

The Ownership Deception

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In late 2006, shortly before the end of his tenure as secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld made the following remark regarding the ongoing U.S. role in Iraq: [“The biggest mistake would be not to pass things over to the Iraqis. It’s their country. They’re going to have to govern it. They’re going to have to provide security for it. And they’re going to have to do it sooner rather than later.”](#) This remark is striking for its ahistorical crassness and demonstrated a striking amount of chutzpah even by Secretary Rumsfeld’s standards. However, it also raises some interesting questions about sovereignty and responsibility in foreign affairs.

Rumsfeld’s remarks are so bizarre because they occurred after, if not during, an invasion of Iraq by the U.S. during which Iraq’s government was destroyed. Whether or not one supported that invasion, it is reasonably clear that less than four years later, the U.S. still had a fair amount of responsibility for Iraq’s reconstruction and security. While Rumsfeld’s remarks were clearly premature in post-war Iraq, there are many cases around the world where the question of when international, or U.S., responsibility should stop is far more difficult to resolve.

For example, in many elections international actors are so heavily involved that they train and oversee the election administrators, provide material support such as vehicles, computers for counting and even pay for the ballots. This happens in post-conflict countries such as Afghanistan or the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as to a lesser extent, in post-authoritarian countries in places like the former Soviet Union. In these cases, the election can no longer be viewed as a domestic event, nor is the idea that it is entirely “their (meaning the country in which the election is occurring) election” accurate. However, it is not unusual to for representatives of foreign multi-lateral institution or powerful countries step back and says that a particularly knotty election problem, such as how to pay for some unexpected expense, or adjudicate disputes regarding election fraud, is not their responsibility because “after all, it is their country.” This is disingenuous and uses progressive sounding rhetoric to disguise what is essentially passing the buck. Once international actors, for better or for worse, push a country to have elections, have a major military and political presence or defeat a country in a war, the question of when it is truly “their country” becomes much more complex. This phenomenon is not just limited to elections and can be found in areas such as peace keeping and conflict resolution as well.

The difficulty lies in a conflict between the broadly recognized notion that people should govern and make decisions for themselves and the reality that in many post-conflict or post-authoritarian countries, international actors have taken on major responsibilities, which put them at the center of the policy process. Further, in general, the idea that people should govern themselves and are responsible for their own countries reflects the

kind of liberal values and recognition of sovereignty which we would like to see in our foreign policy. However, when this line is used in a state that is heavily dependent on political, technical and financial assistance from outside, it is often deceptive, reflecting political avoidance more than any progressive inclinations.