The term “failed state” makes no sense, writes Susan L. Woodward in *The Ideology of Failed States*. Its usage is misguided—theoretically and empirically—and represents “the primary explanation for the repeated failures [of interventions]” in recent decades (p. 7). It leads to operational pathologies and state-building practices that defeat the purpose of any intervention.

To explain the term’s emergence and popularity, Woodward takes us back to the end of the Cold War. To justify the preservation of America’s superpower military capacities in a world devoid of a prime adversary, military officials in the George H. W. Bush administration began to construct the concept of the rogue state—a state that is unable to control its territory and uphold its internal legal order. Thus, it constitutes an increasingly prevalent threat to international security—and particularly the security of the United States.

Development officials soon joined the discussion. Threatened by right-wing elements in the US Congress that advocated for a complete slashing of US foreign aid budgets, they saw in the concept of “human security” a way to link development and national security concerns. A mixture of both “rogue states” and “human security” soon produced the all-encompassing term: failed states.

According to Woodward, the rapid diffusion of the term and its immense popularity has led to several operational pathologies, most notably, the obsession of international organization (IO) actors with building their own capacities for state-building (p. 72). Moreover, to deal with the challenges these failed states pose, these international actors have developed a set of practices which prevents them from actually “fixing” such states. Even worse, these practices often further weaken said struggling nations. These practices include: (1) holding elections as soon as possible to produce “a domestically legitimate government” that will serve as a strategic and willing partner in the state-building endeavor (p. 142), and (2) the outsourcing of key tasks to foreign IOs and NGOs because of the “lack” of local state capacity. Woodward is highly critical of both of these practices and argues that they represent the key reason why interventions fail.

*The Ideology of Failed States* is a tour de force. The empirical examples Woodward presents are rich in detail and thoroughly curated. Her theoretical construct is interesting. On several occasions, she insists that the pathologies “the ideology of failed states” has created cannot be equated with traditional bureaucratic pathologies as analyzed by, for example, Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore’s *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (2004). Rather, this behavior has to be understood in “its historical context, as a specific response to a particular world historical moment [e.g., the end of the Cold War] and as a political battle far removed from the states labeled failed or fragile” (p. 77). Moreover, Woodward suggests that “the concept of failed states ... prevents changing policies and improving outcomes.... It acts as a totalizing camouflage ... [it blinds] observers [from] seeing the countries themselves as well as the immense variety among them” (p. 250).

Nevertheless, the greatest weakness of the book is arguably a lack of evidence that links her theoretical argument (i.e., “failed states” as an ideology) to the empirical record. Many of the practices she describes have little (if anything) to do with the concept of failed states. For ex-
ample, she criticizes international financial institutions (e.g., the World Bank) for their focus on disbursing as much money as quickly as possible (p. 136). How is this tendency related to the ideology of failed states? Similarly, she criticizes development agencies of "sectoral fragmentation" (p. 199) and also denounces intervening coalition members (e.g., Germany, the UK, and the United States in Afghanistan) for divvying up operational tasks (i.e., during the state-building process the United States took responsibility for military reform, Germany for training police, and the UK for counternarcotics). Again, I see no direct relationship between such behavior and the concept of failed states. One would imagine such conduct in a world completely devoid of any "failed states"—simply because of organizational and national preferences. After all, group tasks are often divvied up among the participating actors.

Another weakness of the book is Woodward’s refusal to thoroughly engage with the question, what is the alternative to the current state-building approach? It is impossible to answer this question, she argues, because "there are so many different actors and agendas involved" (p. 249). However, if someone or something has to change, then—in Woodward’s view—it is international organizations (p. 252). After all, it is they who "created" the flawed state-building practices. But are IOs really all there is to blame? Woodward’s own account seems to contradict this analysis. She highlights, for instance, that UN staff are eager to please their permanent five sponsors (p. 75) and that program evaluations (and thus also programs) are often tailored to the needs and desires of government donors and not necessarily IO institutions (p. 136). Woodward also overlooks the decision-making process of interventions. If the "ideology of failed states" is so all-encompassing and powerful, how can we then explain that an intervention took place in Iraq, Mali, and Libya but not in Syria? A recent publication of mine looks at this question in great detail and argues that intervention entrepreneurs are key to understanding such policy diversity.[1]

Woodward concludes her analysis by suggesting that interventions should be analyzed “in operational terms, not in normative terms as is more common” (p. 254). But can this really be done? Bosnians, East Timorese, and Angolans are no longer killing each other, and have not been doing so for a long time. In my opinion, this always has to figure prominently in any analysis of the “net” effect of an intervention—irrespective of the “operational” state-building success. Moreover, not all of Haiti’s, Afghanistan’s, and Liberia’s problems can be attributed to foreign intervention. Woodward at times romanticizes “local solutions” to state-building problems. If these solutions were "perfect," how can we then explain the descent into violence and chaos of many of these countries prior to intervention?

Despite these weaknesses, however, I highly recommend Woodward’s book to anybody interested in military interventions, peacekeeping and state-building. She presents a rich account of what went wrong in many of these places and what might have caused it. Her book is a brilliant addition to what we know about these important and timely topics and is full of lessons to be learned.

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