Book Proposal materials by Neil Englehart

Field of Study: Political Science

Table of Contents

- Book Prospectus
Prospectus

State Failure: The Furies Unleashed

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A wave of state failures followed the end of the Cold War, in parallel to the wave of democratic transitions in the same period. Although the democratic transitions were the focus of enormous scholarly interest, the state failures have so far received little systematic attention. Yet state failure is a matter for serious concern, a lesson painfully brought home by 9/11 and the realization that the failed Afghan state had provided a congenial base for international terrorism. State failure has since become an important foreign policy issue. The Bush administration declared in its 2002 statement on the National Security of the United States that “weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states,” worrying that they will become breeding grounds for terrorism, illicit drug production and epidemic disease. Yet the administration’s uneven response to state failure reflects our poorly developed understanding of the phenomenon.

There is more at stake in failed states than the terrorism, drugs and disease that worry the administration. In addition to being dangerous for their neighbors and the international community, failed states are first and foremost dangerous to their own citizens. Policymakers, activists and scholars interested in advancing human rights, democracy and social justice today must make state failure and state capacity a central focus of concern.

In State Failure I make three central arguments: 1) State failure is far more common than unusually assumed; normally only states that have completely collapsed
are recognized as failed, but many states fail in serious ways and for long periods. This means that 2) state failure is properly understood as a continuum, rather than a dichotomy between fully functional and completely collapsed. This is critical to promoting social justice and human rights, because 3) Failing states are at least as dangerous to human rights and civil society as strong, repressive states.

I support this argument with both qualitative and quantitative evidence. I first undertake detailed case studies of partial state failure in Burma and the Indian state of Bihar, and state collapse in Somalia and Afghanistan. I then test the inferences drawn from the case studies with multivariate statistical tests employing a unique set of data covering over one hundred countries. The data are assembled from a variety of sources: the State Failure Task Force, the World Bank, the World Health Organization, Interpol, UNESCO, the Polity IV project, Freedom House, Transparency International and others.

The existing literature on state failure is sparse, and there has been little attention to theorizing the phenomenon systematically. Most of the literature consists of case studies of collapsed states. Such studies are valuable for understanding the dynamics of individual cases, but the lack of an explicitly comparative structure limits the generalizations that can be drawn from them. In addition, there are a few edited collections of case studies that include insightful introductory chapters by the editors, observing patterns among the cases.


The United States Central Intelligence Agency funded a pioneering effort to
generalize about state failure across cases, the State Failure Task Force (SFTF). An
independent consortium of academics, the SFTF was charged with predicting state
collapse. However, the SFTF was interested primarily in forecasting events that would
require U.S. intervention. Its approach was atheoretical, mechanically looking for the best
statistical predictors for a variety of catastrophic events without worrying about why they
predict those events. Furthermore, its results have been published in obscure venues and
are thus not widely disseminated.

The absence of a single-authored volume with an explicitly comparative focus is
striking. In State Failure I seek to fill this void. I bring together a set of in-depth case
studies detailing the dynamics of particular cases, a body of theory developed from those
case studies, and global statistical tests demonstrating the wider applicability of that
theory.

The book is primarily addressed to an academic audience, particularly scholars of
international relations and comparative politics. However, I expect it to have crossover
appeal to policymakers, human rights and civil society activists, and anyone interested in
state failure and its consequences.
Table of Contents:

1. Rights and the State

2. State failure

3. Somalia: Rising from the Ashes?

4. Afghanistan: Endless War

5. Bihar: The Privatization of Violence

6. Burma: The Illusion of Control

7. A Global View

8. Conclusion: The Case for State-Building

Chapters 1 through 4 and 6 have been written. I expect to complete the manuscript in January 2004.