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Commencement Address 2006 | Pardee RAND Graduate School

Carl Bildt

Former Prime Minister of Sweden

It is a great honor for me to be invited to address you upon your graduation from this center of excellence in the theory and practice of policy analysis.

I am not entirely certain that it is strictly my academic credential that bestows me this honor.

My early years of studies in the *theory* of policies were too quickly interrupted as I was dragged into the *practice* of policies.

But perhaps I can take some comfort in the fact that my former professors at the University of Stockholm do not consider me a totally lost cause.

The RAND Corporation—at which I have the honor of serving as a member of the Board of Trustees—is known all over the world as the first, the finest, and the foremost of what is today called a think tank. It has acquired its reputation by using the intellectual tools of policy analysis to try to tackle some of the most challenging problems of our times.

Once upon a time, RAND spent a lot of its time thinking about the unthinkable.

Rightly or wrongly, in those distant days, it was the theories of nuclear deterrence that were seen as the key to a more stable and less insecure world.

Today, the challenges we face as we look out into the turmoils of the world are very different.

As we have learned during recent years, today we—and our world—are threatened more by weak than by strong states.

We have seen how areas in which state authority has broken down can easily be taken over and become the safe havens for terrorists directing their hate against others.

We have also seen other grave risks in such areas.

The risk of sheer chaos. Of massive waves of refugees. Of collapsing economies and mass starvation. Of ethnic strife, cleansing, and killing. Of dangerous black holes in the global attempts to combat the dangers of new infectious diseases.

And today we live in an interconnected world where a crisis in one place has both direct and indirect effects in other places. Sometimes massive. Sometimes minor. But always effects.

We can just turn a blind eye ...

During the last decade, the so-called international community has increasingly been called upon to set up major operations to prevent states from failing or fracturing, or repairing or setting up more or less new state structures after wars, conflict, or collapse.

Here in America this is referred to as nation-building.

For a European or an Asian, it is referred to instead as state-building. For us there is an important distinction to be made between a state and a nation.

The task we are confronted with is often that of building state structures in areas where people belong to different nationalities. Often, that very fact is part of the problem.

I lived some years in Sarajevo—in Bosnia, southeastern Europe—trying to coordinate the international efforts to heal that state from its nationalist wars as what was formerly called Yugoslavia gradually fell to pieces.

We were trying—and others are continuing the work today—to set up a reasonably functioning state that could overcome the sometimes very deep national, cultural, and historical divisions that ruthless war leaders had made even worse.

It wasn't easy, and it still is a very challenging undertaking. But we were greatly helped by the fact that we had a blueprint in the form of a peace agreement that had been, however reluctantly, signed and approved by all the relevant local and regional actors.

Some of what we learned there we have subsequently had reason to apply in one case after another. Since then, state-building has become a growth business like few others for the international community. As we have piled new mistakes on old ones, we should gradually have become somewhat wiser and somewhat better.

Here in the United States, most of the attention is naturally on Iraq, with some side stories focusing on the situation in Afghanistan.

The situation in Iraq is certainly a challenging one—made substantially more difficult by the obvious mistakes made in the early phases of the effort. And the situation in Afghanistan has turned more complicated in the past few months with perhaps upwards of 1,000 people killed in the upsurge of fighting in the south.

But for all the attention given to these two countries and the challenges there, we should not lose sight of the fact that the United Nations has more than 90,000 personnel serving in no less than 18 so-called peacekeeping but often state-building operations on four continents across the globe.

And these numbers keep rising.

Today, the operation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—Africa's second largest country—is the biggest UN operation of this sort. Safeguarding and organizing its elections in July is the most immediate challenge.

As we speak, forces from the European Union are deploying in and near the country to serve as a backup if the election process goes wrong or someone tries to violently spoil it.

But for all the challenges in Congo today, tomorrow the operation in Sudan—Africa's largest country—will overtake it in size and probably also in complexity and long-term importance. This will happen as the UN mandate goes from trying to assist in the implementation of the difficult North-South peace agreement to also seeking to secure the even more fragile agreement recently reached in the Western province of Darfur.

These are challenges so massive that no nation alone would be willing to take them on; you have to rely on a resource base wider than what even the most powerful can muster.

Multilateralism need not be born out of naïve idealism: It can spring from sheer realism about the magnitude of the challenges.

What we have certainly learned during the decade since Bosnia is that state-building requires an abundance of resources—manpower, money—as well as an abundance of time and patience.

There are no short cuts. There are no quick fixes.

Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither are more or less functioning states in our modern world.

To come even close to starting to succeed in the different challenges in this area, we must learn the lessons from our failures and our mistakes. If we don't, we are bound to repeat them—as indeed we seem to be in the process of doing in some cases.

As someone with an element of practical experience in the area, as well as someone with a keen interest in policy analysis, let me spell out the seven major lessons that have emerged over the last decade of state-building.

Lesson 1: It is imperative to quickly establish a secure environment.

After a conflict, it is absolutely vital to establish some sort of order, preferably based on some sort of law, as fast as possible.

We have learned that this requires manpower in great numbers. It's not a task for machines; it's a task for men and women. And we have learned that the numbers necessary to secure a peace are almost always greater than the numbers necessary to win a war.

If you fail to ensure a secure environment, you destroy the potential for peaceful politics.

If the bullet is a safer way to power than the ballot, you can be certain that the young and impatient and frustrated—of which there are always many—will take that route. And the state-building effort will sooner or later fail.

In Bosnia, we initially probably had more forces available than were really needed, but in Afghanistan and Iraq the opposite has certainly been the case, leaving free room, for too long, for those having other agendas or just wishing to spoil and destroy the process.

It is easy to say that this is not a task for an army or a soldier. But the simple fact is this: In the world in which we live, there is simply no alternative. If armed forces don't do it, no one else will, and everything is bound to collapse.

Over time, there is certainly the need to deploy and train police and all of the other instruments of the rule of the law so central to any functioning state. But even as that happens, there will often be the need for military forces for a long time to come, as a backup and deterrent if for no other reasons.

All over the world, there are too few soldiers available for the stability operations that are the very foundation of the state-building that is so important.

The main contributors to UN stability operations today are Bangladesh and Pakistan, and they often do very well. But even as we in the richer part of the world struggle with the few operations that we have been willing to be part of, we must realize that over time we will have to shoulder a greater share of the greater burden of operations like these across the world.

It might be more politically tempting to argue for more high-tech fighters, or new sophisticated satellites, or the like. But the fact is, what we often require to achieve international order are simply soldiers securing stability in shady corners of the world.

Lesson 2: The central challenge is not reconstruction but state-building.

Earlier, many believed that if you just repair the physical damage caused by conflict, most other things in the economy would sort themselves out.

But now we know that you can pour endless amounts of money into reconstruction, but if you don't build the structures of a functioning state, it will all be turned into dust again, sooner rather than later.

I have seen funding allocated for the complete rebuilding of a particular (and not unimportant) road in the Balkans time after time without any visible effects on the road itself.

In the absence of a functioning state, the money is more than likely to end up somewhere else.

So, state-building is what it's all about. Only a functioning state can create the conditions for a functioning society and a functioning economy.

Lesson 3: To build a state, you need to know what state to build.

That might sound simple, but the question of what state to build often takes you to the root of the conflicts that you are trying to resolve.

Often it sounds as if this task boils down to running a couple of elections. And much effort in recent years has indeed gone into setting up structures to organize elections even in very challenging circumstances.

This is important. But as election results in countries like Bosnia and Iraq often demonstrate, an election is often little more than an ethnic census, illustrating the basic problem that needs to be solved rather than resolving it.

In places that look as different as Bosnia, Iraq, or Sudan, the challenge is often the same.

They are countries with a multitude of beliefs and traditions, often forged into some sort of state at a fairly late stage in history. Their politics is seldom the politics of ideology, but often the politics of identity. After an open conflict, politics is often seen as the continuation of war by other means.

The key task in situations like these is an early and firm agreement on the nature of the state to be built.

Are we to try to help in the building of a centralized state based on everyone just being a citizen, or are we to try to build highly decentralized states—identity-based states in which different nationalities form their own entities and institutions and manage their own affairs?

If we choose the latter course, is there any guarantee that we will not end up simply destroying whatever remains of common interests, thus entering into a circle of disintegration that might well go beyond the borders of that particular state?

There is no answer that fits with every situation. The only thing I am certain of is that there needs to be a clear answer to this critically important question at the start of every state-building operation.

If not, problems are likely to just increase as time goes by.

Lesson 4: There must be an early focus on the preconditions for long-term economic growth.

Initially, there is often the temptation to try to subsidize and fund whatever structures can be found, be those old so-called social enterprises of Yugoslavia or the vast subsidy schemes of Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

But that is more often than not the wrong course.

Without neglecting traditional patterns, there is the need to energize the long-term potential for economic growth.

Entrepreneurship is as important in the Panshir Valley as it is in Silicon Valley, and too-heavy taxes and trade restrictions have led to black economies and open rebellions throughout human history.

Today, Kosovo is a region with a staggering trade deficit—41 percent of its estimated GDP—and Afghanistan is a country with an impressive 87 percent share of the global market for opium, valued at something like half of the country's estimated legal GDP.

It goes without saying that these are shaky foundations on which to build stable states.

Lesson 5: There has to be a benevolent regional environment.

When we sat down to negotiate the peace that ended Bosnia's war, we did so with some of the national and regional leaders most responsible for its tragedy.

Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic and Croatia's Franjo Tudjman were our partners for peace. Not because we particularly liked them, but for two other solid reasons.

You can only make peace with those who make war, and the powers of neighbors to destabilize are always far greater than the powers of more distant states to stabilize.

We dealt with the Devil, but we knew that only by creating a benevolent regional environment could we give Bosnia a chance to survive.

And the same applies to every other state-building operation.

If neighbors are not stakeholders in the process, they might easily turn into spoilers.

Lesson 6: The greater the international support, the less difficult is the process.

That this is the case should be obvious from what I have said. And the practical and political conclusion is often that the policies of these operations at the end of the day have to be anchored in the United Nations Security Council.

Indeed, that is the case with every state-building operation of significance in the world today.

It might not always be the easiest or the most convenient body to deal with. It might be argued that the only thing worse than trying to have policies endorsed by it is trying to pursue policies not endorsed by it.

Again, this need not be an issue of principle; the practicalities are enough to justify the conclusion.

Lesson 7: State-building takes a longer time, and requires more resources, than most initially believe.

In tiny Timor-Leste (formerly East Timor), there was a belief that initiatives could be declared a success after a certain number of years. Those on the ground were less convinced, but the great and the good were eager to declare success and head for home.

But recent weeks have seen it all collapse, and Australian soldiers have been rushed in to stop internal fighting that has driven roughly 100,000 people from their homes.

That lesson has profound implications from Bosnia to Baghdad and from Kabul to Khartoum. To quit and run is to risk having to rush back in again at some point in time.

We should certainly think long and hard about intervening in countries, but even longer and harder about suddenly abandoning them when some sort of short-term success can be claimed, media attention has turned elsewhere, or we have simply lost patience with the place.

If we look at the record of the different state-building operations of the past decade or so, the failures stand out more than the successes, although I would argue that for all of them the jury is still out and will be out for years to come.

What I think is beyond doubt is that the consequences of failure would be very grave indeed—for the particular countries or regions and for the international system as a whole.

An Afghanistan that slips back under some sort of Taliban control.

Ancient lands of Mesopotamia that descend into a civil war that rapidly risks drawing in other countries as well.

A Sudan that just splits apart, and probably causes one African state after another to do the same, with unimaginable humanitarian consequences; a possible belt of genocide stretching along the south of the Sahara.

A Balkans that goes back to ethnic strife, ethnic cleansing, and ethnic war.

At the very worst, we could see state failures spreading like bushfire through the most vulnerable parts of our world, perhaps endangering the entire process of globalization of the past decades.

It is against this background that the importance of state-building efforts must be seen.

In my opinion, they are as important to stability and peace in your world of tomorrow as nuclear deterrence was to the old world of yesterday.

As you have now finished your studies here, you will walk into the world to make your living, but also to make your impact and make a difference in the way the world works.

And it is my hope that some of the knowledge, enthusiasm, and analytical skills that you represent at some point in time will be used to increase our chances of success in these difficult but crucially important endeavors around the world.

Thus you could make your contribution to a world tomorrow that is even better than the one of today.

Thank you.