

## STATE-BUILDING LESSONS FROM THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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**Abstract:** After the frustration of recent state-building missions, we should ask why such interventions seemed less difficult in the era of colonial expansion. Before 1939, foreign state-building interventions were regularly managed by a decentralized team of plenipotentiary agents who specialized in fostering local political development. Since 1945, however, international assistance has generally worked with and through an officially recognized national government, implicitly supporting a centralization of power. This paper considers the corps of British colonial District Officers as a potential model for an international state-building agency, which could help to repair failed states that export violence and suffering.

### **When did state-building become so difficult?**

In the late 19th century, European colonial expansion made state-building look easy. Colonial agents repeatedly demonstrated their ability to establish stable political systems in distant foreign lands at negligible cost to the domestic taxpayers of their home countries. Recently, however, the frustration of costly state-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq has led many observers to conclude that even a superpower with global military supremacy cannot undertake missions to establish stable government in foreign countries. We should ask whether 19th-century colonizers understood something about how to establish political stability that was forgotten by those who undertook state-building missions in the early 21st century.<sup>1</sup>

Of course political goals and the realities of power have changed over the past century, and nobody wants to recreate the old colonial empires. But there are still times when political instability in one country can become a threat to other nations, as when a failed state becomes a base for terrorists or a source of desperate refugees flooding into other nations. Then international security and stability may depend on some capability for state-building. (For broad examinations of the recurrent necessity for state-building interventions and the fundamental dilemmas that they entail, see James Fearon and David Laitin 2004, and David Lake 2016.)

There are basic principles in the development of political order that may apply to any form of government. Thus, regardless of our aversion to colonialism, it might be worthwhile to examine the operational principles that were successfully applied in colonial state-building, so that we may ask whether some of these principles could still be applicable for democratic state-building today.

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<sup>1</sup> Rory Stewart has insightfully raised this question in his book with Gerald Knaus (2012).

This paper focuses mainly on the organizational principles of the British colonial administration in Africa, which established political order in about half of the continent, and which ultimately supported the development of democratic governments and peaceful transitions to independence. Excellent sources on this subject include books by Anthony Kirk-Greene (2006), Frederick Lugard (1922), and Margery Perham (1937, 1962). Among the lessons that can be drawn from the history of British colonial state-building, I will suggest that the most important may be that the management of a state-building mission should rely on a decentralized team of agents who can negotiate effectively with local leaders throughout the country.

But let us start with a short review of Gertrude Bell's (1920) report on the British administration in Iraq after World War I, which offers a sharp contrast to the American-led state-building operation in the same country eight decades later.

### **Lessons from British state-building in Iraq after World War I**

To understand the qualities that made successful state-builders in the British Empire, it might be useful to ask how Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) developed the skills to become a great state-builder at the end of World War I. She was a wealthy heiress who entered government service as a volunteer during the War, but before that she had been an amateur explorer in the Middle East (see Howell 2006). In her Arabian expeditions between 1900 and 1914, she could venture out from the Ottoman-controlled towns into the desert with safety by asking for protection from a dominant tribal leader or sheikh in each region where she traveled. Negotiating with gifts over tea in his tent, she would ask for a guide to conduct her through his region of influence and for an introduction to a powerful local leader in the next region of her journey. Thus, Gertrude Bell had years of practice in identifying local leaders of Arab society and in negotiating with them to earn their respect and trust. This experience turned out to be excellent preparation for managing a state-building operation, as British officers in Iraq recognized when Bell arrived there in 1916.

The British occupation ultimately led to the establishment of an independent Kingdom of Iraq under Faisal, a son of the Hashemite Sharif of Mecca, whose general acceptance as King of Iraq in 1921 was substantially promoted by Gertrude Bell. To achieve this political settlement, she negotiated with local magnates and tribal chiefs throughout Iraq, hearing their concerns and assuring them that a government under King Faisal would serve their interests. Bell's ability to build relationships of trust with local leaders was essential to this process. Thereafter, Faisal and

his successors held power in Iraq for 37 years, although popular support for their regime was eroded by its acceptance of treaties that perpetuated British influence. The downfall of the regime under Faisal's grandson may also point to a weakness of political institutions (municipal councils and Parliament) that should have provided a framework for continuing Bell's work of developing local political coalitions to support the royal government.

Of course the political reconstruction of Iraq after World War I required more than one skilled political facilitator. As Gertrude Bell makes clear in her 1920 *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, the British administration of Iraq relied on a small but essential corps of approximately 70 political officers who had experience serving as local magistrates in the British Empire (Bell 1920 p122-125).<sup>2</sup> Bell also reports that these 70 local political officers were overseen by a central administrative office in Baghdad that included just 5 senior British officials. This decentralized distribution of the British political officers in 1920 contrasts starkly with the central concentration of American officials in Baghdad's Green Zone after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

In her overview of the 1920 administration of Iraq, Bell indicates that each of these local political officers had primary responsibility for supervising all political, fiscal, and legal matters in his district or division. Political officers generally acted in consultation with a representative group of local notables, so that their judgments could achieve broad popular acceptance with minimal reliance on external force. Thus, although the British occupation of Iraq was a foreign-imposed government, its policies were shaped by decentralized network of officials who were professionally sensitive and responsive to local political forces throughout the nation.

### **British District Officers in Africa**

The local administrators whom Gertrude Bell called "political officers" were also known by a variety of other titles across the British Empire, including District Magistrate, District Commissioner, or District Officer. Anthony Kirk-Greene (2006) has suggested that the term "District Officer" may be most appropriate for a general discussion of the British colonial administrative services in different countries, and we follow his usage hereafter.<sup>3</sup> Gertrude Bell's

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<sup>2</sup> We may note that, having 70 professional political officers in Iraq after World War I meant having about 20 officers per million people in the population

<sup>3</sup> The term "political officer" might have some advantage in discussing situations where military forces are actively operating, so that the adjective "political" could help to distinguish the colonial officers who oversee indigenous politics from military officers who command armed forces in the same districts. This observation may explain why Bell uses this term for discussions of Iraq in 1920. Similarly, while Perham (1937) uses the term "political officer"

report makes it clear that the achievements of the British state-building mission in Iraq after World War I depended on the fact that the British Empire had an ample supply of such professional District Officers for its colonial operations.

District Officers formed the essential backbone or core of Britain's colonial administration. Anthony Kirk-Greene (2006) has provided a comprehensive description of their careers and professional norms, and here we can only sketch an outline of salient points from Kirk-Greene's magnificent book. (See also Valentin Seidler 2017, 2018.)

As the title suggests, the District Officer's primary job was to oversee all political and legal affairs in a district in the British Empire. Districts varied in size, but an average district might have about 50,000 inhabitants, and it had to be small enough that the district officer could visit most of it in a couple of months of touring on foot. Within such a district, the District Officer had responsibility for supervising all aspects of local government and law, as the local representative of the colonial power. While most of this work would be done from an office in the district headquarters, with an indigenous staff of clerks and messengers, the District Officer was expected also to spend at least a couple of months every year touring to learn about problems and concerns of the people throughout the district. If there were any disorder or unrest in the district, the District Officer could expect to be questioned about whether he had failed to anticipate the problems by inadequate touring.

District Officers were commonly recruited as recent college graduates or war veterans, and they might be sent out to a colony with only a short period of training that could include basic introductory courses on colonial accounts, tropical economic products, criminal law and Islamic law, hygiene and sanitation, surveying, ethnology, and languages. A new officer's first assignment would be to serve as an Assistant District Officer, sharing responsibilities with an experienced supervisor, and the first tour of the district was effectively an immersion course in the regional language. Promotion then depended on passing exams in law, government regulations, and languages. But Kirk-Green (2006 p43) quotes one District Officer's testimony that the most important skills that they needed were "unlimited patience, and a real sympathy for the people among whom the young officer will work." Lugard (1922 p132) suggested that basic qualities for a good District Officer were an aptitude for managerial initiative, within a chain of command, and "an almost passionate conception of fair play, and of protection of the weak."

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in sections that discuss the initial operations to establish British power in Nigeria, which involved active military support, but she switches to the term "district officer" thereafter. (See also David Gilmore 2005 p90n.)

When wide powers over remote communities are concentrated in the hands of one official, however, one cannot rely on good character alone to prevent abuse of power. District Officers were supervised by a Provincial Commissioner or Resident whose province typically included only three or four districts (Lugard 1922 p131). A practice of regularly re-assigning District Officers to different districts every few years provided another form of monitoring, as local complaints about one officer would be heard by his successor. Provincial Commissioners were expected to stay longer in one province (Lugard 1922 p136).

District Officers were also typically assigned for at least a couple of years to the Governor's central secretariat in the capital of the country where they were serving. As a result, effective communication between central policy-makers in the capital and those responsible for implementing policy in the districts could be facilitated by personal connections and familiarity. Furthermore, because the District Officers on rotation always formed an essential component of the central secretariat, the District Officers as a team had substantial responsibility for the direction of policy-making in the colonial capital as well as in the most remote districts. So political policies in the colony were determined primarily by the team of officers who had local expertise, and the influence of the Colonial Office in London was correspondingly limited (Perham 1937 p350).

### **Lugard's principles of colonial administration**

In his treatise on colonial administration, Lord Lugard (1922 p113) summarized its essential principles in three words: Decentralization, Continuity, and Co-operation. It is worth considering in some detail what he meant by each of these.<sup>4</sup>

Lugard's principle of Decentralization refers to the devolution of wide powers and responsibility to the local District Officer. Under the policies of indirect rule, which Lugard did much to formulate, traditional forms of local indigenous authority were maintained under British colonial rule. But all decisions by indigenous authorities were subject to review by the local District Officer, who represented the British Empire within his district. Foreigners in the district were also subject to legal supervision by the District Officer. Notice that this allocation of colonial power can be described as both decentralized and concentrated, as the central officials delegated wide discretion and responsibility to local administrators, but this decentralized power was concentrated in the hands of one District Officer in each district. This local concentration of

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<sup>4</sup> Frederick Lugard was a leader in the establishment of British colonial rule in Malawi, Uganda, and Nigeria.

effective power over all relations with the external world helped to maximize the District Officer's ability to influence indigenous local leaders with a minimal use of external force. Operating locally, but with globally authorized powers, the District Officer combined an ability to act forcefully with an intimate understanding of the local political issues that motivated and constrained indigenous community leaders.

But the District Officer's influence would be reduced if his ability to offer promises was limited to the extent of his own term in office. Lugard's principle of Continuity serves to solve this problem. Lugard (1922 p103) argued that, to maintain continuity of policies under different officers, it was essential that each officer should keep detailed records of important matters, especially of any conversation with indigenous leaders in which some promise was made. Thus, a District Officer had to keep a notebook that was a guide to his district, listing village units, tax collection data, and details about village chiefs, including how they are chosen. Other essential documents included the hand-over notes which the District Officer was expected to leave for his successor, which described recent issues and undertakings in the district, such as local political events and economic development projects.

In Lugard's system, the higher levels in the hierarchy had principal responsibility for maintaining continuity. The Provincial Commissioner would review the documents and records from the District Officers under his supervision and then would report to the Governor and the central secretariat about current problems in the province and how they were being handled. The Governor in turn had to study the Provincial Commissioners' reports, formulate general principles for consistently addressing the policy questions raised in these reports, and issue memoranda that would codify these principles for guidance of future decisions. Thus, the Provincial Commissioners and the Governor worked to integrate the District Officers' solutions to new political problems into the written policies of the colonial government.

Lugard's principle of Co-operation directs District Officers to build an inclusive coalition for supporting local government and its undertakings, by striving to develop trust and common interests with all significant groups that operate in the district. Co-operation should be sought with others in the colonial government, with local merchants, with other Europeans who are active in the district, and above all with indigenous chiefs and local leaders, who must be assured of a share of the benefits of power in the local order.

Lugard emphasized the vital role of local taxation, for cementing the alliance between the local chiefs and the colonial administration, and for confirming the general acceptance of their

local authority in the community. He argued that, when the colonial intervention has increased people's welfare by promoting regional peace and improving transportation routes for their products, people should be willing to pay moderate taxes on the enhanced income-earning potential of their land and other assets. In Lugard's system, residents' tax obligations were assessed by their village headman under the direction of their traditional chief, and the District Officer would support the headman's collection of these taxes after hearing people's complaints about any perceived inequities or excesses. Tax revenue was then divided in fixed proportions between the headman, the chief, special funds for local public goods, and the colonial administration.<sup>5</sup> So the system of taxation was designed to be a partnership between indigenous leaders and colonial officials, and people's tax payments implicitly demonstrated their acceptance of this leadership.

The political education and development of indigenous society was considered to be a principal goal of colonial government in Africa. In Lugard's view (1922 p217-219), the essential primary step in this program of political development was the establishment of such accepted local leadership, capable of taxing its people and managing budgets for public services.

### **Perham's inter-war prescription for the path to independence**

Examining Nigeria after several decades of colonial rule, Margery Perham (1937 chapter 21) described the next steps that she saw as necessary to move toward independence. She argued that the program of educating people for local self-government based on their own traditional institutions needed to be applied more boldly, first by increasing the responsibilities and public accountability of indigenous local leaders, and then by encouraging them to federate.

Perham criticized colonial governments for over-regulating instead of allowing indigenous leaders to take real responsibility for serving their communities. She also warned against a common tendency of colonial governments to give a few indigenous agents great coercive powers over their own people, without any corresponding concern for making these agents accountable to their communities. She observed that there are democratic tendencies in most African societies which colonial governments had too often ignored or suppressed.

To take control of large territories with small forces, colonial governments initially needed to win the cooperation of indigenous leaders who had real popular support. But once the colonial regime was established, it would often be more convenient for the government to allow

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<sup>5</sup> The colonial administration was also supported by taxes on trade collected at the major ports. See Gardner (2012).

its allied chiefs to have more power and less accountability in their communities. Indeed, a District Officer could find himself more respected and influential throughout a community when complaining to him provided the only redress that people there had against their chief.

Even if colonial officials maintained a scrupulously neutral policy toward indigenous political institutions, the positive effects of colonial government in promoting a broad regional peace would tend to reduce the local accountability of indigenous leaders. In precolonial times, although many traditional leaders might not have been chosen by any formal popular election, the constant possibility of a violent challenge to their authority meant that they could not hold positions of power without some broad support from people willing to fight for them. But with peace under colonial rule, when recognition from a colonial officer was all that a chief needed to maintain his privileged position, the imperative for him to maintain a popular base of support would vanish. So there was a serious risk of traditional political institutions losing their ability to provide trustworthy leadership for their communities when their leaders were not subject to some form of broad popular accountability. Thus, a program to support the development of effective self-government based on traditional institutions needed to promote some elements of democratic accountability in those institutions.

But democratic accountability requires voters to have a sophisticated understanding about how to compare leaders who are competing for power. The reason for recommending the principle of political development by gradual evolution of traditional indigenous institutions is because people have greater difficulty understanding how to judge contests for power in unfamiliar institutions. In elections for an unfamiliar office, people may not know what they should expect of good leaders or what qualities would be most important for the job. When a population has had no experience of peaceful competition for power at the national level, only at the local level, then democratic accountability is likely to function better at the local level.

So Perham urged that greater responsibilities and more popular accountability should be introduced first at the local level, on the small scale of the traditional institutions with which the people were familiar. Such political decentralization might seem inefficient to foreign observers who saw economies of scale and regional externalities in the provision of many public goods and services, but it might be necessary until people have had more experience with national politics. As Perham suggested, a weak federation could be an ideal structure for this transitional period, keeping most responsibilities of government in the hands of locally accountable local leaders, but giving people some experience of national political competition in the weak federal body.



Perham argued that, when the time for independence comes, it would be easier for a new national government to take effective accountable control of public service agencies that have developed under indigenous local management than under foreign colonial management. Under the latter alternative, nobody in the new nation would be able to offer a knowledgeable experienced critique of public mismanagement after independence. Although development of public-service agencies under local indigenous authorities might involve some redundancy that could seem inefficient at first, it would ultimately give the nation a large competitive supply of individuals who know how these public services should be managed.

Perham believed that most government jobs for educated Africans would have to be found in the local native administrations, but she recommended that the central colonial government should also press forward a policy of employing more Africans in responsible positions. But then she urged one extraordinary exception from this policy, an exception which shows deep insight into the problems of foreign assistance in state-building. Her words are worth quoting directly:

*"There is, however, one branch into which, I believe, Africans should not enter, and that is the Administrative Service. This should aim at being increasingly advisory in its functions. It should be regarded as the temporary scaffolding round the growing structure of native self-government. African energies should be incorporated into the structure: to build them into the scaffolding would be to create a vested interest which would make its demolition at the appropriate time very difficult."* (Perham 1937 p361.)

The colonial Administrative Service to which she refers here is the corps of District Officers. As we have seen, they formed the primary operational network of the colonial regime. We must understand why Margery Perham considered it vital that the network of District Officers should not be integrated into the new independent state, but should vanish like scaffolding when the colonial state-building project was finished.

By professional norms and organization, the District Officers formed a superb instrument for monitoring and responding to local political challenges in every district of a large nation. As such, they were the primary agents for supporting the development of both administrative capacity and public accountability in the traditional indigenous institutions of local government. But there is only a fine line between supporting local political development and controlling it. A network of District Officers could equally serve as a mechanism for asserting central political control throughout the nation. Kirk-Greene noted (2006 p221) that no African government

wished to rid itself of these critical field agents and representatives.

Perham's vision was of African nations achieving independence as federal entities, where institutions of local self-government would be derived from familiar forms of traditional leadership, and where national coordination would be provided by a weak federal government with limited powers. Indeed, people in the United States of America chose a political system based on just these principles when Americans became independent of British rule. But a different path was followed in Africa.

### **The great shift in development assistance after World War II**

After World War II, the mission of British colonial government in Africa shifted toward preparation for national independence. Although independence would obviously mean an end to political supervision by British District Officers, they continued to serve the cause of political development with vital guidance and advice right up to the day when Independence put them out of a job (Kirk-Greene 2006 chapter 10). From the late 1940s, however, the nature of colonial government and the District Officers' roles in it were fundamentally changed by an increased focus on developing the central administrative capabilities that a sovereign national government would need. This post-war shift, away from the previous focus on decentralized political development based on local indigenous institutions, should be recognized as a critical change in the strategic direction of international development assistance.

The refocusing of colonial efforts on national political development meant that traditional local leaders were not pressed to accept stronger forms of public accountability. As a result, traditional forms of local leadership could be seen as lacking accountability to anyone but their District Officer, and as such they would be obsolete political institutions that should have little or no role in a modern democratic state. Thus, new foundations were laid instead for a centralized state which would seem remote and foreign to many outside the capital.

Contrary to Perham's advice, native citizens began to be trained to replace foreigners as District Officers for the new nations. But Kirk-Greene (2006 p219-221) noted that, in the transition to independence, new indigenous recruits into the corps of District Officers seemed less prone to accept the old norm of regarding rural assignments with village touring as the best and most important part of their work. For District Officers who were citizens of the new independent nation in which they served, it was natural to feel that service in a remote rural district was less likely to bring recognition and rewards from powerful national leaders than

service in the national capital. (Perhaps District Officers from England tended to see less value in their occasional assignments to the colonial capital because, after all, it was not London.) In any case, a national leader who could view effective local leaders as potential rivals for power would probably not want the development of effective local self-government to be a priority for his District Officers. He would prefer them to focus on monitoring local political issues and exercising the control over traditional chiefs that the independent state inherited from its colonial predecessors.

Strong national political systems depend on a balanced relationship between local and national politics. When the national government constitutionally devolves powers to autonomous institutions of local self-government, then every part of the country will have local leaders whose share of power gives them an active interest in maintaining the political system. Furthermore, popularly trusted local leaders who prove their ability to provide good public service in autonomous local government can become strong competitors for higher office, thus strengthening democratic competition at the national level.

In a centralized state, however, the national leader can keep all the benefits of state power within his own patronage network and can avoid such locally-proven competition. So national elites may prefer to lead a weak state where all the power is concentrated in their hands than to lead a strong state where the exercise of national power regularly requires complex negotiations and competition with autonomous local leaders throughout the country. But then the result can be a weak state, where only a narrow elite have any real interest in supporting the state, and where large segments of the population may feel alienated politically and unable to invest securely for economic improvement.

A national leader's ability to impose such centralization can be increased by foreign assistance that is directed through the national government, as this assistance provides a source of funding that national elites can enjoy even if they lose effective control over some remote regions of the country. Such flows of international assistance to support the national governments of poor countries began in the late 1940s and have continued to this day.

Indeed, development assistance since 1945 has been guided largely by an assumption that economic and technical experts can promote economic development without political development, and that political development should be based on national leaders accepting democratic forms of public accountability. Where the new national governments seemed weak, the solution would be sought in technical assistance to improve their administrative capacity. So

in the 1940s and 50s, even as independence approached, the inflow of Europeans coming to Africa to work on development initiatives outnumbered the old corps of District Officers so much that some described it as a second colonial occupation (Kirk-Greene 2006 p217, Low 1991 p173-176). After the end of colonial rule in Africa, the old form of developmental intervention by a team of District Officers who specialized in supporting local political development was largely forgotten in the global community of development-assistance professionals.

### **The importance of political autonomy**

People can be confident of getting beneficial public goods and services only from a government that is accountable to them. But any foreign intervention, even when its goal is to support positive political development, must inevitably compromise this essential principle of domestic political accountability. Even in Lord Lugard's treatise on colonial political development (1922 p58), his title "The Dual Mandate" was an admission that colonial governments were established to serve international economic interests as well as the interests of the indigenous population. The key question is whether, in some circumstances, can a foreign intervention be managed so as to do more good by supporting local political development than the harm that it does by its (hopefully short-term) violation of national political autonomy.

Since the end of colonialism, the Westphalian principle of nonintervention among sovereign states has been appropriately valued as a norm for defending the autonomy of politics in every nation. But this principle of nonintervention has had its own dual motivation. While today we may prefer to interpret it as an international norm for protecting the domestic democratic accountability of national governments, its original motivation (from the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648) was more about autocratic rulers agreeing not to undermine each other's domination of their respective subject populations. From this perspective, we should not be surprised to find cases in the world today where the principle of respect for Westphalian sovereignty in international relations has effectively served to strengthen the centralized power of a ruling national elite.

But communities also need some degree of subnational political autonomy, for effective local accountability in the provision of local public goods that are essential for prosperity. We have argued that strong political systems depend on a balanced relationship between local and national politics. When there has been no constitutional protection for autonomously elected institutions of local government, people who do not trust their national leaders may prefer to rely

on informal structures of local leadership, which are harder for outsiders to monitor and manipulate. Unfortunately, this informality also makes it harder for foreign assistance to promote local political development, unless the assistance is directed by local political officers who are deeply immersed in the communities that they have been sent to help. Without formal institutions of local democracy, it is difficult to identify who is widely respected in a community except by living there and listening to people. So the kind of immersion that was practiced by colonial District Officers may be essential for anyone whose mission is to cultivate popularly trusted local leadership, which must be the primary task in any intervention for democratic political development.

### **State-building agents for the 21st century?**

A global order that is based on mutual respect among sovereign independent nations throughout the world is better than a global order based on colonial domination of large regions. History has shown that benevolent goals could be claimed as justifications for interventions that became imperial conquests, and so it is appropriate that any such claimed justifications for forceful interventions should be judged critically by the international community (see Myerson 2014). But as Fearon and Laitin (2004) have cogently argued, global stability requires some mechanism for filling vulnerable gaps in the international system, by fixing failed states and promoting their political development into functioning partners in the global order. When the violence and suffering in a failed or dysfunctional state threaten to spill over its borders into other countries, their citizens have a right to demand some effective response.

However, the frustration of costly state-building missions in recent years has created a widespread belief that nothing can be done to help states that fail, and this sense of helplessness has fed demands to fortify borders against the possibility of ever-increasing waves of refugees from failed states. It is to find some remedy for this perceived helplessness that this paper has examined the state-building strategies of the British Empire, to identify what principles might have been forgotten by would-be state-builders in Afghanistan and Iraq after 2003.

Our salient finding here has been the vital effectiveness of District Officers for political development. So when foreign assistance is intended to promote political development in a country, this goal may be best served by assigning one district development officer to each part of the country, giving these officers full authority to direct all foreign assistance in their respective districts. These district development officers would be expected to monitor the local

political situation and to use assistance as an inducement for positive cooperation among local leaders.

In recent state-building missions to Iraq and Afghanistan, however, vast resources were invested in developing the military and administrative capacity of the national government. This strategy, if successful, would have created a powerful centralized state that could implicitly threaten local interests in many parts of the country. But an essential part of the state-building problem was the complex challenge of negotiating a broad inclusive distribution of power that could assure trusted local leaders a role in the political system (Myerson 2017). The administration of British colonial dependencies has shown us that, to support the development of a political system with deep roots in local politics, the strategic management of a state-building intervention should be based on a team of local plenipotentiary district development officers.

To illustrate how the District Officer model might be adapted to a political development challenge today, let us consider the problem of reconstruction in Syria after its long civil war. At a time when the long struggle seems to be ending with a triumph for the Assad regime, it seems clear that Western powers have little leverage to help those who worked for democracy in Syria. But the District Officer model suggests a way to maximize the impact of the limited leverage that is available.

Imagine a broad coalition of democratic nations agreeing to jointly finance a large fund for reconstruction assistance in Syria, but on the condition that the distribution of the aid must be overseen by a team of district development officers, one for each of Syria's 65 districts. To supervise and coordinate these district development officers, there could also be a provincial development commissioner for each of Syria's 14 provinces. These provincial supervisors would approve and record all agreements between the district officers and cooperating local leaders. The district development officers would be expected to work full-time in their districts for tours of duty that might last a year or two (with successive officers having some period of overlap in the district). The provincial development commissioners would be expected to supervise one province for a longer term, to maintain continuity as Lugard suggested, but they would not need to be full-time in the field, as much supervision could be done remotely with electronic communication.

The multinational donor coalition would accept (under the principle of co-operation) that some fraction of their assistance fund would be spent in ways that are valued by the Assad regime, generating profits for contractors with connections to the regime, and providing services

which benefit the communities that were loyal to the regime. But each district development officer would be directed to ensure that some significant portion of the aid (say, at least half) must be used to benefit other communities as well, using local contractors who are trusted in these communities. When any district development officer reported that these terms were not being locally fulfilled, then the multinational donor coalition would be committed to halt all assistance payments to Syria until the district officer's conditions were met. Thus, the strategic management of the entire mission would depend on a team of local officers, who would monitor local political conditions in every part of the country, assess what progress can be realistically achieved, and use their delegated power within the system to achieve it.

As we have noted, there is a danger that any mechanism for providing external support of local political development could be converted into a mechanism for control of local politics, and so any state-building intervention should have a limited time horizon and a clear exit strategy. But there is a subtle problem in removing the scaffolding, because the interveners' effectiveness will depend largely on their ability to make long-term promises in exchange for cooperation. The key for an exit strategy may be found in Lugard's reliance on provincial commissioners and governors to solve the continuity problem when district officers are reassigned. When the mission is winding down and the district development officers are being withdrawn, provincial development commissioners should still be expected to maintain a connection with their provinces for several more years, to remember and honor promises as appropriate. That is, the scaffolding of the political intervention should be removed first from the lowest local level. Then, after the provincial development commissioners have also withdrawn, any continuing implications of the intervention's agreements with local leaders could be managed from an office in the embassy of a nation that had supported the intervention.

Such state-building power should be exercised only with strict international restraint. State-building missions should be considered internationally unacceptable unless they are supported by a broad coalition, and such missions are best done multilaterally. One can only speculate about what nation or international organization might take responsibility for maintaining a reserve corps of district development officers, with professional training in local government administration and languages, so that the world can be better prepared for the next state-building emergency. But we should note that, from the perspective of this paper, it is hard to imagine that a more suitable sponsor than the Commonwealth of Nations, where the legacy of British Colonial District Officers is still widely remembered.

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