

they can control, the dangers they can avoid, and the dangers they can neither control nor avoid; courage, thought, and preplanning are relevant but are not enough on their own. Interveners must proceed carefully and invest heavily in finding out more about the specific context

in which they operate—especially after the intervention—and must define concrete goals. Equally important, the international community must be much more humble about what it can accomplish in terms of state-building abroad and abandon the notion that “failure is not an option.”

***Private Empire: ExxonMobil and American Power***, Steve Coll (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 704 pp., \$36 cloth.

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In this voluminous and exhaustive book, Steve Coll—a two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize and a staff writer for *The New Yorker*—examines the global reach and influence of ExxonMobil, the most profitable corporation headquartered in the United States. Coll shows how ExxonMobil operates as a uniquely powerful private geopolitical actor, leveraging its vast influence over Washington, D.C. (for instance, former ExxonMobil CEO Lee Raymond was close friends with Vice President Dick Cheney, who formulated the Bush administration’s energy policy with ExxonMobil’s interests in mind), and marshaling its resources to prevent government interference when U.S. strategic interests seem inimical to the corporation’s. “Raymond aligned ExxonMobil with America,” observes Coll, “but he was not always in sync; he was akin to the President of France or the Chancellor of Germany. He did not manage the corporation as a subordinate instrument of American foreign policy; his was a private empire.” Because ExxonMobil invests in energy reserves abroad that may take decades to exhaust, its time horizon is far greater than the average U.S. presidential administration’s.

Whereas U.S. foreign policy toward a state may undergo numerous shifts in a short period of time, ExxonMobil’s interests remain constant: to encourage stability in countries where it does business in order to realize its investments.

The idea of “empire” is not employed by Coll in a metaphorical sense. The culture of ExxonMobil is hierarchical, insular, and haughty. Its competitors—such other energy giants as Chevron, ConocoPhillips, and BP—view it with a mix of respect and resentment. A year after Exxon merged with Mobil in 1999, the company’s revenue was already greater than the GDP of Norway; if its revenue were converted to GDP, it would have then ranked as the world’s twenty-first-largest economy.

With energy investments in more than a dozen countries, it is, in its own way, a global power. Like any global power, however, ExxonMobil must work closely with authoritarian governments—especially since the greatest untapped energy reserves now lie in the developing world. But unlike the United States, which sometimes incorporates concerns about human rights and democratization into a realpolitik-oriented foreign policy, ExxonMobil can generally

focus on profit—and stability—alone. For example, the Arun gas fields of Indonesia, one of the most prodigious and profitable of all of ExxonMobil's holdings, are located in Banda Aceh province, which until 2005 was embroiled in an armed separatist rebellion against the Indonesian government. The Indonesian army conducted a brutal counterinsurgency campaign in the province, and was accused of mass torture and the killing of Acehnese civilians. As part of

their contract with the Indonesian government, ExxonMobil *paid the military* to protect its gas fields from rebel attacks, and there is evidence that the torture and murder of suspected rebels occurred on ExxonMobil property. In effect, ExxonMobil helped underwrite Indonesia's counterinsurgency.

Methodical in approach and clinical in style, *Private Empire* brilliantly documents the reign of the world's most powerful private corporation.