarian relief efforts in Somalia, in 1992, “nation-building” came to define the military’s new role in the world: to build viable nations in troubled places where no nation had coalesced, where no sense of shared national identity had taken hold before. This was to be done by deploying our powerful military, which would move in and quickly impose order on a chaotic situation. It was to be followed by an infusion of massive foreign aid for infrastructure, the development of a civilian police force as an alternative to strong-arm rule, and the nurturing of new leadership to guide the “nation” in transition to democratic governance. With variations, nation-building has been the goal of U.S. military expeditions in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and, most recently, Iraq.

The use of the term “nation-building” as a tool of foreign policy is truly unsettling, for it signals a complete lack of comprehension about our limitations abroad and obligations at home.

The Hubris of Nation-building Abroad

As America has demonstrated, we are able to occupy territories, send in engineers to build roads, repair bridges, improve water and energy distribution, provide temporary security and help make life more tolerable in other ways. We can also – and this is far trickier – offer advice on new forms of governance to replace failed dictatorships, on overhauling dysfunc-

tional legal systems, planning school curricula, and lend our expertise in numerous institutional areas essential to countries emerging from years of trauma. We are, after all, far more than a rich nation providing concrete aid; we are also the one with the world’s oldest Constitution and most stable government, whose advice is derived from solid experience.

But we can not build “nations” for other people. We can help a country in the short term, but we can not build an enduring nation where the requisite building blocks of nationhood are missing. We have repeatedly placed our faith in free and fair elections, but these can not guarantee nationhood. On the contrary, given a real choice voters may opt to break away from an artificial “nation” formerly held together by despotism, as we have seen in the former Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

As Ernest Renan famously concluded in his meditation on what makes a nation, a nation is a daily plebiscite – a subconscious questioning every day by every citizen. Do I really want to throw in my lot with this aggregate of people? Can I trust them? Does their past have meaning for me? Does their future hold promise for me? Only a country’s inhabitants have the answer. Above all else, a nation is the collective will of its citizens to be one.

Neglecting Nation-building at Home

The political statesmanship that believes America has the ability to engage in successful nation-building abroad, also appears to believe that nation-building, once achieved, requires no further cultivation. The exceptional circumstances that brought the United States into being and allowed for the creation of a highly diverse nation are acknowledged, while the strongly unified citizenry that emerged despite that diversity is not perceived as requiring ongoing attention.

Four decades of unrelenting and massive

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immigration, mostly from non-European cultures more difficult to integrate into America's civic mainstream, have been greeted by loosened policies on assimilation. As a result, once common interests within and between constituent parts of the American polity have changed, ties have frayed, attachments have withered. The change has been particularly startling in the area of language usage – a *laissez-faire* attitude borrowed from the marketplace has transformed Spanish into a viable rival to English in many parts of the country, eroding our most solid bond. Our nation's history too has been rewritten, from one emphasizing America's uplifting role in offering more freedom and dignity to more people than any other country in the world, to a grim narrative of oppression suffered by a growing number of aggrieved victim groups. American citizenship has been devalued and made to compete with a sense of "transnational" allegiance. John Fonte has outlined these trends in a succinct table.

America, a Nation Bashed

It need not have happened. An understanding that nation-building is a never-ending obligation of government, that the country's bias must always be in favor of nationhood, that its culture must foster what we hold in common rather than what sets us apart, such awareness would have kept us closer to the ideal in the Constitution's preamble of "a more perfect Union."

Instead, for at least four decades, we have been living through an era of relentless bashing of what is probably the most successful nation that ever was. Every Congress, every Administration, every policy-making institution in the country has played deaf-and-blind with the demands of nation-building, and found fulfillment in nation-bashing.

Our nation gets bashed when our politicians, of both parties, insist on ever larger mass immigration, in numbers that far surpass our cultural carrying capacities. Our nation gets bashed when we import workers to fill the jobs at home and export other work abroad. Our nation gets bashed when we teach our children perverted interpretations of history. Our nation gets bashed by talk of "sharing" our vote with those who are not citizens. Our nation gets bashed with talk of dropping the Oath of Allegiance that has long been the hallmark of American citizenship

acquisition. Our nation gets bashed when we never find anything good to say about America and its people. Our nation gets bashed when we look away as every day a foreign power challenges our sovereignty by pushing its nationals into our territory. Our nation gets bashed when we fail to counter such invasions with diplomatic protests in the United Nations along with a military presence at our borders. Our nation gets bashed when we let a foreign power determine what constitutes acceptable personal identification in our own country. Our nation gets bashed when our courts permit foreign legal systems to trump established U.S. law.

Our nation gets bashed when we remain silent in the face of monumental political misrule that insists on building nations abroad while destroying our own.

Speak up, America!

Further in This Feature Section...

We have pulled together a broad range of views on the present state of nationhood, in other countries and in our own. The reader should keep in mind that the forceful opinions expressed by our authors are their own and do not necessarily reflect those of the editors.

- We reproduce Ernest Renan's summation of his classic 1882 essay on "What Is a Nation?"
- John Fonte, an expert in civic education, makes the case for a policy of "patriotic assimilation" through the teaching of "idea civics." He summarizes the changes in the very vocabulary that frames America's national ideas from the Founding to the present.
- Few countries are truly nations. France had long been considered a textbook model of nationhood, historically open to immigration but exacting from its newcomers their full assimilation to French norms. This policy changed when, driven by domestic labor shortages, France failed to control the pace of immigration, much of it from Islamic countries. Jean-Paul Gourevitch analyzes the violent confrontations that erupted last fall between young people of immigrant parentage and the police.
- Leon Bouvier and Donald Hugh Smith study the demographics and predict an African and Middle-Eastern future for Europe. They speculate about the features of the new societies that will arise, and to what extent today's host society can shape the eventual

outcome.

- James Pinkerton revisits the Danish cartoon controversy that sparked riots across the world, including in Europe. In an addendum this writer has some reservations, asking: was this insult really necessary?

- Former Colorado Governor Richard Lamm, writing in the immediate post-communist period, wrestles with the personal qualities required of citizens of a great nation.

- Journalist Bill Dickinson probes the diminished sense of mutual responsibility between citizens and the

state, and the resulting consequences.

In addition, our Australian correspondent, Denis McCormack, has prepared a lengthy report on the recent clashes in that country between residents and Lebanese Muslim immigrants. The full report is posted in the journal archives on the website: www.thesocialcontract.com. Find Denis' name in the "frequent authors" list, or type "McCormack" in the author box and click "submit."

Always, we welcome your comments on these and other writings in this issue. ■