

Title:

The Semi-failed State

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Summary:

A failed state is a country whose government has no control and cannot exercise a monopoly on the legitimate use of force over a substantial part of its territory or citizenry.

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Article Body:

The US State Department's designation of "rogue state" periodically falls in and out of favor. It is used to refer to countries hostile to the United States, with authoritarian, brutal, and venal regimes, and a predilection to ignore international law and conventions, encourage global or local terrorism and the manufacture and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Most rogue states are not failed ones.

A failed state is a country whose government has no control and cannot exercise a monopoly on the legitimate use of force over a substantial part of its territory or citizenry. It is continuously and successfully challenged by private military power: terrorists, warlords, or militias. Its promulgations and laws are futile and inapplicable.

With the exception of the first criterion (hostility towards Pax Americana), some scholars claim that the USA is, itself, a rogue state (q.v., for instance, William Blum's "Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower" and "Rogue Nation" by Clyde Prestowitz).

Admittedly, the USA's unilateralist, thuggish and capricious foreign policy represents a constant threat to world peace and stability. But labeling the USA a "rogue state" may be overdoing it. It better fits the profile of a semi-failed state.

A semi-failed state is a country whose government maintains all the trappings and appearances of power, legitimacy, and control. Its army and police are integral and operative. Its institutions function. Its government and parliament

promulgate laws and its courts enforce them. It is not challenged by any competing military structures within its recognized borders.

Yet, the semi-failed state - while going through the motions - is dead on its feet. It is a political and societal zombie. It functions due mainly to inertia and lack of better or clear alternatives. Its population is disgruntled, hostile, and suspicious. Other countries regard it with derision, fear, and abhorrence. It is rotting from the inside and doomed to implode.

In a semi-failed state, high crime rates and rampant venality, nepotism, and cronyism affect the government's ability to enforce laws and implement programs. It reacts by adding layers of intransigent and opaque bureaucracy to an already unwieldy mammoth. The institutions of the semi-failed state are hopelessly politicized and, thus, biased, distrusted, and compromised. Its judiciary is in a state of decrepit decline as unqualified beneficiaries of patronage join the ranks.

The result is social fragmentation as traditional and local leaders, backed by angry and rebellious constituents, take matters into their own hands. Centrifugal politics supplant statehood and the nation is unable to justly and effectively balance the competing claims of the center versus the periphery.

The utter (but insidious) institutional failure that typifies the semi-failed state is usually exposed with the total disarray that follows an emergency (such as a natural disaster or a terrorist attack).

To deflect criticism and in a vain attempt to reunite its fracturing populace, the semi-failed state often embarks on military adventures (cloaked as "self-defense" or "geopolitical necessity"). Empire-building is an indicator of looming and imminent disintegration. Foreign aggression replaces reconstruction and rational policy-making at home. The USA prior to the Civil War, the USSR between 1956 and 1982, federal Yugoslavia after 1989, and Nazi Germany are the most obvious examples.

Is the USA a semi-failed state?

I. Empire-building and foreign aggression

Its neighbors always perceived the United States as an imminent security risk (ask Mexico, half of whose territory was captured by successive and aggressive American administrations). The two world wars transformed the USA into a global threat, able and only too willing to project power to protect its interests and disseminate its brand of missionary liberal-capitalism.

In the last 150 years, the USA has repeatedly militarily attacked, unprovoked, other peaceful or pacified nations, near and far. To further its (often economic) ends, the United States has not refrained from encouraging and using terrorism in various parts of the globe. It has developed and deployed weapons of mass destruction and is still the biggest arms manufacturer and trader in the world. It has repeatedly reneged on its international obligations and breached international laws and conventions.

II. Dysfunctional institutions

Hurricane Katrina (August-September 2005) exposed the frailty and lack of preparedness of FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and, to some extent, the National Guard. It brought into sharp relief the cancerous politicization of the crony-infested federal government.

FEMA is only the latest in a long chain of failed institutions. The SEC (Securities and Exchange Commission) coped poorly with virulent corruption and malfeasance in Wall Street. The FDA (Food and Drug Administration) capitulated in the face of commercial and political pressures and neglected to remove from the market malfunctioning medical devices and drugs with lethal side effects.

The EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) has sacrificed America's nature reserves to business interests. A heavily politicized Supreme Court legitimized manifestly tainted election results and made a president out of the loser of the popular vote. The disenfranchisement of minorities, the poor, and ex-convicts is now in full swing. The legislature - the two houses of Congress - are deadlocked and paralyzed.

The organs of the government of the United States now function only when exposed to acute embarrassment and a revolted public opinion. Private firms and charities sprout to fulfill the gaps.

III. The National Consensus

Americans long mistook the institutional stability of their political system, guaranteed by the Constitution, for a national consensus. They actually believe that the former guarantees the latter - that institutional firmness and durability ARE the national consensus. The reverse, as we know, is true: it takes a national consensus to yield stable institutions. No social structure - no matter how venerable and veteran - can resist the winds of change in public sentiment.

Hurricane Katrina again demonstrated the unbridgeable divides in American

society between rich and poor and black and white. But this time, the rift runs deeper.

The Bush administration is the first since the Civil War to dare to change the fundamental rules of the political game (for instance by seeking to abolish the filibuster in the Senate and by a profligacy of recess appointments of judges and officials). Its instincts and reflexes are elitist, undemocratic, and violent. It is delusional and its brand of fanatic religiosity is not well-received even among the majority of Americans who are believers. Additionally, it is openly and unabashedly corrupt and ridden with nepotism and cronyism.

Yet, Bush, unlike Nixon, is not an aberration. He is unlikely to be impeached. He was overwhelmingly re-elected even as his quagmire war in Iraq unraveled and the self-enrichment and paranoia of his close circle became public.

This is the new and true face of at least half of America, to the horror and dismay of the other half, its liberals. If the history of the United States is any judge, these two camps are unlikely to sit back and navel-gaze. Semi-failed states typically disintegrate. A bloodied (perhaps even nuclear) second civil war is in the cards.

Should the United States devolve into its constituent states, the world will breathe a sigh of relief. A European Union (EU)-like economic zone between the parts of the former USA is bound to be far more pacific and to contribute to world stability - something its malignant former incarnation had so signally failed to do.