Imagining the Next Occupation

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When Lt. Gen. William Caldwell pitched the US Army’s updated field manual on the March 10 Daily Show, Jon Stewart inquired: “If I read this, can I take over a country?” Caldwell, who served 13 months in Iraq and today runs the Combined Arms Center in Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, demurred with a chuckle. And the text his center published in October, FM 3-07, Stability Operations (2008), treats the question as moot.

FM 3-07 skips over the matter of whether the Army can or should take over a country and cuts straight to how, thereby enshrining post-war occupation and political administration as core responsibilities of the Army, coequal to war fighting. The new field manual is as significant for the aspirations it encapsulates as for the operations it purports to guide. At a moment when much of the public looks forward to concluding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the military’s strategic thinkers are studying how to “stabilize” more countries in the future. FM 3-07 marks, yet again, the post-September 11 zeal of President George W. Bush’s administration for a mission—nation building, if by another name, stability operations—that candidate Bush disdained in 2000. The outgoing president leaves his successor a bureaucratic apparatus and ideological leitmotif for rationalizing vast military spending and foreign adventurism.

Lead author Lt. Col. Steve Leonard and his collaborators have written a manual reflecting the Bush administration’s perception that America has entered “an era of persistent
conflict.” Since early 2005 the government has maintained a secret watch list, updated biannually by the National Intelligence Council, of 25 states that are deemed unstable or threatening.1 FM 3-07 heeds the White House’s call to fix such “failed or failing states” by battling the “destabilizing forces” of government collapse, criminal networks and humanitarian emergency. The jobs of stability operations would previously have been recognized as nation building—“various military missions, tasks and activities...to maintain America’s armed forces: “Contrary to popular belief, the Vietnamese and Iraqi civilians were killed should be American War, post-World War II Germany and Japan, Jekyll and Hyde Humanitarianism warfare. America’s experiences in Lebanon in the 1980s would previously have been recognized as nation building­­—Somalia and the Balkans.

Subsequent cases include Winfield Scott’s capture of central Mexico, post-Civil War reconstruction, the invasions of Cuba and the Philippines after the Spanish-American War, post-World War II Germany and Japan, Vietnam and “more than 15 stability operations” after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, including those in Haiti, Somalia and the Balkans. FM 3-07 infers from this frequency that occupation typifies the historic role of America’s armed forces: “Contrary to popular belief, the military history of the United States is one characterized by stability operations, interrupted by distinct episodes of major combat.” Some readers may challenge the premise that conflicts in which hundreds of thousands of Filipino, Vietnamese and Iraqi civilians were killed should be considered the Army’s normal work. Students of American history may also balk at the notion that stability operations can reasonably aim “to leave a society at peace with itself and its regional neighbors, sustainable by the host nation without the support of external actors.” In the main, US occupation has delivered one of four outcomes: further internal war (Somalia, Haiti); repressive authoritarianism (Cuba, Dominican Republic); impending invasion by a nearby government (the Philippines, South Vietnam); or long-term clientage with a substantial American military presence (Japan, Germany, South Korea). Against this backdrop, the far-fetched promise of FM 3-07 bespeaks a kind of sophistry, a posture of technical control that has been empirically disproved yet ideologically preserved.

Jekyll and Hyde Humanitarianism

The term stability operations, like “pacification” in the 1960s and “nation building” in the 1990s, relabels the occupier’s use of violence and separates it semantically from prior warfare. America’s experiences in Lebanon in the 1980s and present-day Iraq evince the transparency of this divide, as havoc persists despite the end of “major combat operations” and the hoisting of “mission accomplished” banners. According to the Iraq Body Count website, more Iraqi civilians (7,984) died from May 2003 to April 2004, the first year of stabilization and reconstruction, than during the invasion. Because FM 3-07 rests on the distinction between stability operations and major combat operations, it fails to address the violence that happens after the population stops being invaded and starts being stabilized.

It is difficult to fathom the simplifications required to treat state building as a matter of technical know-how. Where historians fear to tread, the strategists behind FM 3-07 march forward, directing the Army how to bequeath to the “host nation” a “legitimate government” that will then join a “world of legitimate, well-governed states.” The manual enjoins soldiers to exploit the widespread “shock and relief” that follows an initial invasion. In this “malleable situation,” “soldiers become governors.” They “are required to reconcile long-standing disputes between opposing parties...[and] are frequently called up to restore host-nation civil authority and institutions, to facilitate the transition toward a desired political end state that supports national and international order.” Lest one miss the gravity of this task, FM 3-07 adds, “The burdens of governance...require culturally astute leaders and soldiers capable of adapting to nuances of religion [and] ethnicity.” (One wonders what role Raphael Patai’s The Arab Mind, a mainstay of the Combined Arms Center’s “Cultural Awareness Reading List,” plays in such duties.) In the areas of cultural sensitivity and political aptitude, FM 3-07 connotes “required” with “ready.” Those whom the manual would call governors may just as well be dubbed “warrior kings,” as one practitioner of stability operations, Lt. Col. Nathan Sassaman, called himself in post-invasion Iraq.

A battalion commander in the “Sunni triangle” in 2003-2004, Sassaman gained notoriety for covering up the drowning death of Zaydoun Fadhil, whom his soldiers had kidnapped, forced into a river and left behind with Fadhil’s cousin, who survived. Although the incident brought a reprimand for Sassaman and his subsequent retirement, his prior efforts “to inflict extreme violence” on Sunni Arab areas around the heavily Shi’i town of Balad drew accolades. Sassaman was considered an innovator who, the New York Times reported, “had quickly figured out what he needed to do: remake the area’s shattered institutions, jump-start the economy and implant a democracy, all while battling an insurgency that was growing more powerful by the day.” This knack for administration coincided with a power that “was very nearly total.... When he walked into a crowd, the Iraqis would sometimes smile and sometimes tremble, and sometimes both.” Those quaking may have experienced a disturbing side that Sassaman himself admitted: “It’s like Jekyll and Hyde out here.... By day, we’re putting on a
happy face. By night, we are hunting down and killing our enemies.”2 The duality of Sassaman’s reign prefigures how future American stewards might handle the “burdens of governance.” Marilyn Young has described that the lieutenant colonel “met resistance of any kind with massive force, and taught his men to do likewise.”3 As a profile in coercion, Sassaman’s fiefdom undermines the argument for soldiers becoming ombudsmen or undertaking the other functions FM 3-07 describes.

On the Daily Show, Caldwell lauded the supreme multi-tasking ability of “these young men and women” of the Army: “One minute they’re drinking tea with a sheikh, the next minute they’re over surveying where they’re going to put a well in, the next minute they’re taking sniper fire from some insurgent and they’re returning fire, and the next minute they’re over here figuring out where they’re going to put another road in.” Indeed, the breadth of jobs in FM 3-07 is even more remarkable. A chapter on “Essential Stability Tasks” lists establishing security, enforcing peace agreements, handling local intelligence services, disarming and demobilizing local paramilitaries, controlling borders, vetting members of the ancien regime, protecting key military and civilian facilities, clearing hazardous munitions, policing neighborhoods, establishing an interim justice system, reforming the judiciary, adjudicating property disputes, providing services for civilians and assisting displaced populations. Later sections mention waste management, utilities restoration and mail delivery. This dizzying array of assignments implies a preternatural competence that would seem fantastical even without the example of Sassaman’s troops.

It is worth recalling that Bush administration officials would likely have scorned the breathtaking sweep of FM 3-07 as recently as the 2000 campaign, when Condoleezza Rice quipped, “We don’t need to have the 82nd Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten.” Under the new field manual, the Army may indeed be directed to chaperone the children, as well as build the school, screen regime loyalists from the faculty and patrol the neighborhood. As a 100-page to-do list for military occupation, FM 3-07 provides a veneer of command over these component projects. Yet enumerating humanitarian tasks does not necessarily illuminate them. Most significantly, with no real accountability to the local population there is no evidence soldiers will pursue such directives without further traumatizing the population. Caldwell has touted FM 3-07 as the cutting edge product of “233 years” of experience and the Army’s “most widely vetted” manual.4 But the strategy assumes a beneficence that eluded Sassaman—at least in his Mr. Hyde phases—and escaped his forerunners during operations in Asia and the Americas. The field manual depicts military occupation as the calling of magnanimous armies, a fallacy that was already old when President William McKinley announced “benevolent assimilation” for the Philippines in 1898. Caldwell, Leonard and their fellow strategists have valorized the traditions they claim to reform, even taking inspiration from America’s war in Vietnam.

**Reenacting Vietnam**

The Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Manual of 2007 revisited America’s experience in Vietnam and found a template in the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program: “CORDS achieved considerable success in supporting and protecting the South Vietnamese population and in undermining the communist insurgents’ influence and appeal, particularly after implementation of accelerated pacification in 1968.”5 Likewise, Leonard et al praise CORDS and rue its neglect in Army doctrine: “In a cruel twist of fate, the answers we so desperately sought in recent years were collecting dust on bookshelves half a world away; the distant lessons of a remarkably successful Vietnam-era civil-military program sat largely forgotten, save by those few who had lived those experiences.”6 CORDS was a relatively brief attempt at nation building that ushered in the longer-running Phoenix Program, a campaign of assassination and mass detention. Rating CORDS as “remarkably successful” reveals a fixation on bureaucratic efficiency despite staggering human costs.

Under interim national security adviser Robert Komer, CORDS unified the chain of command for stability operations in South Vietnam. The program thereby accelerated the flow of USAID funds and personnel to President Lyndon Johnson’s “modernization” of the South Vietnamese countryside. The counterinsurgency manual recalls CORDS as “a successful synthesis of military and civilian efforts,” although civilians constituted less than 15 percent of advisers.7 This highly militarized stability operation failed to deliver even the infrastructural improvement Komer envisioned, and its failings in the political arena were even more dramatic.8 In 1968 the Tet offensive signaled shortfalls that Komer soon acknowledged: CORDS had not made the South Vietnamese government capable of sustaining itself nor had it undermined support for the National Liberation Front.9 Tactical gains of territory derived mainly from the forced relocation of South Vietnamese. While CORDS was operating, the number of Vietnamese refugees grew to over three million; Defense Secretary Robert McNamara credited about 30 percent of the growth in the Republic of Vietnam’s control to this redistribution of people.10 The idea that Komer’s approach might be antithetical to sustainable and accountable governance does not register in FM 3-07’s calculus. The success they emulate is akin to French accomplishments in Algeria and Soviet victories in Afghanistan.11 Accordingly, citizens of allegedly failing states may question the advisability of stability operations in their homelands.
The Ministry of Stability

The latest emissaries of stability and reconstruction appear set on reprising a mission described four decades ago as building “a stable and effective government that inspires confidence in the future.” FM 3-07, Stability Operations seals a six-year push by the Bush administration to establish military occupation as a Pentagon priority.

In mid-September 2002, the Bush administration's first National Security Strategy enshrined idées fixes that portended the invasion of Iraq and survived its wake. The argument that weak and “failing” states posed the greatest threat to American security continued to develop through L. Paul Bremer’s ill-fated tenure as Iraq proconsul. Responding to a January 2004 request from the Department of Defense, the Defense Science Board recommended that the Departments of Defense and State “make stabilization and reconstruction missions one of their core competencies” and called for changing the “mindset” of Defense to embrace such operations “with the same seriousness as combat operations.” The State Department then announced the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization in late September 2004. Its intended resources were modest—White House budget requests totaled $17 million for 2005 setup funds and $124 million for the next year—and its expected role amid military conflicts like Iraq and Afghanistan was commensurately small. (The Defense Science Board study showed that stabilization and reconstruction costs exceeded basic war fighting expenses during 1991-2004 by a factor of more than three to one, like Iraq and Afghanistan was commensurately small. The 2004 Defense Science Board report on “Transition to and from Hostilities” advocated greater emphasis on stability operations and evaluated the French and Soviets as successful in four out of nine areas in “post-conflict operations.” Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics, Defense Science Board 2004 Summer Study on Transition: Supporting Papers (Washington, DC: 2005), pp. 37-41. 11

11 The Pentagon soon eclipsed State’s new office in the latter’s putative bailiwick. Whereas the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review had made no mention of “stability operations,” “reconstruction” or “nation-building,” a March 2005 National Defense Strategy echoed the Defense Science Board’s call for a greater military role after major combat operations. On November 28, 2005, Department of Defense Directive 3000.05 assigned stability operations the same importance as warfare: “They shall be given priority comparable to combat operations and be explicitly addressed and integrated across all [Defense] activities including doctrine, organization, training, education, exercises, materiel, leadership, personnel, facilities and planning.” The potential for a de facto annexation of “stabilization and reconstruction missions” by the Pentagon may answer calls for a standing department of nation building. 14

FM 3-07, Stability Operations signifies the success of the Rumsfeld-Wolfowitz-Feith Pentagon and Bush-Cheney White House at legitimating a project that was anathema to many officers a decade prior. The manual will be assigned and read by soldiers bound for Iraq, Afghanistan and other destinations. Their labors will reflect the state of the art in America's bid for friendly, self-sustaining states. Meanwhile, the manual's immediate impact will be in securing that controversial and troubled aim as a commonplace of US foreign policy. This stunning leap in military policy assumes the advisability of stability operations and funnels resources toward executing the next occupation. President-elect Barack Obama faces the choice of sustaining or challenging this vision of turning soldiers into governors. ■

Endnotes

1 Financial Times, March 29, 2005.
4 States News Service, October 8, 2008.
7 Counterinsurgency Field Manual, pp. 74-75.
14 See, for instance, Francis Fukuyama, “Nation-Building 101,” The Atlantic (January/February 2004); and Andrew Ermann and Suzanne Nossel, Are We All Nation-Builders Now? (Muscato, IA: Stanley Foundation, June 2007).