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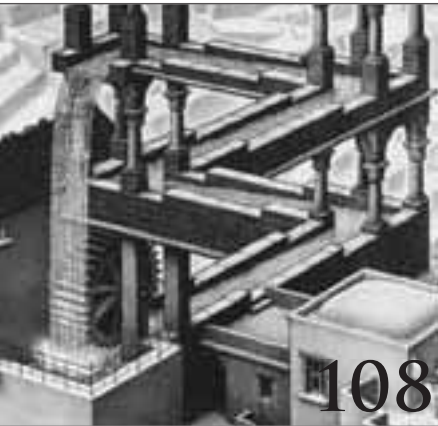
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Adventures in State-Building

Bremer's Iraq and Cromer's Egypt

HARVEY SICHERMAN

Colin Powell offered the same observation on Iraq to Bush the father and Bush the son, first in 1990 and again in 2002: “If you break it, you own it.” Powell’s so-called Pottery Barn rule, however, had its Humpty Dumpty corollary, as in “All the King’s horses, and all the King’s Men, couldn’t put Humpty together again!” This corollary suggests a deep pessimism about what “ownership” implies—namely, the inability of American presidents to assemble the necessary political and material resources, including time, to remake what they break.

As we bear witness to the Iraq endgame, it is tempting to conclude that a new American aversion to any policy of “breaking” states—more conventionally known as regime change—could be a healthy thing. “No More Iraqs” might join “No More Vietnams” in the pantheon of difficult or impossible obligations the United States must avoid at all costs. Such abstinence, however, grants almost automatic sanctuary to threatening regimes and, in an era of spreading nuclear technology, abandons failed states to

their fate. Moreover, difficult, even very difficult, obligations are not the same as impossible ones. Against the prevailing pessimism stand the sterling examples of Germany and Japan, as well as the “pretty good” examples of the Philippines and South Korea. Today, we and they are justifiably satisfied with their American-directed or influenced reconstruction.

The suddenly vast academic literature on state-building (often misnamed nation-building) is not always enlightening in dealing with this challenge. Against the occasional touch of humility, one finds more often voluminous checklists that remind me of an automotive repair magazine that once offered a four-step process for replacing a worn-out engine: step one, open the hood; step two, remove the old engine; step three, replace it with a new one; step four, close the hood. Nation-building advice these days too often offers the same: step one, enter the afflicted country, by force or invitation; step two, replace by coercion or persuasion the worn-out government; step three, install a new democratic, free market replacement; step four, leave the country!

This kind of advice will not do for either mechanics or statesmen, so we might turn instead to those who have actually tried to remake

Harvey Sicherman is president of the *Foreign Policy Research Institute* and served three *Secretaries of State* from 1981–92.

states. But whose experience and advice should we seek? General Lucius Clay (and General Douglas MacArthur) offer pointers, but they worked on developed, not developing, countries. The usual analogy—Britain’s Iraq experience in the 1920s—misleads because London was inventing a state where none had previously existed. Perhaps more can be learned from two Middle Eastern opposites: Ambassador L. Paul Bremer’s year-long attempt to reorder 21st-century Iraq and Lord Cromer’s far more protracted attempt to reorder 19th-century Egypt. And while the contrasts seem to defy comparison—Bremer’s uneasy 12-month effort to remake what his country had broken on the quick and cheap; Cromer’s 24-year imperial proconsulate to endow a broken Muslim state with modernity—surprising similarities emerge, particularly at their respective beginnings. Set alongside each other, they tell us much about the do’s and don’ts of state-building.

Bremer’s Iraq

On May 9, 2003, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, known to associates as “Jerry”, lunched with President George W. Bush at the White House, just before a National Security Council meeting on his new mission to Iraq. An athletic man with a youthful appearance and quick grin, Bremer shared with Bush an enthusiasm for running, which excused their modest meal of pears and greens. He told the President that Iraq was “a marathon, not a sprint.”¹ Bush agreed, but as Bremer soon discovered, that was not the policy.

Who was Jerry Bremer and how did he come to this job? Born in Hartford, Connecticut, his blue-blooded education included Phillips Academy, Yale and Harvard (MBA), rounded out by a Certificate of Political Studies from Sciences Po in Paris. Bremer made a Foreign Service career, eventually becoming Ambassador to the Netherlands and Ambassador-at-Large for Counterterrorism. He had been in bureaucratic harm’s way at the Secretarial level, serving as Deputy Executive Secretary to Henry Kissinger and Executive Secretary to both Alexander M. Haig, Jr., and George Shultz. The job required tracking the Secretary’s schedule, recording

and conveying decisions, ordering tasks and reporting results. To do this, Bremer used the “Secretary’s Book”, a volume listing daily meetings, replete with the necessary papers for the day and a presage of activities to come.

I came to know Jerry when I ran afoul of the “Book” during my service as Special Assistant and speechwriter to Haig. Bremer let me know that he expected a draft speech a full fortnight ahead of the occasion, a serious violation of my work ethic, which counts premature effort a cardinal vice. I had Haig’s confidence in the product, so Jerry and I soon reached a friendly *modus vivendi*: three days ahead of time, no more.

Bremer boasted a wall full of awards for his service. He had other attractive qualities, including a strong sense of duty, family and faith. Moreover, Bremer had sounded the public alarm on terrorism long before 9/11. On the awful day itself, his offices in the New York firm of Marsh & McLennan had been destroyed in the collapse of the south tower, killing several hundred of his colleagues. Finally, Bremer worked well with Republicans and was one himself, although not of the neoconservative persuasion. Bremer’s skills were therefore preeminently those of the Washington insider, and his selection as Special Presidential Envoy to Iraq by an Administration already shaken by internal quarrel suggested that some adult supervision was now at hand.

Unfortunately, Bremer knew damned little about Iraq. He had never served in the Middle East, spoke no Arabic, and his repertoire of political analogies was entirely European. Bremer therefore quickly tapped his network of “formers”, some of whom knew the region well, notably the late Ambassador Hume Horan. These men in their sixties, like Bremer, proved astonishingly resilient as they plunged themselves into 18- to 20-hour workdays amid considerable physical danger and away from their families.

Another thing Bremer did not know was counterinsurgency. Here too he had expert friends. One who declined to join the team was Ambassador James Dobbins, a veteran of the Bosnia and Kosovo projects. Shortly before Bremer met Bush,

¹Subsequent quotations derive from Bremer, with Malcolm McConnell, *My Year In Iraq* (Simon & Schuster, 2006), unless otherwise noted.

Dobbins handed him a RAND research report on counterinsurgency. The study found that all recorded successful strategies employed troop-to-population ratios that dictated 400,000–500,000 troops for a country the size of Iraq. Those who tried to make do with less not only failed; they failed with higher casualties. Bremer handed the RAND report to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and told Bush about it.

Contrary to the critics, there *was* a strategy for Iraq. As Secretary Rumsfeld explained in a February 14, 2003 speech called “Beyond Nation Building”, the United States could do more with less, thanks to the new technology of war and a revised notion of how to reconstruct states. If the technological revolution demanded the “transformation” of U.S. forces from their Cold War model to lighter, quicker and more lethal ones, then “nation-building” American style required a “light footprint.” Rumsfeld compared Bosnia and Kosovo, where U.S. and NATO forces had created a “culture of dependency”, to Afghanistan, where the United States had quickly transferred responsibility to an Afghan government. The result was a nearly functioning democracy without a large residual American presence. The new “light footprint” approach also intended to resolve a strategic conundrum: The post-9/11 era found the United States burdened by the commitments of the 1990s and new ones as well, yet with a military force half the size. George W. Bush had ten army divisions, his father 19. Rumsfeld was bent on proving that ten would be enough.

The President and his closest counselors calculated that Iraq was even more fertile ground to execute the “light footprint” plan than Afghanistan. Unlike Afghanistan, Iraq’s bureaucracies appeared to function, its infrastructure seemed to work, and its oil reserves promised resources for any necessary reconstruction. There was an educated middle class thirsty for democracy, if only Saddam could be removed (all the Iraqi political exiles said so). Hence, a quick “shock and awe” operation that cut off the Saddamite head with minimal damage to the rest of the Iraqi body would facilitate a safe political transplant. Rumsfeld had therefore bullied the Pentagon’s original war plan, requiring 500,000 troops, down to a

number that fit transformation and the “light footprint.” Cobra II would be a four-division coup d’état, leaving the state intact. It would be liberation, not occupation.

It was a brilliant concept that did not survive contact with reality. Off went the head in the Coalition’s march to Baghdad, but down also came the body. The head, moreover, did not exactly die, for Saddam and his two deranged sons escaped. As for the body, looting destroyed the infrastructure, violence marred the streets, and Iraq’s functional ministries vanished. The new head, moreover, was a hydra of competing exiles bereft of consensus, ignorant of government and lacking popular support. The light footprint threatened to morph into the Frankenstein option.

American officials, thinking of Germany and Japan, had vastly overestimated the underlying solidity of the Iraqi state. In the transition from General Jay Garner and ORHA to Jerry Bremer and the CPA there seemed to be at least an inkling of this. Still, most Bush Administration principals back in Washington believed that the original strategy might still work if only it had more time, more money and a strong local hand. That hand was to be Jerry Bremer’s, and he used it.

Bremer’s effort to revive the body and ready the head transplant can be divided conveniently into two acts: in the first, May to October 2003, Bremer’s encounter with Iraqi reality disabused him of his Washington instructions, leading to the collapse of his political support in the Defense Department; the second act, beginning with a key series of meetings in Washington, witnessed an heroic effort to establish a political structure even amid a growing military crisis and ended on June 28, 2004.

Act I: Breaking the State

As Bremer flew into a chaotic Baghdad on May 12, 2003, he determined immediately upon a dramatic show of authority. The day after his arrival he suggested at a staff meeting that looters should be shot. This remark, leaked to the press, provoked hysterical publicity. The generals disavowed him and Bremer could not overrule them because his “unity of command”

covered only civilians. Bremer rebounded from this unhappy start in Baghdad through two decrees aimed at convincing Iraqis that Saddam, and Saddamism, were over: The first outlawed the Ba'ath Party and the second dissolved the army and other security organizations.

Unlike the "shoot the looters" idea, both of these proposals had originated in Washington, specifically in Rumsfeld's staff. They were not only the administrative vehicle for breaking the Saddam state, but also for assuring the Shi'a and Kurdish communities that Saddamism would never return. Although never intended to break the Iraqi state itself, they finished what was left of it.

The May 16, 2003 decree outlawing the Ba'ath Party was hardly objectionable. In Saddam's clan-party-state, however, the impact depended on how far down the line the decree was enforced, because nearly everyone dependent on the Iraqi state had been forced into party membership. The process was turned over to the controversial exile Ahmad Chalabi, the Pentagon's favorite Iraqi son, who ran the line

down as far as he could, the better to make all those who wanted work dependent on him. The "de-Ba'ath" decree therefore effectively crippled attempts to revive the pre-war Iraqi bureaucracy. As the Iraqi middle class consisted largely of government employees, the very group the Americans expected to have the greatest stake in the new Iraq found itself financially bereft and fearful of the future.

The second decree, on May 23, 2003, dissolved Saddam's numerous security organizations and the Iraqi army. No one contested that Iraq's huge, over-officered and under-trained force had to be reformed, but U.S. generals (and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith, who briefed Bush himself on this point before the war) had counted on the Iraqi military to supply the "missing link": the forces necessary to stabilize the country and guard its borders in the absence of sufficient Coalition troops. Senior Iraqi officers who might pass the Ba'ath purity test had already been contacted and were in extended conversation with ranking American commanders.

Bearing Witness to War

Dark Hope

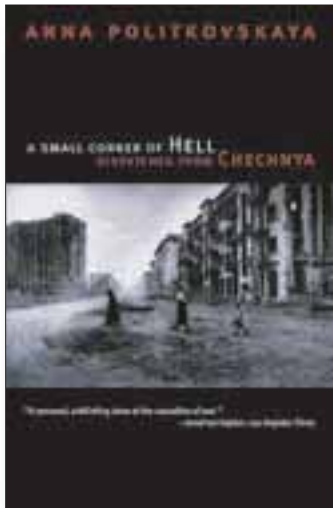
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Feith, Bremer and his security expert, the veteran analyst Walter Slocombe, however, decided on abolition instead. Their reasoning was simple: The pre-war plan had been overtaken by events. There *was* no Iraqi army; it had “self-demobilized.” Abolishing what no longer existed anyway also had symbolic value to the Shi’a and the Kurds. This act, however, outraged all the former soldiers and took U.S. generals by surprise. The blunder here was to assume that an Iraqi army gone on collective home leave



could not be recalled and reconstituted into divisions that could pass the professional and political purity tests. (For his part, Bremer later boasted that three-quarters of the officers and all the NCOs of the new Iraqi army were veterans from the old one, proving, if inadvertently, that the Iraqi army had in fact not permanently “self-demobilized.”) Now, between Rumsfeld and Bremer, U.S. commanders could not expect either American or Iraqi reinforcements anytime soon. Moreover, a large pool of the disaffected had been created. So between his “shoot looters” proposal and his army-banning decree, Bremer and the military were already operating at dangerous cross-purposes.

The German analogy—de-Nazification and dissolution of the Wehrmacht after World War II—clearly preoccupied Bremer and his superiors. They seemed to forget, however, that unlike Iraq, Germany benefited from a meticulously planned American postwar administration, good local intelligence and a very large occupation army ruling a thoroughly defeated nation. The Bush Administration, in effect, was operating only half of the analogy, and the effort quickly foundered on reality.

Over the summer, Bremer concluded that there was no body on which to graft a new political head. Instead, a new state would have to be erected and, simultaneously, a new political order created. He saw also that such a feat of social and constitutional engineering would be increasingly constrained by time, money and military resources, for the simple reason that the “light footprint” strategy sought to avoid such an effort, and hence no part of the U.S. government was committed to it.

Despite early progress, such as the establishment of an advisory Iraq Governing Council for the disappointed exiles, the injection of literally tons of dollars and new dinars into the Iraqi economy, and the promise of much more from the October 2003 Madrid Donors Conference and the U.S. Congress, Bremer became increasingly aware that his instructions were impossible in the absence of basic security. He and his CPA colleagues worked a furious pace largely sequestered in the Green Zone, Saddam’s former palace complex.

Outside the Green Zone, Baghdad and

a few major cities, the CPA hardly existed. Volunteers soon despaired that it was too dangerous to move around. Some of his CPA charges, pressed on him by the White House personnel office, were not expert enough at anything to justify their assignments. Meanwhile, the Pentagon's micromanagement, known as the "8,000 mile screwdriver", frustrated requests.

Worst of all, Bremer sensed the growing insurgency. On August 19, 2003, a suicide bomber attacked the UN Mission, headed by the experienced diplomat Sergio de Mello, killing him and ending the UN presence. Insurgents then systematically targeted recently repaired infrastructure, hobbling electricity and oil production. The CIA failed to find weapons of mass destruction, and failed at much else besides in "reading" postwar Iraq. Yet despite all this, Rumsfeld and the local commanders were adamant on troop reductions. When Bremer detected the incipient danger of a second insurgency—a Shi'a one led by the young demagogic cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr—the American military refused to suppress him, even though the Shi'a parties supported Bremer's request. Meanwhile, the quarrelsome Governing Council proved of little value.

Act II: Exit Strategy

By late October 2003, Bremer had come to oppose the very plan he had been sent to execute. He wanted much more time, at least two years to build self-sustaining Iraqi political institutions, and many more troops to conduct counterinsurgency. But these ideas ran contrary to those of his superiors, notably Rumsfeld, who advocated a quick assignment of sovereignty to the Governing Council (the Wolfowitz-Feith scheme) coupled with an accelerated turnover of security responsibilities to newly recruited Iraqi forces. During late October meetings in Washington, Bremer found that he was no longer the Pentagon's man. Andrew Card, the President's Chief of Staff, suggested he was being "set up" for blame if Rumsfeld should have to go through a full rotation of forces in spring 2004, mobilizing Reserve units in an election year. So Bremer played his best card to Card, telling him he would like to leave his post in May 2004. The marathon man had become a sprinter after all.

After an indecisive NSC meeting on October 29, Bush joined Bremer in another exercise séance, where Bremer quoted a CIA estimate that "the enemy believes American leadership is more focused on an exit strategy than prosecuting the war." Bush assured him that the United States was still prepared for a marathon, but he did not try to dissuade Bremer from leaving. Clearly, the jig was up, and Bremer returned to Baghdad, a man in a big hurry. He was therefore not surprised when Vice President Cheney told him that the Pentagon was hell-bent on an exit, and not surprised either when Bush decided in mid-November to press for early sovereignty, a March 1, 2004 target date for a constitution, and elections to be held soon thereafter. As Bremer immediately recognized, this schedule was either impossible or, if pushed hard anyway, a formula for a communal train wreck. The *de facto* Shi'a leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, demanded elections before writing a constitution in order to ensure Shi'a majority power, but both the Kurds and the Sunnis demanded constitutionally grounded minority protection before an election.

At this dark hour, Bremer was buoyed temporarily when Bush managed a surprise trip to Baghdad for Thanksgiving and, on December 14, 2003, American soldiers captured Saddam. This marked the high point of Bremer's personal prestige, but he knew that personal prestige was not enough. Besides, Bremer had a first rule for Iraq that kept his enthusiasm in check: "If you get what appears to be good news, it usually means you're not fully informed."

Squeezed between a quick-step schedule demanded by Washington and a recalcitrant Iraqi political reality, Bremer did his best to persuade the local parties that their maximum objectives could not be obtained: There could be no Sunni dictatorship, no independent Kurdistan, no Shi'a Islamic Republic. He thought the parties could be brought to agreement if a written constitution more or less matched this natural balance. After several false starts, on March 8, 2004, the three major Iraqi communities finally initialed a deal. The winning formula turned out to be a custodial government to prepare a constitution, its *bona fides* based on a "pre-constitution" called the "Transitional Authority Law" that guaranteed Kurdish and Sunni rights. Sover-

eignty would be turned over on June 30, 2004, with elections scheduled for early 2005.

This political triumph, however, was promptly threatened by two rebellions. On March 31, 2004, four American security contractors were murdered, and their bodies mutilated, in Fallujah, a town already infamous as a haven for Sunni insurgents, including Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's suicide bombers. Almost simultaneously, Sadr's Shi'a gang revolted. These eruptions ended the Pentagon's plans for a quick exit, and, in Bremer's initial view, offered a last best chance for the United States to assert a decisive military authority that would ease the task of the new Iraqi government in formation.

At the moment of truth, however, Bremer (and Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN envoy helping the constitutional negotiations) feared that crushing al-Sadr and Fallujah would collapse the Governing Council. The Shi'a and Sunni parties simply could not be seen making deals with the CPA while large-scale American military action played out amid suffering civilian populations. What to do? On Good Friday, an emergency NSC meeting ended with Bush deciding that the June 30 sovereignty transition date had to be met, hence the use of U.S. military force would be restrained. On the ground, the American counterattack became a slow squeeze of al-Sadr and an inconclusive siege of Fallujah. Washington had flinched. Compounding Bremer's plight at the height of the military crises, photos of the Abu Ghraib prison abuses were published on April 28.

Bremer redoubled his efforts. On May 31, the new interim government, under the premiership of the secular Shi'a Iyad Allawi, had finally taken shape, complete with the Transitional Authority Law. This paved the way for the UN Security Council to recognize it on June 8 and to guarantee legal authority for the Coalition Multinational Force to continue its supporting role until Iraq's new government held elections under a new constitution no later than January 31, 2005. Bremer had not saved American policy in Iraq, but he believed he bought it more time. If Washington continued to will the end without willing the means, however, there was little more he could do about it.

Despite congratulatory leave-taking, Bremer

departed from Iraq on a sour note. In December 2004, his van had been attacked; he had escaped assassination primarily because a traffic jam delayed the suicide bombers. His security guards argued that the June 30 turnover date was a big bullseye. So abruptly on the morning of June 28, Bremer conducted a hastily assembled turnover to a surprised Iraqi Chief Justice in Iyad Allawi's office. At the airport, he pretended to leave on one aircraft then jetted out on another.

Upon his return to Washington, Jerry Bremer received the Medal of Freedom from President Bush and numerous accolades from Congress. He told reporters he was going to fish for a while, and write a book. The book, *My Year in Iraq*, achieved mixed acclaim and good sales, but in 2006 the war was going badly because, as Bremer had feared, the Administration had never brought to bear sufficient power and determination. Conditions within Iraq continued to deteriorate.

For that reason, if not for others, antiwar Democrats gained control of Congress in November 2006. On February 6, 2007, Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA), the new Chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, summoned Bremer, clad in his familiar pin stripes but without the hiking boots he wore in Baghdad, to a Capitol Hill hearing. To the amusement of all those who knew the desperate Baghdad summer of 2003, Waxman fixated on denouncing Bremer's distribution of Iraqi cash to an impoverished population without—*horror of horrors*—proper accounting. The tragic aftermath of Saddam's fall had become congressional farce.

Waxman's political pantomime aside, Bremer knew the real issues. He foresaw that "constitutionalism" in itself would not end the violence. What was not done in spring 2004 would have to be done later. In 2005, U.S. forces destroyed Fallujah. Al-Sadr, however, was allowed into the election process, becoming a key supporter of Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaaferi and then Nouri al-Maliki, both of whom provided political protection for his increasingly murderous militia. Long before, however, Bremer had lost any illusions about the Iraqis themselves, or, more specifically, their would-be political leaders. He re-



AFP/Getty Images

Bremer's Iraq exit: June 28, 2004

spected Iraqi culture and Muslim mores—what he knew of them. He learned some Arabic and practiced a professional diplomat's tact. Nevertheless, Bremer grew weary of what he called “Persian” negotiating methods (roughly equivalent to “moving the goalposts”), and he found few leaders able to rise above tribe and sect. He also got a full, bitter taste of what British Prime Minister Tony Blair called the Arab “grievance culture”, whereby all misfortunes were attributed to Americans, Britons or the Zionists, amplified in the Shi'a case to cover a thousand years of Sunni misdeeds. His parting words to the Iraqis—“You have your country now. . . . Take good care of it”—expressed a hope. Hope was many things, but a policy it was not. And remaking an Iraqi state recently broken was simply not Rumsfeld's policy. President Bush, meanwhile, still nourished the ambitions of a marathon man with the resources of a sprinter.

Cromer's Egypt

It turned with relief from the tale of a botched U.S. venture in Iraq to Lord Cromer's masterful command in Egypt. Here was a story,

so I thought, not of the unwilling and the unprepared but of a highly prepared proconsul, willingly supported. That proved true eventually, but it was not so at first. Indeed, Cromer's first year bore an uncanny resemblance to Bremer's.²

When Evelyn Baring, later Lord Cromer, arrived in Cairo on September 11, 1883, he had already distinguished himself as a soldier and administrator. Born in 1841 to a prosperous banking family, Baring had a Churchillian upbringing: neglectful parents, poor schooling and, on his own part, rebellious behavior. He was then sent to the British army, the Victorian destination for the well-born but dimwitted. There, like Churchill, Baring acquired discipline, and when his mind awakened he worked hard to educate himself, learning among other things the Latin and Greek he had earlier avoided.

An artilleryman, Baring soon excelled as observer and analyst. He witnessed part of General Grant's Wilderness Campaign near the end of the Civil War, losing a cap to a Confederate sharpshooter. Thereafter, he entered the new

²This section's source is Roger Owen, *Lord Cromer* (Oxford, 2004), unless otherwise noted.

Staff College, joined the Intelligence Branch and became an expert on the French and German armies. Baring predicted not only that France would lose the Franco-Prussian War but even the location of the decisive battle. In 1872, his cousin Lord Northbrook took him to India following the assassination of the previous Viceroy. There, Baring learned administration, security and intelligence, including the cultivation of the lively local press. He also manifested a gift for public finance.

Baring emerged fully formed from his Indian experience. Low taxes, local knowledge and aiding the peasants were keys to success. A paragon of integrity, Baring exuded a distant dignity that reflected his reserved personality. His intolerance of fools made him formidable—an impression reinforced by his six-foot stature. Baring also exhibited the usual prejudices, disliking Catholics (though he married one) and Jews (the Baring Brothers' rivals were the Rothschilds). More significantly, Baring thought Islam a real obstacle to progress. A Whig-Liberal he joined Gladstone in denouncing Disraeli's pro-Ottoman policy. Nonetheless, he accepted Lord Salisbury's offer to join the Anglo-French mission to Egypt in 1877, technically as an employee of the Khedive Ismail, to repair that country's woeful finances. The Khedive so disliked Baring's report that he fired him, but Ismail was forced to abdicate under international pressure. The report's findings were applied, and Baring returned to India.

“The Most Incapable Ministry”

In 1882, Colonel Ahmad Urabi of the Egyptian army revolted against the Powers and the Khedive on the grounds that the 1877 financial agreements deprived Egypt of its independence. European lives and, ultimately, control of the Suez Canal were at stake, and Prime Minister Gladstone dispatched a British army to crush the revolt. This done, Britain faced mounting international opposition and the cost of a large garrison. Gladstone did not want to “own” Egypt and he needed a Liberal who knew the country to evacuate the 20,000 plus British forces within a year. And thus it was that Evelyn Baring became Consul General in Cairo,

with instructions to establish a Khedival government that would satisfy international creditors and Britain's interests, in effect remaking Egypt even as the British army departed.

Egypt had been broken and remade once before, when Napoleon's invasion in 1799 led to the overthrow of the Mameluk dynasty by the soldier Muhammad Ali. He refashioned Egypt on French lines and, indeed, until his ambitions were thwarted by a British-led international coalition, the country was considered an astonishing success. But Egypt was now living well beyond its means. After a short time in the country, Baring concluded that the Khedive was a tyrant, the accounts impenetrable, the Egyptian army too large and the people incapable of self-government. By July 1884, he was back in London, arguing against evacuation and for reform, new institutions and eventually the independence of Egypt (and Sudan, then controlled by Egypt) from the Ottoman Empire.

This argument was overtaken by dramatic events in the Sudan. Back in November 1883, an Egyptian expeditionary force, officered by Colonel William Hicks of the British army, had been massacred by the forces of the Mahdi, a Sudanese rebel who intended to purify Sudan en route to renewing the Caliphate, in his opinion laid low by infidels and traitors. The evacuation of Egyptians and Europeans from Sudan was added to Cromer's mission, but the Egyptian government resigned rather than carry out the order, to be replaced by the efficient but unpopular Nubar Pasha, a Coptic Christian. In a strange little dance, Baring and Nubar played off each other, explaining to their respective masters that it was unsafe for the British to leave until Sudan was settled, and that the British should suppress the Mahdi. Instead, Gladstone ordered the celebrated General Charles “Chinese” Gordon to evacuate the Sudan. Baring thought Gordon a violent drunk; still, he approved the choice, so long as Gordon was under his command. In a prophetic second thought, however, Baring wrote: “A man who habitually consults with the Prophet Isaiah when he is in difficulty, is not apt to obey the orders of anyone.”

Gordon entered the Sudan by announcing that he had come to leave, a signal that instantly eliminated any cooperation he might

have gotten from the Mahdi's opposition. He was soon besieged in Khartoum. Gladstone dallied and Gordon perished, his rescuers arriving two days too late on January 30, 1885. Reeling from the disaster, which was soon amplified by the publication of Gordon's private journals, Gladstone reversed course, suggesting that Britain might have to stay in Egypt for five years. This, however, wrecked Baring's carefully contrived international financial conference in July 1885, which fell prey to the suspicions of the French and others that England intended to annex Egypt. Small wonder that he confided to his diary that Gladstone had run "the most incapable ministry—as regards foreign affairs—that I believe ever ruled England." Cromer's first year and a half had been disastrous.

Baring thought he was finished, but then Gladstone's government fell, rose, then finally fell again to Lord Salisbury's Tories in July 1886. That November, Baring wrote a colleague, "If a civilised Power takes a semi-barbarous country it must make up its mind quickly whether to go or to stay." By July 1887, the Sudan, the Canal, the other powers, the debt and the Khedive had made up Salisbury's mind. He decided to stay.

Baring and Salisbury got along famously. The arch-Liberal and arch-Tory, however, did have one major difference: In Baring's words, Salisbury believed that "the political regeneration of Mohammedism was possible", but "I don't agree." The Tory statesman hoped the Ottoman Empire could be regenerated; the Liberal proconsul wanted it reformed beyond recognition or dismembered. This reflected a deeper division over Empire: Could rule over others be justified by self-interest alone, or must the ruled also benefit? Baring answered by skillfully pitching the Canal and India to the imperial-minded Tories, and a civilizing mission to the Liberals, thereby satisfying both Queen and conscience.



Getty Images

Lord Cromer, c. 1895

The Long Haul

By the summer of 1887, at age 46, the proconsul was set for his life's work. Lytton Strachey wrote of Baring in *The Eminent Victorians* (1918) that "his views were long, and his patience even longer." Creating what we would call today a "virtual state", Baring retained the façade of Egypt's government, complete with Khedive and ministries, while running them from behind and inside through handpicked British experts. Nubar Pasha characterized the relationship: "The British are easy to deceive. But when you think you have deceived them, you get a tremendous kick in the backside." When Nubar challenged Baring over the appointment of the Police Inspector General after the British appointee died in 1888, claiming it was time for an Egyptian, Nubar himself felt Baring's foot against his backside: He was forcibly retired from public office by the Khedive. A more pliable Riaz Pasha fell in 1891 when he contested Baring on judicial reform. A yet more pliable Mustafa Fahim occupied the post for most of the next 16 years.

Baring also made sure to dominate the administration, the intelligence services and the military. He started small with 366 Britons and a garrison reduced to 5,000 troops, but the number of Britons in the Egyptian civil service grew steadily and the troops could be readily reinforced by British units rotating to India through the Canal. So did the subventions to journalists and the press.

Last and not least came the reforms themselves. After assuring fiscal stability through debt retirement and other economic stringencies, Baring eliminated the *corvée* (forced labor) and flogging for taxes. He built canals and dams, notably the original Aswan Dam, which greatly increased cotton production. Baring was not much interested in education beyond technical training, but he insisted throughout on an honest public service and judiciary. He also insisted on his own hard work. Baring spent most of his time in the office, venturing infrequently up the Nile on tour and into Cairo—already a big city of several hundred thousand residents, including thirty to forty thousand Europeans. When he did travel the short distance between his office and the Khedive's palace, his carriage was attended by fifty cavalry. To the dismay of British units posted in Egypt, Baring often insisted on marches in full regalia through different parts of Cairo, the better to impress the residents.

After some years of slow but steady improvement in Egypt, Baring was ennobled in March 1892 as the first Lord Cromer, taking the name from the family home in the midlands. This gratification, however, soon dissipated. Khedive Taufiq had died suddenly in January 1892 at age forty and his son Abbas II, 17 years of age, European educated and ambitious, became the new ruler. Then in July, a Liberal government replaced Salisbury. Thus, when Abbas challenged Cromer frontally by dismissing his favorite Prime Minister on January 14, 1893, he could not be sure of his backing. So Cromer decided to impose his way on both London and Cairo. He wrote to Lord Rosebery, the new Foreign Secretary, of his fear of a plot backed by the French and the Ottomans through Abbas to dislodge England. Why not simply seize Egypt's government and be done with the meddlers?

The Liberals were taken aback. Rosebery explained to Queen Victoria that Cromer's recent gout might have affected his judgment. When Cromer demanded military reinforcements, however, the Liberals, like the Tories, remembered the Gordon disaster. The Black Watch Regiment, bound for India, was diverted. Cromer then chose, unwisely, to humiliate Abbas by forcing the dismissal of both the Prime Minister and the newly selected commander of the Egyptian army. In the wake of this affair, pro-British Egyptian politicians were discredited, Nubar Pasha declaring, "There is no longer an Egyptian government!" The Khedive became a permanent enemy.

In 1896, Lord Salisbury once more led the British government. On the rebound from the mess with the Khedive, Cromer wanted to recover the Sudan, a highly popular idea among the Egyptians. The Mahdi was dead of natural causes, but his Khalifal successor was raiding the border. Cromer needed a general, an army, and someone else's money to build the railroad needed to transport a modern force into Sudan. Lord Kitchener was the general, England would provide the army, and Cromer would command it all or he would resign. Salisbury agreed.

Then came the money. London would not finance a war in the Sudan and the building of a dam at Aswan simultaneously, so Cromer persuaded Sir Ernest Cassel (Jewish but not a Rothschild) to fund it, giving him an option to buy remaining public (once Khedival) lands in lieu of a British government guarantee. Kitchener then headed south slowly with a mixed force of 25,800, one-third of them British, building the railroad as he went. Salisbury urged haste as the French were engaged further south in what would become the Fashoda Incident. On September 2, 1898, the battle of Omdurman sealed the Khalif's defeat. Cromer thought less well of Kitchener, however, after the general allowed the desecration of the Mahdi's tomb and the dismemberment of his body in revenge for Gordon. This raised a storm of protest in London, angered the Queen, and greatly encouraged Cromer's enemies, largely Liberal anti-imperialists who were busily publicizing his "misrule" of Egypt. Another group of critics was outraged when he announced that

Sudan's way of life would continue: slavery yes; Christian missionaries no!

Amid these storms, Cromer suffered the worst blow of his life. His beloved wife, Ethel, suffering from Bright's disease, died on October 16, 1898. They had been married 22 years, in love for 35. He was now bereft of the emotional light of his life.

Dispensing with the Indispensable

As the century turned, England had been in Egypt for 17 years. Longevity gave Britain and Cromer increasing authority to change the complex arrangements of the debt and the international claims. Debt retirement freed cash reserves for public works in Egypt and the economy boomed on cotton and foreign investment. Cromer believed England indispensable to Egypt, and himself indispensable to them both. But then his health failed. After a bad bout of gout and intestinal troubles, he decided to take a four-month rather than three-month leave annually. He felt so poorly that he turned down the new Liberal government's offer of Foreign Secretary in December 1905.

Two crises then became his undoing. Cromer got a British battle fleet to intimidate the Ottomans over the poorly delineated provinces to the north. (It was called the Taba Incident, and indeed it was about the same issue that plagued Egyptian-Israeli relations into the 1990s.) London thought Cromer had grossly overreacted to a German-sponsored railroad being built near the area. Then came the Dinshawai Incident on June 13, 1906. A small British army party hunting pigeons got into a brawl with some villagers, and one British captain died of his injuries. Cromer resolved on swift justice, using a special mixed court he had appointed in 1895 to try military cases (Butros Butros-Ghali, then acting Minister of Justice and ancestor of the future Foreign Minister and UN Secretary General of the same name, presided.) Four of the villagers were sentenced to hang and eight to be flogged publicly.

Cromer left Egypt before the trial, but his second wife's illness en route delayed his arrival in London until June 30. Meanwhile, Cairo and London both were agog with pro-

tests against the sentences and Cromer's regime. The government's defense in Parliament was discredited by inaccurate information. In Egypt, the nationalist cause revived. Between the two events, Cromer was badly undermined, for he relied upon a consensus in Britain that the occupation was uplifting the native people, even as it served imperial interests. Taba seemed out of scale to imperial interests, and Dinshawai suggested that "Cromerism" itself was arbitrary and cruel. His health broken, Cromer resigned in March 2007.

Cromer's departure after 24 years of swagger and hard work was welcomed by most Egyptians. All faulted him for failing to restore self-rule; a few respected his economic and social improvements. Back in England, a grateful Parliament awarded Cromer £50,000. He was frequently honored and consulted but did not rest, writing *Modern Egypt*, two volumes sometimes indiscreet. Everywhere he repeated his familiar message: Islam was a spent and wrongheaded force; only Europeans could train the Muslims to modernity. As for Egypt, he summed up the alternatives: In the absence of England or some new cohesive civilized class, Egypt would be "easy prey to either the nationalist demagogue . . . or that of some religious fanatic."

Cromer died on January 29, 1917. He is hardly remembered in Britain, but generations of Egyptians have been taught to revile him as the archenemy. (Sadat recalled being taught ballads about Dinshawai as a child in the 1920s.) Despite the 1952 Revolution, however, one can still see Cromer's *Modern Egypt* on display. It is still virtual, with a parliamentary façade but real rule by the coterie around Mubarak backstopped by the army and the secret police. And the real choice he had predicted in 1906 was manifest. Egypt, "his" Egypt, is now in the hands of the "demagogue nationalists." The alternative is still the religious fanatic.

Bremer and Cromer

Bremer and Cromer are very different people. The American, diplomat and coordinator, affable and approachable; the Englishman, soldier and administrator, imperious and

distant. They also lived in very different times. Although each represented the dominant power of their eras, imperial Britain at its zenith did not have anywhere near the resources of 21st-century America.

Cromer, however, could call upon a national flexibility that Bremer lacked. While the Empire had strong opponents in Britain, Victorian England was prepared to rule over others in the national interest (Tory) or the civilizing mission (Liberal). The breaking and making of states, either incorporated into the empire or “protected” with a façade of self-government, was therefore the way one did business. Americans, by contrast, oppose “rule over others” in principle. In practice they have occasionally done it, but deemed it mostly a sin. The *casus belli* has also changed. In the 19th century, default on debts begat an invasion. In the 21st century, it begets an IMF rescue.

Bremer and Cromer also differed sharply about the people they governed. The American respected the locals and their Muslim traditions. The Englishman denigrated Islam and instead measured local leaders against Roman, Greek and Protestant Christian ideas. At bottom, Bremer wanted out and Cromer wanted in.

The countries were different, too. Iraq was a heterogeneous and recent creation unsure of itself and its past. Egypt was and is a universe unto itself, proud and eternal. Moreover, British intelligence proved proficient and competent, America’s the very opposite. Finally, of course, there was time itself. Bremer had but a year; Cromer nearly a quarter century. The American was constantly forced to act in haste; the Englishman could take the long view.

Despite these differences, there are surprising similarities. While unlike in personality, both Bremer and Cromer were profoundly patriotic, serving despite great personal risk. Both represented governments that had decided to break a key Muslim state: in Bush’s case, because of faulty intelligence about weapons of mass destruction and the War on Terror; in Gladstone’s case, because of the Canal and India. Both governments wanted to

do their breaking on the cheap. Bremer and Cromer were therefore assigned “missions impossible”, their timetables set by distant politicians interested primarily in swift military withdrawal. And both faced strong international opposition.

Nor could the Ambassador or the Consul be sure of home support. Bremer lost his early when he opposed Rumsfeld’s plans and ran afoul of his generals. Gladstone changed instructions twice, and Salisbury contradicted Gladstone. And both Bremer and Cromer compounded their own trouble: Bremer thought to break Saddam’s regime and instead broke the remnants of the Iraqi state; Cromer supported the Gordon mission but then could not alter its tragic outcome.

Other similarities may arise, as well. Is

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Bush’s surge and General David Petraeus’ remarks about prolonging it well into 2008 a harbinger of a Salisbury-like reversal to “stay”? If Nubar gave way to Riaz Pasha and Riaz Pasha then to Mustafa Fahim, does that mean that Ibrahim Jaaferi’s giving way to Nouri al-Maliki predicts Maliki’s giving way to a more pliant successor, as well? Are the information operations of the U.S. Army in Baghdad comparable to Cromer’s suborning of the Egyptian press? Were Kitchener’s desecration of the Mahdi’s tomb and Cromer’s own Dinshawai Incident comparable to Abu Ghraib and the murderous behavior of soldiers like Stephen Green? Can we compare the effects of Cromer’s parades through Cairo with Bremer’s proconsular posturings in Baghdad?

These are interesting questions, but as the late Robert Strausz-Hupé liked to say, not half as interesting as the answers. Meanwhile, these sagas offer us three secrets, mostly hiding in plain sight, that could instruct American statesmen confronted by similar challenges tomorrow.

No Will, No Way: Presidents who break states but are unwilling to provide the plan and resources to remake them, including the suppression of insurgencies, eventually pay with their own reputations, not to speak of lives, treasure and national interests. Moreover, insurgencies—civil wars by definition—are a predictable outcome of state-breaking and they are best quashed early. This is a labor intensive exercise that involves the three “Ps” and the three “Cs”: pursuit of insurgents, protection of vital facilities and promotion of reconstruction, combined with cooption, corruption and coercion of opponents.

No Magic Bullets, Please: British forces in 1882 shared with American forces in 2003 a huge technological advantage that gave relatively small units enormous lethality. But the British never thought that was enough to prevail. So Cromer applied intelligence and all the rest of what is today called counterinsurgency doctrine. He skillfully co-opted and corrupted, leaving the smallest number to be coerced, although plagued by a “banditry” problem with occasional nationalist overtones. When late in his career Cromer exercised too much coercion, he badly hurt the British position. There are simply no technological fixes for wars of occupation when national or tribal energies are engaged. Too few troops using too much firepower is a sure recipe for failure.

One Man, One Command: Unity of command over civilian and military resources vested in the man on the spot is vital to success. Cromer

insisted on it and got it. Unity of command also has a “home” dimension. Cromer’s experience, reputation and arguments appealed to both parties, giving him resiliency and winning him time. Bremer, through no fault of his own, possessed neither unity of command nor a convivial home front.

So does the Humpty Dumpty corollary to the Pottery Barn rule mean that the “breaking and making” of states exceeds American competence? Can any foreign power endow a broken state with a political system not of its own people’s making?

Bremer tells us that it cannot be done on the quick and cheap. Cromer tells us that such experiments take a long time and considerable expense, and may still fail in the absence of a local “center” that can avoid extremes. The “foreigner’s gift” of a new political system (Fouad Ajami’s phrase) is therefore likely to be “degifted” (Jerry Seinfeld’s phrase) when the foreigner leaves.

If our main justification for breaking a state is the export of our ideals, then the record suggests that we not try it at all. If it be to safeguard our interests, then we will find a more compelling source of action. While in the end the British parliamentary gift was degifted, Britain’s position in Egypt proved vital to its survival in two World Wars. Ultimately, the American attempt to remake the politics of Iraq—and the broader Middle East—must pivot on the value of our interest in keeping that tortured region from an even worse fate than has already befallen it, and us. 🌐

You can’t let this country starve to death or break down with the lack of opportunity for economic life. In the long run, the American people will never tolerate an area under American control in which there is chaos.

—General Lucius Clay,

U.S. Military Governor of Germany, 1945–46