

Cure Not Prevention

I have often thought that you need a... kind of layered map to understand Sudan's civil war. A surface map of political conflict, for example—the northern government versus the southern rebels; and under that a layer of religious conflict—Muslim versus Christian and pagan; and under that a map of all the sectarian divisions within those categories; and under that a layer of ethnic divisions—Arab and Arabized versus Nilotic and Equatorian—all of them containing a multitude of clan and tribal subdivisions; and under that a layer of linguistic conflicts; and under that a layer of economic divisions—the more developed north with fewer natural resources versus the poorer south with its rich mineral and fossil fuel deposits; and under that a layer of colonial divisions; and under that a layer of racial divisions related to slavery. And so on and so on until it would become clear that the war, like the country, was not one but many: a violent ecosystem capable of generating endless new things to fight about without ever shedding any of the old ones.

DEBORAH SCROGGINS, *Emma's War*, 2004¹

Weber's definition pointed to the essential feature of statehood in monopolising force within borders, and set a clear if limited marker for state failure. This was essentially the one adopted by the US government's State Failure Task Force, which identified 136 occurrences of state-failure in the period between 1955 and 1998. It considered four kinds of internal crisis—revolutionary war, ethnic war, adverse regime change, and genocide—and the task force found that between 20 and 30 per cent of

countries were in 'failure' during the 1990s.²

The modern state, however, was expected to perform against many other criteria. States need administrative capacity and revenues (if only to wage wars). Over time their functions expanded to include provision of health, education, and welfare. Their governance moved from monarchs to political leaders more or less accountable to legislative assemblies and to public opinion. After 1990, as Central and Eastern Europe embraced democracy and enjoyed economic growth, the idea took hold that this experience could be replicated throughout the world in a benign process of globalisation, generating virtuous cycles of prosperity, democracy, and peace. Further support was found in the fact that the most successful new states, especially those in Asia, had gravitated towards the liberal capitalist model, and so there was greater confidence that this was the best route for all who wished to raise their sights to a more stable future.

A modern state could therefore be declared a failure against a range of criteria. As more sophisticated indices of failure or fragility were developed by international organisations as a form of early warning, it became apparent that the concept was broad enough to cover many disparate states with a range of problems. States such as North Korea, a dictatorship which failed to meet the needs of its people, still effectively monopolised force within their borders. The concept of a successful state, derived from the Western experience, was one which many states would struggle to meet. States might fail their people in many ways yet still function. As states were assessed by criteria well away from Weber's basic definition involving monopolised violence and borders, the more could be judged to have failed.³

If a state was failing it was not sufficient to bring an end to violence. Success meant strengthened institutions, ensuring that no minority was excluded and all enjoyed opportunities for political and cultural expression, competent economic management, an absence of corruption, and responsive administration. Thus the high-level international Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, reporting in 1997, provided the headline answer to the challenge posed by its title:

This is done by creating capable states with representative governance based on the rule

of law, with widely available economic opportunity, social safety nets, protection of fundamental human rights, and robust civil societies.

This was not so much an answer to the question as reframing it. The same could be said for the recommendation that it was important when there were signs of trouble to react quickly and have a comprehensive, balanced approach to alleviate the pressures that trigger violent conflict and ‘an extended effort to resolve the underlying root causes of conflict’, which went back again to ‘fundamental security, well-being, and justice for all citizens’.⁴ The basic requirement was to strengthen the state sufficiently enough to deal with violence and then, with security, to collect taxes and rebuild infrastructure. The consensus was captured by Francis Fukuyama’s observation that state-building, defined in terms of the creation or strengthening of government institutions, was the major foreign policy challenge, because weak or failed states were ‘the source of many of the world’s most serious problems.’⁵ An article urging a much more systematic global effort to promote better governance as ‘the only real way to create lasting peace’ observed that: ‘These elements of state weakness constitute structural threats akin to dead leaves that accumulate in a forest. No one knows what spark will ignite them, or when.’⁶

It was easy to set standards to which states might aspire and reasonable to note that when they were unable to do so that trouble might ensue. As a preventative measure shoring up the quality of governance and on that basis pushing forward with economic and social reforms would also make sense, although it could be noted that Western advice on these matters did not always have the desired effects. The problem, however, when considering the question of state failure in the context of counter-insurgency and peacekeeping was a backdrop of violence and degradation. The consequences of constant fighting could be seen in the infrastructure left damaged and never repaired, economic activity subdued, law enforcement minimal and corruption rampant, displaced people unable to return, health and education services stretched, grievances festering without satisfaction, and distrust dominating all political activity. The challenge here was one of cure rather than prevention. Wendy Brown expressed the unreality of the expectations this could create in her critique

of The Counter-Insurgency Field Manual 3-24:

In short, it requires—from the US military no less—a degree of political intelligence and foresight worthy of Rousseau’s Lawgiver, a degree of provision for human needs worthy of the farthest reach of the communist imaginary, a degree of stabilization through governance worthy of Thomas Hobbes or perhaps Immanuel Kant, an ability to “decipher cultural narratives” (the manual’s words) worthy of a trained ethnographer, and an ability to manipulate these narratives worthy of Plato. It also entails the paradox of fostering the strength and legitimacy of what are often puppet regimes, and doing so while the occupiers are still on site. And all of this in a milieu of upheaval, violence, and complexly riven societies with weak or nonexistent states.⁷

It was always ambitious to expect that a state reconstructed in such unpromising circumstances would be other than disappointing when set against the highest standards. At best it would be led by a strong man sufficient to function to a degree but well short of liberal democracy. Once the new regime was strong enough to have agency it would likely begin to clash with its external patron, for example to pursue sectarian interests or engage in corrupt practices. While documents such as FM 3-24 assumed that the American interest and that of the host government could be brought into close alignment that was usually overoptimistic, as was the case in both Iraq and Afghanistan. An intention to change a client state’s behaviour, so that it could be shown to be deserving of the support it was getting, required attaching conditions to any assistance. Unfortunately once considerable resources had already been invested in protecting and building up the client, the patron dare not let it relapse back into failure even if its state practice remained lamentable.⁸

THERE WAS NO FORMULA TO SATISFY ALL CASES. DIFFERENT countries started at different places in terms of their economic and political capacity and the legacies of past conflicts. In some cases there were political leaders who could reach out across communities, or commodities that could ensure revenues. Some states had a history of centralisation, which tended to be the case with oil-producing states, whereas in others demands from the capital were generally ignored and more attention paid to local leaders.

There were those who argued that the first priority was to get the state functioning, so that violence could be contained and economic activity organised. Others put more stress on nation building, so that divisions could be healed and a sense of common purpose instilled. And then there was the question of democracy. Could regular votes for parliaments create legitimacy and a sense of political access that had previously been lacking, or might it instead accentuate divisions, as parties were organised on religious or ethnic lines, and just provide the new political class with opportunities to indulge their greed?

As we noted earlier, although stable democracies had many advantages introducing democratic practices at times of political turbulence did not always help the cause of order and stability. Democracy was associated with elections, for that meant that all citizens could participate and that there was a choice. But there were problems with elections. Political parties were likely to reflect national divisions and their campaigns could aggravate a sense of grievance. Without strong institutions, including an independent judiciary, winning an election could be seen as an opportunity for patronage and corruption. It was to the good if one election took place, but the challenge in these circumstances was always to get the second.⁹ Although establishing democracy helped to stabilise a country this was only if it could be reinforced and sustained, lest the country drift back into authoritarianism and so become vulnerable once again to civil war and military coups.¹⁰

Demanding that more attention be paid to popular views meant that less regard was placed on state sovereignty and established borders while encouraging the principle of self-determination as an expression of the rights of a free people. Once this principle was asserted it was hard to know when to stop. It was one thing to assert the need for self-government against rule from a distant and oppressive capital, but another to insist that any minority should be allowed to govern itself. A new state, detached from its parent, could soon face the same issue as some even smaller minority began to assert its rights and so challenge the new borders. This became painfully evident as Croatia and Bosnia peeled away from the Yugoslav Federation and then became subject to forms of partition.

A WHOLE NEW CADRE OF SPECIALISTS DEVELOPED AROUND all these questions, some working for governments and other for the international organisations, including the various UN agencies, the IMF, and the World Bank. There were the large NGOs, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and Oxfam, and smaller charities, perhaps with a focus on education or getting relief to the victims of sexual abuse. They did what they could with projects and contracts, offering advice on best practice and training, and developing theories on what should be done. And there were also those addressing security issues, provided by the UN, friendly governments, and private contractors. Others sought to get militias demobilised and disarmed and reintegrated into a national army, weaning underpaid police forces away from corrupt practices so that they could fight crime, working with local forces to deal with signs of reviving rebellions or insurgencies as quickly as possible.

There was a degree of irony in all of this. Many of the states now being consumed by their own weakness had emerged out of colonialism. By definition, a country that could only be stabilised by outside intervention was no longer fully self-governing, and was likely to be somewhat distant from a long-term settlement based on harmony, justice, and consensus. Was the logic to take them back, to create a new form of trusteeship that would give authority to the international forces and administrators that came into a country to provide order and start reconstruction once the fighting had subsided? Jennifer Welsh, reporting on an Oxford seminar, noted a ‘recurring theme’ that ‘humanitarian interventions contain within them imperialist implications’. What might be necessary to create ‘lasting stability’ would also raise ‘thorny questions not only about self-determination but also about the accountability of western-sponsored transitional authorities.’^{[11](#)}

An imperial role, however, carried the implications of control, whereas the reality was often getting caught up in situations that were hard to control, leaving those with good intentions compromised. Deborah Scroggins used the story of Emma McCune as a vehicle for exploring the confused motives and mixed effects of Western aid efforts. McCune was a British aid worker, full of enthusiasm for human rights and initially engaged setting up schools, who went to Sudan in 1988 and died in a car

crash in Kenya in 1993.

Sudan had gained independence in 1956, and then come to exhibit all the symptoms of persistent conflict: division between the Muslim northern and non-Muslim southern parts of the country (which had been administered separately until 1946 by the British); successive coups in the capital Khartoum, resulting in Marxist, non-Marxist, and eventually Islamist regimes; oil fields in the South the North wished to control; peace agreements of variable duration; casualties that defied calculation (normally put at some two million); meddling external powers with Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda supporting the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) who led the fight against the north.¹²

When McCune died she was married to Riek Machar, an SPLA commander. Riek had tried to overthrow SPLA leader John Garang, ostensibly in the name of a 'secular, democratic Sudan', which led to vicious fighting. In late 1991 his forces killed some 2,000 civilians in Bor and wounded several thousand, looting villages and raiding cattle. Some 25,000 died in the ensuing famine and another 100,000 left the area. Yet the idealistic Emma became a committed partisan on her husband's behalf, to the dismay of the rest of the expatriate aid community.

In 2011 South Sudan eventually gained its independence from Sudan, but it remained poor, with limited economic prospects, and full of weapons and fighters. It was divided from the start between factions based on the Dinka and Nuer tribes, with little having been done to bring them together after independence. The UN arranged a power sharing agreement and sent in a force of 12,000 peacekeepers. Riek's role in this ongoing tragedy continued. He became vice president of South Sudan when it became independent. In 2016 he was dismissed from office by the president and fled to Britain, vowing to return.¹³ As the fighting flared up again a UN base was attacked along with foreign aid workers, who were beaten and raped.

Scroggins's conclusion, reflecting her own disillusion, was that the wider expatriate community had become compromised in their own way, caught up in a vicious multifaceted conflict that they barely understood. Their 'salvation fantasies' combined a conviction that they were doing something worthwhile and effective though their actions, which they often

were, though a consequence of the assistance they dispensed was to perpetuate rather than ease the violence. She questioned whether external assistance did much good at all while providing no reasons to believe that left alone matters would improve on their own accord.

There was certainly no shortage of assistance coming into South Sudan after independence—with consultants pouring in to sort out the country's administration, along with its education and health services. *The Economist* explained the problem:

But it was all carrot and no stick. With no conditions attached, the money rarely found its way to infrastructure projects and public services. The consultants' advice, especially when it was about boosting governance and reforming the army, was ignored. Chiefly focused on state-building, Western aid also failed to bring together estranged communities. All this left plenty of leeway for factional chiefs to whip up tensions and consolidate power, their rivalries culminating in a full-blown civil war in 2013.¹⁴

This fitted in with a general argument developed by Monica Toft, that a successful resolution of a civil war required not only the effective delivery of benefits, and withdrawal of financial and other support from the warring parties, but also 'a credible threat of harm or punishment to those who defect from the treaty.'¹⁵

THERE WAS THEREFORE AN ARGUMENT THAT FOREIGN INTERVENTION simply made bad situations worse and undermined natural forms of recovery. According to this argument the focus on the vice of war, and especially its dire humanitarian impact, missed its virtue as a means of resolving political conflicts which could lead to a lasting peace. The historian Ian Morris answered the question 'What is war good for?' with peace. 'What has made the world so much safer is war itself.'¹⁶ War led to the development of strong states capable of keeping internal violence in check, bringing an end to the more localised, unregulated, commonplace violence of more 'primitive' times. After wars the winners were often able to incorporate the losers into even larger states. 'In retrospect', observed Charles Tilly, 'the pacification, cooptation, or elimination of fractious rivals to the sovereign seems an awesome, noble, prescient enterprise,

destined to bring peace to a people'.¹⁷ There was evidence in more recent times that strong states did emerge out of prolonged wars, having had to improve their abilities to raise funds, maintain discipline, and manage complex operations. Arguably, therefore, if wars kept on being interrupted and prevented from reaching a definitive conclusion, strong states would never be given a chance to develop.

Edward Luttwak urged that wars must be allowed to run their natural course until a resolution was reached. International intervention, of whatever sort, from demanding ceasefires to interfering with the fighting, interrupted this process and so prevented lasting settlements. Often they achieved no more than a pause in the fighting, as belligerents took the opportunity to recuperate and revive their forces. The weaker side, which might have made the compromises necessary for peace, was provided cover for intransigence. In Bosnia the factions had been left with incentives to prepare for future war rather than reconstruct their societies. 'Uninterrupted war would certainly have caused further suffering and led to an unjust outcome from one perspective or another, but it would also have led to a more stable situation.... Peace takes hold only when war is truly over'.

Moreover, peacekeepers had given endangered civilians an illusion of security, when the wise course would have been to flee, although in something of a contradiction Luttwak also complained about large refugee camps as sustaining defeated populations in their anger and providing a base for continued resistance. Luttwak's claim was that conflicts did not end because 'the transformative effects of both decisive victory and exhaustion are blocked by outside intervention'.¹⁸

There were obvious counter-examples to Luttwak's analysis, not least the scale of violence that could overwhelm societies or the interventionist role played by neighbouring countries which were bound to look after their own interests. Yet research suggested that of all the outcomes to a civil war, a clean military victory was the one that was most likely to result in a stable peace. Civil wars did not recur in 85 per cent of the countries that experienced a military victory, while war resumed in 50 per cent of the conflicts settled by means of negotiation.¹⁹ Toft reported similar findings and also noted that the most satisfactory aftermaths tended to be those

following rebel victories.²⁰ The problem with negotiated settlements was that they did not resolve power struggles but instead left them in a state of suspended animation, making it harder for a government to act in a unified and consistent way. When a single party dominated the government then it could act with more consistency and determination.²¹ Strong leaders, emerging out of tough conflicts, could manage economic recovery, even without external assistance.²²

Others pointed out that countries have capacities for economic self-generation that were often missed in the belief that they are helpless without external assistance. This became a similar argument to those about welfare-dependency, and finding the right balance between encouraging individuals—and states—to become self-reliant and providing a safety net, upon which they might become too dependent. The difficulty with this argument was that it implied the possibility of keeping conflicts geographically contained, while neighbours and the wider international community waited for them to burn themselves out or one side to win. In practice there were all sorts of reasons why they were likely to spread into neighbouring regions, because of cross-border allegiances, opportunities for plunder, and refugee flows.

Weinstein used the example of Yoweri Museveni following the victory of his National Resistance Movement (NRM) in Uganda in January 1986. This came after a succession of disasters—coups (including the calamitous rule of Idi Amin) and civil wars. Per-capita GDP had declined by 40 per cent in fifteen years. Museveni ushered in a period of political stability, with the army in control around the country, and the country prospering and poverty falling. The economic reforms followed Western guidelines but less so the political methods. His achievements came as an ‘enlightened autocrat.’²³ And like most autocrats as time passed he found it harder to imagine how the country could manage without him. His view of political parties was that they exacerbated sectarian divisions, and he therefore sought to govern using a broad-based movement.

The hallmark of Western democracy was strong institutions that could manage competition, cope with transfers of power, and provide continuity of administration independent of any particular leader. In other states with more fragile structures, stability tended to come in the form of individuals

whose rule might bring benefits at first until these were overtaken by the costs of personality cults. This is why rebellions and coups at times offered the only hope of refreshing government structures. So sticking narrowly to Weber's definition of states gave priority to internal order and stability, requiring backing strong leaders, even if they were doing little to address popular grievances and creating troubles for the future. After all, the violence in the Middle East was the result of the old generation of anti-colonial, and largely secular, strong men losing their grip or being overthrown. The tradition, however, remained strong. After Egypt's President Mubarak fell the elected President Morsi's Islamist policies generated dissent and he was replaced in a coup by the military chief Abdel Fattah el Sisi, adopting the 'strong man' governance model.

DESPITE OPTIMISM, EXPRESSED AS LATE AS 2014, THAT 'Africa has become dramatically more peaceful over the last 15 years',²⁴ this trend was already in reverse. Hopes that defeated leaders would accept democratic, peaceful power transitions were regularly dashed. From 2008 there were marked declines in freedom of expression combined with rising levels of corruption and bureaucratic incompetence. Coups remained common.²⁵ The lack of accountability meant that rebels returned to the fray after a period of tenuous peace so that most wars were 'repeats'. This repetition was a feature of some 90 percent of all civil wars, including in Africa.²⁶ The biggest cases involved the same countries that had experienced violent conflict for many years. One consequence of this was cumulative misery in terms of disease, famine, poverty, and large numbers of refugees and internally displaced people.²⁷ In April 2017 it was reported that 20 million people in four countries that had faced constant conflict—Nigeria, South Sudan, Yemen, and Somalia—were at risk of starvation. Rebels often deliberately denied them food while governments were either incompetent or diverted resources to regions where they exercised more control. The conflicts had limited the ability of aid workers to reach affected people, and they were too scared to move.²⁸

The only new war in Africa was in Libya, one of the countries to fall under the spell of the Arab Spring. This broke out with demonstrations against authoritarian regimes, beginning in Tunisia in December 2010. In

2011 Libyan President Gaddafi was overthrown.²⁹ This was a small country with oil resources, and it was assumed that it could look after itself. Instead the state fell apart; civil war developed, with Islamist groups getting footholds. The Western interveners watched aghast as this country also descended into chaos. As part of the Syrian civil war, which also began in 2011, the Islamist group ISIS was able to establish a base and move into Iraq (where the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 had given the Islamists their opening) prompting intense fighting and a massive refugee crisis that had an unsettling effect on European politics as they tried to absorb an influx of desperate people. They were dislodged from cities such as Mosul only with enormous effort and great suffering, leaving ruins and rubble behind them.

Islamist groups, such as al-Shabaab in Kenya and Boko Haram in Nigeria, were becoming a more important feature in African conflicts as elsewhere. Barbara Walter wrote of the ‘new new civil wars’. Not only had the number of conflicts gone up but the majority of those starting up or reviving were in Muslim-majority countries and involved rebels embracing radical Islamist goals. These different groups were linked and their goals were as much transnational as national. The ominous features of these wars were that they looked likely to last for some time, were impervious to attempts to negotiate settlements, and carried the risk of contagion into neighbouring territories.³⁰ The extremism of Islamism was instrumental as a powerful recruiting and fund-raising tool, potentially capable of appealing to all Sunni Muslims (some 90 per cent of total) though the majority were more moderate in their beliefs. It justified harsh measures against apostates and non-believers, adding to the intensity of the violence. Groups that had been seen in the 1990s as vicious but marginal had become major players.

The choices got starker for the major powers. Failing to address humanitarian crises meant becoming spectators to immense suffering, watching opportunities being created for extremism, and then having to come to terms with the consequences in terms of pressure to take refugees and risks of terrorism. Military interventions meant participation in frustrating and often cruel wars, from which disengagement was difficult. Limiting the contributions to advice and air power meant limiting political

influence. Success came increasingly to depend on the quality of local partners. Once the problems connected with transforming other peoples' states were recognised, the partners could not be expected to share all core values. The first priority was that they were credible and competent which often meant working with old-fashioned 'strong men' as the best available bulwark against Islamist movements. The objectives were often more about preventing a bad situation deteriorating rather than easing conflict by raising societies to a new level of development. The compromises were awkward and the results rarely matched the scale of the challenge. All this was far from the liberal optimism of the early post-Cold War period.