᠎# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

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In Praise of Warlords

John C. Hulsman & Alexis Y. Debat

LEGITIMACY COMES in many faces. Westerners like to see it in the glow of freedom fighters ascending to high office in a sweeping democratic process, preferably after mass rallies in the squares of capital cities with the attendant flags and banners and rock concerts. But we are loath to grace with "legitimacy" the evil, greedy chieftain of Western imagination—the warlord—conjured in no small part by the portrayals in Indiana Jones movies. Of course, the West might work with such unsavory characters in alliances of convenience, but they are to be despised (not least in their immoral challenge to Western democratic superiority) and then quickly done away with at the first possible opportunity—to be replaced by "proper" political figures.

Our cinematic reaction to warlords has carried over into the policies of American state-builders to an uncomfortable degree. When looked at in the glare of reality, America's state-building record in the post-Cold War era is dreadful because of our reflexive antipathy for warlords and our unwillingness to co-opt them. America's failure to identify and engage warlords has contributed again and again to the most conspicuous of U.S. nation-building failures.

In Haiti we intervened to put a Robespierreist president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, back in power following a military coup. After he pathetically failed even to begin addressing Haiti's massive problems, cultivated authoritarian tendencies, and failed to draw in the country's factional power brokers, Aristide was again chased into exile, this time in Africa. Haiti remains the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

In Bosnia America's failure to grasp the durability of clan and ethnic allegiances undermined peacekeeping efforts. If free and fair elections were held tomorrow, two of the three primary ethnic groups (the Bosnian Serbs and the Bosnian Croats) would vote to secede from the country, a decade after the Dayton Accords.

In Afghanistan things are a little better. President Hamid Karzai, following successes in both the presidential and parliamentary elections, is finally more than just the mayor of Kabul. But anyone assuming that in the foreseeable future he will be able to supervise, bypass or pacify the country's powerful warlords—especially now that they are represented in

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Parliament—needs an Internet connection. And, of course, there is Iraq.

This dismal record is matched by an unwillingness to seriously assess the flaws in the standard Western model of state-building from afar. Debates continue to focus on the potential roles of the United States, United Nations, World Bank, European Union or International Monetary Fund in state-building, with indigenous leadership—chiefs, elders and yes, even warlords—playing either a secondary or adversarial role in the process.

As long as international admiration trumps local legitimacy in selecting who we are willing to work with in state-building, our efforts will fail. This means, in many parts of the world, we have to come to terms with so-called warlords.

But just what do we mean by "warlord"? A "warlord" is a leader whose power has been attained by non-democratic means but who exercises authority usually on the basis of an appeal to ethnic or religious identity, and who usually controls a definable territory where he has a near monopoly on the use of force. A warlord, as opposed to a gang leader or petty crook, operates within a clear and defined political framework.

To bolster our state-building efforts in the future, we should instead look towards a British subaltern who in the early 20th century hastily scribbled some notes about the importance of warlords in the wastes of the Arabian Desert.

Lessons from Lawrence

THOMAS EDWARD Lawrence, in the flower of his youth, was one of the most famous men in the world. The conqueror of Aqaba at 29 and Damascus at thirty, he was a major leader of the wildly romantic and improbably successful Arab Revolt of Emir Feisal—a warlord—against his Turkish overlords during World War I. There is no doubting Lawrence's military achievement. During the Great War, 50,000 Turks were pinned down east of the Jordan by an Arab force of around 3,000 irregulars operating under his immediate direction. A further 150,000 Turks were spread over the rest of the region in a vain effort to crush the Arab Revolt, so little more than 50,000 were left to meet the assault by Sir Edmund Allenby—the senior British officer in theater and Lawrence's commanding general. The British historian and friend of Lawrence's, Basil Liddell-Hart, noted that while it was unlikely that the Arab forces alone could have overcome the Turks without British assistance, it was equally true that Allenby could not have defeated the Turks without the Arabs and Lawrence.

Lawrence's approach was based on a few simple principles, encapsulated in an August 1917 memo he wrote for British officers serving with Feisal's legions, and in a September 1920 article he wrote anonymously for the British journal *Round Table*. What Lawrence advocated in these primary sources represents a dramatic break not only with state-building as it was then practiced, but also as it continues to be implemented today.

Local elites, Lawrence held, must be stakeholders in any successful state-building process. At root, almost all state-building problems are political and not military in nature; with political legitimacy, military problems can be solved. To work against the grain of local history is to fail. It is critical to accurately assess the unit of politics in a developing state—and in the case of the Arab Revolt, it was the tribe, and hence tribal leaders, or warlords.

To Lawrence, the seminal operational fact in dealing with the Arab Revolt was that the framework was tribal. By working within Bedouin cultural norms, rather than imposing Western institutions, the Arabs accepted the legitimacy of British objectives. As he wrote in his 1917 memo,

Getty

T. E. Lawrence, c. 1925

"Wave a Sharif [local warlord] in front of you like a banner, and hide your own mind and person." Lawrence understood that the sharif, not he, had local legitimacy. The common British custom was to issue orders to the Arabs only through their chiefs, and only when agreed upon. Lawrence did not take this approach out of some romantic belief in the unspoiled ways of the Arabs. Rather, he saw it as the only practical way to achieve results. Lawrence worked with local culture, history, political practice, sociology, ethnology, economic statutes and psychology to get the job done.

Early on, Lawrence realized that in Emir Feisal he had happened upon the ideal warlord of the Arab Revolt. As son of the sharif of Mecca, Feisal was imbued with religious and political legitimacy. He led in the name of his father, who as keeper of the Holy Places had an unrivalled political position in the Hejaz (western Saudi Arabia). Lawrence worked within the tribal structure and collaborated with warlords, an approach he employed later on his way to Damascus, when he successfully constructed another alliance of Syrian tribes, including the Howeitat, Beni Sakhr, Sherrat, Rualla and Serahin.

The contrast with modern Western efforts at state-building could hardly be greater. Too often, modern-day Wilsonians assume that because a nation-state exists on paper, they can dispense with the need to forge alliances and compacts among sectarian, tribal, ethnic and religious factions and simply deal with "Iraqis" or "Somalis" or "Afghans"—disregarding or ignoring the traditional subnational centers of authority in favor of anointing "modern" leaders.

Mistakes in Iraq

MANY OF the administration's problems in Iraq can be traced to two fatal mistakes. First, while obsessing about Iraq's problematic long-term democratic future, the Bush White House ignored the "spiritual warlord" Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the Kurdish leader Nechirvan Barzani, both of whom possessed the (admittedly non-democratic) legitimacy to bring the majority of the Shi'a and the Kurds toward some sort of fairly rapid

Iraqi national compromise. The failure to recognize their importance, particularly that of Sistani, one of the most respected men in Iraq, led to a situation whereby the administration was playing a game of perpetual political catch-up.

Secondly, the administration simply backed the wrong horse in supporting Ahmed Chalabi, rather than Sistani. In its appreciation of the impeccably tailored and mannered Chalabi, the administration failed to question how his exile status and Western orientation, indeed the very qualities that made him a neoconservative fantasy ruler for Iraq, would impair his leadership capability. Chalabi had not set foot in Baghdad since he fled Iraq in 1958 at the age of 14. The wonder was that American policymakers presumed he could speak with confidence for any indigenous Iraqis at all. In many ways Chalabi functioned as the anti-warlord, grounding his power in the patronage he received from Washington, rather than possessing any significant local sway in Iraq.

Ahmed Chalabi confirms the adage that if something seems too good to be true it probably is. He had a good story to tell, assuring neoconservatives through the defectors he presented them with that Saddam had a major and successful program of weapons of mass destruction; he told the administration exactly what it wanted to hear.

There is no doubt that Chalabi was amply rewarded. In 1998, Congress provided $97 million to the Iraqi National Congress, of which Chalabi was the founder and leader. In addition, the Department of Defense, as acknowledged by Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, provided up to $340,000 a month for Chalabi, largely due to his importance as an intelligence asset, and the prospect that when Iraqi regime change occurred, we had the Iraqi George Washington already on the payroll.

Chalabi aligned himself with the dominant Shi‘a alliance and served as deputy prime minister in the interim government, but he broke with the alliance prior to the December 2005 elections (because they refused to guarantee him the premiership), and his lack of indigenous support was clearly revealed when his faction failed to win a single seat in the December parliamentary elections. Always more popular with Americans than Iraqis, the Chalabi fable is an example of why warlords, and the local legitimacy they represent, continue to matter.

Indeed, neither Chalabi nor the American military nor even the Iraqi interim government of Ayad Allawi, were able to do what Sistani (a frail 73-year-old Shi‘a cleric and, purportedly, an obstacle to "Iraqi democracy") was able to accomplish: to quell the most serious rebellion against the occupation by enticing its leader, Moqtada al-Sadr, into the mainstream of Iraqi politics. Sistani was never elected, but when the United States faced the greatest crisis to date in post-Saddam Iraq, it had to rely on Sistani's authority and legitimacy.[1]

Sistani displayed his central role in Iraqi politics after quelling the August 2004 fighting between Sadr and American troops in Najaf, home of the Imam Ali Shrine and Shi‘a Islam's holiest city. After three weeks of fighting around Najaf, Sistani arose from his heart-treatment convalescence in London to return to Iraq, where he successfully brokered a face-saving truce between Sadr, the popular anti-American firebrand, and U.S. forces. By personally going to Najaf, Sistani made it clear he had the authority

[1]Iraqi Shi‘a believe that it is their spiritual obligation to choose a senior clerical leader as a guide for settling disputed religious convictions. As Islam has never built walls between the strictly religious and the strictly political, in practice this means Sistani is the supreme arbiter for all major decisions made in Iraq.

to call off Sadr's rebellion, something no other figure in the country—not even those who had been elected—could have brought about. His five-point peace plan was accepted, and Sadr's Madhi paramilitary was disarmed but not disbanded, and was allowed to leave the city. Sistani was given personal control of the shrine, in tandem with the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the city.

Much of the story regarding the "Great Chalabi Heist" on U.S. foreign policy remains to be told. But beyond Washington's own "warlord politics", there is at least one reason why the American foreign-policymaking establishment chose to stay away from the individuals who commanded true but undemocratic legitimacy in Iraq: It failed to understand Somalia.

Learning the Wrong Lessons

SOMALIA HAS come to shape the popular image of warlordism, particularly the failed 1993 U.S. operation to arrest Mohammed Farah Aidid in Mogadishu. At the height of the Somali civil war in the mid-1990s, many gang lords vied to fill the power vacuum left by the ouster of socialist strongman Siad Barre in 1991. The four most powerful were Aidid, Ali Mahdi Mohammed, Mohammed Said Hersi and Ahmed Omar Jess.

Aidid and his main enemy, Ali Mahdi Mohammed, controlled rival factions of the United Somali Congress. Aidid's militia was based in central and southern Somalia; Mahdi's forces were drawn from the old Somali army. Battling these two factions were a mix of Barre loyalists and clan leaders. One was Barre's son-in-law, Hersi, a U.S.-trained colonel in the old Somali army and leading member of the Somali National Front. Another was Jess of the Somali Patriotic Movement, who represented most of the powerful Ogadeni clan and operated mainly in the southern part of Somalia.

But the protagonists of the civil war do not fit the traditional definition of warlords. First, none of them appealed to clan, territorial or religious identities, because of the flexible nature of the country's clan identity and its lack of hierarchical order outside of the family. All factions drew from a variety of clan and sub-clan groups, and support for a faction cut across clan allegiances. Both Aidid and Mahdi, for example, were members of the Hawiye clan.

And while Mahdi established Islamic law in 1994, he did not use Islam as a vehicle for his movement's identity (drawing most of his funding from the local drug market), which in turn had very little political legitimacy beyond its leader's inner circle. Accordingly, each Somali faction was neither homogeneous nor clearly defined, and allegiances shifted quickly among them, giving the Somali political-military landscape a kaleidoscopic form. Somalia's so-called warlords did leverage the widespread resentment in the countryside to recruit followers, but they steered clear of any affiliation with a specific community or a specific cause. With such poor authority, loose identity and rudimentary client-patron networks, Somali militias functioned less like warlord groups than like patrimonial gangs, focused on the narrow economic interests of their leaders, who in turn wielded little legitimacy.

Second, no faction leader ever exercised absolute control over specific territories or populations. While Aidid and Hersi were more powerful in the south and Mahdi was in general control of the northern part of the capital, none of them managed to exercise long-term authority over either a region, a civilian community (60 percent of the Somali population is still nomadic), a religious sector or an ethnicity. They could not, therefore, make legitimate claims to defending or even representing a specific

community, and they even yielded little effective power over the areas they controlled.

Contrary to the popular image that it subsequently carried in the West, the Somali civil war was less about "warlords" or political actors than about militias and bandits. Without an established identity based on ethnic, religious or territorial factors, the actors failed to garner genuine authority within a set political system. Warlords have to be able to deliver politically. As such, the situation in Somalia in the 1990s looks more like an exception than an illustration of the warlordism archetype.[2]

But somehow the trauma of Somalia left the opposite impression on the foreign policy establishment in Washington: Warlords were a dark and chaotic force bent on subverting the nation-building process. Warlordism became synonymous with defeat and humiliation.

Then came Afghanistan, where, in late 2001, the United States was compelled to intervene—and face the reality of warlordism.

Enlightened Warlordism

MORE THAN any other country, Afghanistan has been shaped by warlordism—and has paid a steep price for it. In the past quarter-century, this battlefield of empires was shattered by two decades of conflict, first against the Soviet Union and its proxies, and then after 1989 as the victorious warlords jockeyed to fill the power gap. Far from an anomaly, those episodes were the newest chapter in Afghanistan's longer history of fratricidal warfare and hopeless governance, which some commentators attribute to the country's complex DNA. (Barnett Rubin even speaks of an environment of "competitive state-building.") Save for a few distinct attempts at national edification (such as under the rule of Amir Abd al-Rahman's from 1880 to 1901, or under the Taliban), legitimacy in Afghanistan has remained with the warlords and their sponsors. From the mid-17th century to today, outside powers—Persia, Russia, Britain, and finally the Soviet Union and the United States—have at one point or another leveraged Afghanistan's sectarian and ethnic fabric for their own benefits.

The talent of the Bush Administration was not to face the reality of Afghanistan's warlordism or merely manage it—they had no choice—but to embrace it, to use it fully and shrewdly as a powerful instrument for nation-building. "Afghanistan" would have to be cobbled together with the same tools the Carolingians and General Garibaldi had used with France and Italy: guns, bribes, patience … and a little prayer. U.S. policy benefited to some degree from Washington's benign neglect of Afghanistan. U.S. officials working there were forced into pragmatism due to the lack of resources and attention. Washington's distaste for warlords was much more evident and consequential in Iraq, due to America's more singular and detrimental focus there.

At the time Kabul was turned over to a U.S.-led coalition in late 2001, the Taliban regime gave way to a mosaic of around two-dozen major ethnic and tribal warlords. The United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, as the

[2]The only display of warlordism during the Somali crisis was related to the secession, in 1991, of five of Somalia's 18 administrative regions (the former British Somaliland) to create the *de facto* independent Republic of Somaliland. In this case, a coalition of local chieftains was able to elicit a fairly high degree of legitimacy among the various clans, which is still reflected in the country's system of government. Since the election of President Dahir Kahin in 2003, Somaliland is considered one of the most successful illustrations of a warlord-based democracy.

Northern Alliance was officially known, was a coalition of ethnic warlords, the most of important of whom were Abdul Rashid Dostum, an Uzbek and Mohamed Daoud Fahim, the successor to Ahmed Shah Masoud, and Ustad Mohamed Atta, both Tadjiks. This group also included several smaller Hazara (Shi'a) factions. In the east and southeast, around two-dozen Pashtun warlords were competing—often violently—to fill the power vacuum left by the Taliban. (The CIA's own warlords in the region were busier fighting each other than chasing Osama bin Laden in Tora Bora in late 2001.) The south and west were under the firm control, respectively, of Gul Agha Sherza (a supporter of the late king Zahir Shah), and Herat's Iran-backed strongman Ismail Khan.

By demonstrating to the warlords its extraordinary might and firepower during the course of Operation Enduring Freedom, the United States simply imposed itself as Afghanistan's most powerful and most ruthless warlord, by exercising real power on the ground, and designated Hamid Karzai, no matter what his official title was in international circles, as its representative. While having lived in exile for some of the twenty years before the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, Karzai—as a prominent member of the powerful Pashtun Popalzay clan—had remained a fairly powerful player in Afghanistan's Pashtun community. He had been a very efficient fundraiser in Afghanistan and Pakistan during the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s and had even played a very important role in the initial creation of the Taliban in the early 1990s. In many ways, Karzai was the anti-Chalabi.

Meanwhile, by opening the December 2001 Bonn Conference to the warlords and their sponsors (including Iran), the United States government laid the foundation of a broad-based strategy involving a simple but existential bargain with the warlords: Evolve or die. Operate through a reasonably democratic political process and contribute to the edification of a united, stable Afghanistan and you will survive—albeit as a lesser entity. Or wait for the B-52s.

With a few minor exceptions, Afghanistan's powerful factions matched America's pragmatism and agreed to support Hamid Karzai—a Pashtun—and his Afghan Interim Authority.

Beginning in 2002 they were tacitly allowed to consolidate and even increase their private armies, their regional power base and, most important, their own sources of revenue (opium or customs). Against the tacit promise to turn this power into democratic legitimacy and loyalty to the central government, they were even allowed to "cash in" their authority in the new Afghanistan by taking active responsibility in Karzai's administration. Regardless of their democratic credentials or human rights record, many Afghan warlords were elevated to positions of authority at the national and local levels.

This was by no means a smooth process. Regional warlords displeased with new hierarchies have clashed over authority and territory. At the same time, some non-Pashtun officials in the new administration became mistrustful of Karzai's philosophy of ethnic equality, especially in regards to building the Afghan National Army. Others, such as Ismail Khan, resisted accepting a diminished role and were reluctant to share real power with the central government. So while there have been some important positive developments for Karzai's administration, this issue of regional control—especially with regard to fiscal and military matters—remains very much on top of the agenda for successfully moving Afghanistan through the next phases of its nation-building.

While the warlords have been bribed and coerced into not hijacking the fu-

ture of Afghanistan, they have yet to fully reconcile their authority with a commitment to peace and stability. But the warlords have made a crucial first step toward channeling their identity, authority and regional conflicts of interest through a non-violent, national and democratic process. They have been allowed to think that their legitimacy could safely be transferred from the barrels of their guns to the support of their constituents, especially in the areas and communities fearing the domination of Afghanistan by Pashtuns.

The result is a country with a fragile democratic consensus and a largely uncertain future, but one with a genuine chance for stability that the Bush Administration cannot even afford to dream about in Iraq.

Working with Warlords

GIVEN THE continued relevance of the oft-maligned warlord, how should the United States work with them while engaging in state-building? Here what ought to have been done in Iraq illustrates Lawrence's alternative model of working with local elites, democratically elected or not. Instead of fretting about interim constitutions, permanent constitutions and finding the George Washington of Iraq, a better approach would have involved establishing a loose confederation— where all the major units of political expression (Kurds, Sunni and Shi'a) and their warlords were represented in the central government and given broad local autonomy.

In Iraq and other countries, communicating the language of common U.S. and warlord interests would be best. The administration should have assured the leaders of the three communities that a federal political system is the best means of assuring local autonomy, protecting against the return of a tyrannical central government, and equitably disbursing Iraq's oil and tax revenues. A decentralized system, given the organic nature of Iraq's indigenous politics, always was most likely to fit political realities on the ground, suit the warlords and meet the needs of Iraq's people.

Instead of mindlessly droning on about democracy, a more genuinely moral rule should always guide American efforts at state-building: The United States should leave developing countries better off than they found them. After all, stability is central to long-term political success. In order to do so, it is imperative to work with local elites—and this includes the warlords—to ensure the stability that is so vital to any state-building enterprise. The warlord of Indiana Jones's day may be a laughable and slightly repulsive creature. In the real world, he is the key to moving toward a model for statecraft that stands a chance of success. American efforts at state-building, and the War on Terror itself, begin and end in Washington. It is there that significant changes in thinking must be made. □