

# THE FAILURE OF DEMOCRATIC NATION BUILDING

IDEOLOGY MEETS EVOLUTION

ALBERT SOMIT AND  
STEVEN A. PETERSON



THE FAILURE OF DEMOCRATIC  
NATION BUILDING

*This page intentionally left blank*

THE FAILURE OF DEMOCRATIC  
NATION BUILDING: IDEOLOGY  
MEETS EVOLUTION

ALBERT SOMIT  
AND  
STEVEN A. PETERSON

palgrave  
macmillan



THE FAILURE OF DEMOCRATIC NATION BUILDING

© Albert Somit and Steven A. Peterson, 2005.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2005 978-1-4039-6781-7

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

First published in 2005 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and  
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS  
Companies and representatives throughout the world.

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the  
Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and  
of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark  
in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries.  
Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European  
Union and other countries.

ISBN 978-0-230-62112-1      ISBN 978-1-4039-7842-4 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1057/9781403978424

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Somit, Albert.

The failure of democratic nation building : ideology meets  
evolution / Albert Somit and Steven A. Peterson.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Democracy. 2. Democratization. 3. United States—Foreign  
Relations. I. Peterson Steven A. II. Title.

JC423.S682 2005  
327.73'009'015—dc22

2005049184

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: November 2005

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*. . . this whole tendency to see ourselves as the center of political enlightenment and as teachers . . . strikes me as unthought-through, vainglorious, and undesirable.*

George Kennan

*This page intentionally left blank*

## CONTENTS

<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
1. Introduction	1
2. Authoritarian Government: The Default Option	9
3. What is a Democracy?: Toward a Working Definition	25
4. Democratic Nation Building: From Concept to Operational “Checklist”	35
5. Democracy: The Requisite “Enabling Conditions”—No Small Order	47
6. Will the Real Democracies Please Stand Up?	61
7. American Nation Building, 1945–2005: Costs and Consequences	77
8. The Fourth “Whereas”	93
9. “Therefore Be It Resolved . . .”: Toward More Realistic Foreign and Domestic Policies	111
<i>Notes</i>	117
<i>References</i>	137
<i>Name Index</i>	151
<i>Subject Index</i>	157



*This page intentionally left blank*

## LIST OF TABLES

4.1	U.S.-led nation building efforts since 1900	41
4.2	Checklist for successful democratic nation building	45
5.1	Checklist for emergence of a democracy	57
5.2	Checklist for successful democratic nation building	58
5.3	Checklist for emergence of a democracy	58
5.4	Checklist for successful democratic nation building	59
6.1	Democratic countries as a percentage of all countries	65
6.2	Comparing three ratings of democracy, 2001: counting those countries with two or three indices indicating democratic status	66
6.3	Percentage of countries that are democratic or near democratic	67
6.4	Freedom House: ratings over time: 1973–2003	68
6.5	Movement in democracy versus nondemocracy	72
6.6	Category to category change, Freedom House ratings, 1973–2003	73
6.7	Status of the countries of the former USSR	74

*This page intentionally left blank*

## PREFACE

As some of our readers may recall, the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 was enthusiastically hailed in the media as an overwhelming victory for democracy. Not sharing this general euphoria, we submitted a brief article to one of this nation's leading foreign affairs journals, arguing that few if any of the "liberated" countries would become democracies in any meaningful sense of that term. After a lengthy wait, we took the liberty of asking the editor for a decision. His reply, in effect, was that although he personally agreed with our contention, he had regretfully concluded that his readers would not welcome our bleak prognosis.

Shortly thereafter, we tried again, this time sending the piece to a journal aimed primarily at natural, rather than social scientists. Here again, we encountered editorial agreement—and the same reluctance to publish a predictably unpopular point of view.

In both pieces, our basic thesis was that, contrary to the prevailing ideology, humans were genetically predisposed to authoritarian and hierarchical, rather than democratic and egalitarian, social and political structures. Even in a so-called Age of Democracy, we noted, democracies still constituted a definite minority among governments, as has been the case throughout the ages. This argument, with supporting data, was spelled out in our *Darwinism, Dominance, and Democracy: The Biological Basis of Authoritarianism* (1997), a volume that somehow escaped review by a single major political or social science journal.

Proving that we were extraordinarily slow learners, we tried again a few years later—with an even better known publishing house. This book pointed out the shortcomings of the dominant Standard Social Science Model and advanced the case for a more Darwinian conception of human nature in formulating domestic and foreign policy. Again, we apparently fell below the journals' radar screen.

We probably should have taken the hint that the times were not yet ripe for a neo-Darwinian approach to human behavior and to public policy were it not for the egregious folly of our "nation building" ventures in Afghanistan and Iraq. To borrow a famous epigram, U.S. policy has been

worse than a crime; in terms of our national interest, it has been a staggering blunder. In the hope of lessening the likelihood of a repeat experience, we offer here not so much a *moral* argument (it should not be done) as a practical one—it really cannot be done.

For some twenty-five hundred years, the central issue in Western political philosophy has been “What is the nature of human nature?” Over the past half century (as we discuss in chapter 2), the newly-emergent disciplines of Primatology and Human Ethology have provided both a description of, and an explanation for, the “cross-cultural” behavioral characteristics that *Homo sapiens* so consistently manifests. The evidence amassed to date strongly suggests that Machiavelli and Hobbes were much closer to the mark than Locke and Rousseau in their strikingly different assessments of human nature generally and of *Homo politicus* in particular. This is truly an unwelcome conclusion but, as Edmund Burke advised in a pre-Darwinian era, “We cannot change the nature of things and of man, but must act upon them as best we can.” Unfortunately, the wisdom of Burke’s counsel has yet to be recognized either by those who set American public policy or by the great majority of our social and behavioral scientists.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would be remiss if we did not take this opportunity to

Thank the International Political Science Association for its intellectual open-mindedness in establishing a Research Committee on Biology and Politics in 1972 and for the support (in several senses of the word) it has given the committee since then.

Express our appreciation to the *British Journal of Political Science* for making it possible for us, early on, to apprise their readers of this new way of looking at political behavior and, a couple of decades later, to describe what “biopolitics” had and had not accomplished in the interim.

Commend the American Political Science Association for so successfully shielding its readers from news of this development that the editor of a newly established sister journal could, in all innocence, hail it as a “revolutionary” movement—some 40 years after the fact.

Certainly thank Palgrave/Macmillan Senior Editor Toby Wahl and Editorial Assistant Heather Van Dusen for their unstinting help in bringing this volume to fruition.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Authors who advocate predictably unpopular ideas or policies have a choice of tactics: they can risk alienating their readers at the outset or, alternatively, try to postpone and possibly lessen this danger by an indirect and circuitous statement. As the next few paragraphs make clear, we have opted for the former.

Our major thesis is that the United States should drastically curtail, if not abandon, its efforts to establish democratic governments elsewhere, that is, the so-called policy of “nation building.” With rare exceptions, this policy has been unsuccessful in the past; it is unsuccessful today; and is almost surely certain to be equally unproductive in the foreseeable future.

How to justify this conclusion? Necessarily oversimplified for a one-paragraph summary, our argument runs as follows: Viable democracies (there is near-unanimous agreement) require the conjunction of very special material and social “enabling conditions.” As the relative rarity of democracies and the overwhelming predominance of authoritarian governments throughout human history testify, this conjunction happens all-too infrequently. These special conditions are necessary because we (*Homo sapiens*) are social primates and evolution has endowed the social primates with an innate proclivity to hierarchically structured social and political systems and an innate tendency to dominance and submission behaviors. A species so genetically inclined is hardly promising democratic material—which is why democracies require special conditions, why even today they are a definite minority among governments, why they are so hard to establish, and why they tend to be so fragile—and why the resources expended on nation building would be more productively devoted to strengthening democracy at home rather than in trying to establish it elsewhere.

We realize that many of our readers will probably disagree with at least some of that statement. In the remaining pages of this opening chapter, therefore, we seek to persuade even the most skeptical that our criticisms of “nation building” are soundly based and our resultant policy proposals merit serious consideration.

Since we are admittedly advancing an argument that many of our readers are likely challenge, we start with a couple of purely factual statements, which, in the familiar phrase, “nobody can deny.” They are

1. Throughout history, democracies have been quite rare. Even today, in the so-called Age of Democracy, they are still a minority and authoritarian polities a clear majority of existent political regimes—democratic oases, as it were, in an authoritarian desert.
2. Motivated by the familiar combinations of self-interest, altruism, and ideology, over the past 60 years the United States has spent countless billions of dollars and literally thousands of American lives in attempts to establish democratic governments elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, we have not been the only country to do so. Other “Western” nations, for much the same reasons, have incurred similar, though much smaller, costs.
3. These efforts have so far been largely unsuccessful. In some countries, stable governments, let alone democracies, have yet to emerge; in many of the countries where some degree of political order has been achieved, the resulting regimes are undeniably and often unabashedly authoritarian. If we take the creation of viable democracies as our measure, it would be truly Panglossian to adjudge nation building as other than a demonstrably failed policy.

That bleak conclusion immediately gives rise to the obvious question: why has it proven so consistently difficult to establish democratic government elsewhere?<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, we are hardly the first persons to raise this question. It has been addressed by many social scientists and the near-unanimous answer has been that democracies require very special “enabling conditions” for their birth and survival. In fact, a sizable cottage industry has developed among scholars seeking to identify the unique conjunction of economic, social, political, and other similar conditions needed for this infrequent nativity to occur. And, while they differ on the requisite “magic mix,” on one point they do concur: these enabling conditions normally take decades, often generations, to emerge and mature; they cannot be achieved by import, fiat, or external imposition, no matter how well intentioned.

We certainly agree that special conditions are required and that these conditions are not readily or often attained. This explanation is fine as far as it goes—but it does not go far enough. It stops short because most contemporary social scientists are trained in, and are committed to, the Standard Social Science Model (SSSM),<sup>3</sup> and the intellectual constraints of the SSSM—specifically, its unyielding insistence that human behavior “lies beyond the pale of biological explanation” (Dunbar, 1996: 8)—makes it



almost impossible for its practitioners to pose, let alone answer, what we would say is the real problem—*Why does democracy require so many “special conditions” while despotism and authoritarianism can so readily take root and flourish in almost any setting?* Or, if one prefers a more currently fashionable terminology, why is authoritarianism, rather than democracy, the “default” mode of human governance? Or, to put it still more pointedly, what is it about human nature that makes authoritarianism so easy—and democracy so difficult? If we are to make any headway with this issue, we must abandon the SSSM and turn, instead, to contemporary evolutionary theory, a far more powerful explanatory system.

Folk wisdom warns that “if you may not like the answer, don’t ask the question.” So it is in this instance. From a neo-Darwinian perspective, these “special enabling conditions” are required because democracy (much as we would like to believe otherwise) runs counter to a powerful human behavioral tendency. Biologically speaking, humans are social primates (embarrassingly akin genetically to the chimpanzees) and, over several million years, evolution has endowed the social primates with an innate predisposition (to understate the matter) for hierarchical social and political structures. That is, social primates almost invariably form groups, troops, tribes, and societies characterized by marked individual differences in terms of status, dominance and submission, command and obedience, and by unequal access to many of the good things of life. *Sad to say, the primary reason for the prevalence of authoritarian governments, for the rarity of democracy, and for why democracy demands such special enabling conditions is to be found not in our stars but in our genes.*<sup>4</sup>

Understandably, this unwelcome idea almost always elicits a quite logical objection: If that is so, how then do you explain the (admittedly infrequent) appearance and survival of democracies? Part of the answer, we earlier agreed, lies in the occasional conjunction of economic, social, political enabling conditions; undoubtedly, these do play an essential role. Nonetheless, we must again turn to evolutionary theory to identify the necessary, though of itself not sufficient, human attribute that sometimes makes democracy possible.

As previously remarked, *Homo sapiens* shares with other social primates an inherent proclivity for hierarchical social and political structures. Our species, however, has also evolved a behavioral trait on which we have an unchallenged monopoly—the capacity to create, accept, and then act on the basis of beliefs and values, even when the resulting actions run counter to our innate inclinations or even our personal preferences.<sup>5</sup> Thus, “[W]hile every other organism we know about lives in the world as presented to them by Nature, human beings live in a world that they consciously symbolize and re-create in their own minds” (Tattersall, 2002: 78). Consequently, as one of our most distinguished biologists observes, “of all living creatures,