



# Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama

*Jeremi Suri*

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Americans are a nation-building people, and in *Liberty's Surest Guardian*, Jeremi Suri—Nobel Fellow and leading light in the next generation of policy makers—looks to America's history to see both what it has to offer failed states around the world and what it should avoid. Far from being cold imperialists, Americans have earnestly attempted to export their invention of representative government. We have had successes (Reconstruction after the American Civil War, the Philippines, Western Europe) and failures (Vietnam), and we can learn a good deal from both.

Nation-building is in America's DNA. It dates back to the days of the American Revolution, when the founding fathers invented the concept of popular sovereignty—the idea that you cannot have a national government without a collective will. The framers of the Constitution initiated a policy of cautious nation-building, hoping not to conquer other countries, but to build a world of stable, self-governed societies that would support America's way of life. Yet no other country has created more problems for itself and for others by intervening in distant lands and pursuing impractical changes.

Nation-building can work only when local citizens “own it,” and do not feel it is forced upon them. There is no one way to spread this idea successfully, but Suri has mined more than two hundred years of American policy in order to explain the five “P”s of nation-building:

**PARTNERS:** Nation-building always requires partners; there must be communication between people on the ground and people in distant government offices.

**PROCESS:** Human societies do not follow formulas. Nation-building is a process which does not produce clear, quick results.

**PROBLEM-SOLVING:** Leadership must start small, addressing basic problems. Public trust during a period of occupation emerges from the fulfillment of basic needs.

**PURPOSE:** Small beginnings must serve larger purposes. Citizens must see the value in what they're doing.

**PEOPLE:** Nation-building is about people. Large forces do not move history. People move history.

Our actions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya will have a dramatic impact on international stability. Jeremi Suri, provocative historian and one of *Smithsonian* magazine's “Top Young Innovators,” takes on the idea of American exceptionalism and turns it into a playbook for President Obama over the next, vital few years.

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