can shift to being cooperative by applying moralistic punishment, such as sanctions, against defectors. On a national scale, history suggests that external pressure applied to a society may increase internal cohesion and cooperation. National humiliation of China, first from the European great powers in the nineteenth century and then from Japanese occupation during the Second World War, played an important part in its post-war reunification, for example.

The policy implications of historical outcomes are doubtful. We can hardly subject societies to horrific stresses deliberately, and they may produce oppressive regimes in response. Rather than focus on a few haphazard cases, systematic research is needed to find out what works. Although not mentioned in *Failed States*, such programmes are currently being conducted by, for example, the Political Instability Task Force in the United States and the Centre for the Study of Civil War in Oslo, Norway.

Ghani and Lockhart propose an agenda for state building, but their weak analysis undermines its credibility. They suggest a 'sovereignty strategy' that involves formulating a strategy, then setting the goals and rules of the game, mobilizing resources, allocating critical tasks and, finally, monitoring implementation of the strategy. This generic approach does not suggest concrete policies. For example, the book describes how a strategy formulated in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh "forced a sobering reading of conditions: corruption, inefficient use of state resources, short-term planning and poor infrastructure. This reading of context enabled participants to embrace change and leaders to set a clear sense of direction." Given such an easy buy-in, one wonders why this approach has not enabled more sides, such as the Maronite Christians and the Shia and Sunni Muslims in Lebanon, to make peace given the many opportunities they have had to "embrace change".

I nonetheless commend Ghani and Lockhart for raising this issue. We cannot afford to ignore failed states. We insist that new drugs are exhaustively tested before they are used, so shouldn't we invest in better social science before we intervene with failed states? Otherwise, our well-intentioned but misguided attempts to fix them may be as helpful as the medieval practice of blood-letting. ■

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J. KOHEN/WIREIMAGE

Q&A: Insight into Einstein

Actor **Alan Alda**, who starred in the television series *M*A*S*H* and now hosts *Scientific American Frontiers* on US network PBS, is fascinated with physics. At last month's World Science Festival in New York he led a panel discussing the quantum world, portrayed Richard Feynman in the play *QED*, and presented *Dear Albert*, his new play drawn from Albert Einstein's letters.

Why did Einstein's letters interest you?
It's very important for us to see that science is done by people, not just brains but whole human beings, and sometimes at great cost. Letters can be very personal, and sometimes confrontational.

I had also planned to write a play about Marie Curie's letters. I got a little discouraged because not only are they in Polish and French, but the French letters are still slightly radioactive. After you look at them they go over you with a Geiger counter. I thought I'd wait until somebody else goes in a hazmat suit and translates them. So I stuck with Einstein.

Einstein emerges from your play as a highly volatile character, sometimes spiteful and domineering, sometimes withdrawn and resigned. How do you see him?
Einstein claims not to have felt lonely, but he was a lonesome figure. He could see far out into the cosmos but he was myopic about the people next to him. It was difficult for him to take the time for what he called the "merely personal". And he really did seem images in his head. Like Feynman, he challenged every idea that came to him. He wanted to rethink it, he wanted to see more deeply into it.

Why did you focus on Einstein's relationships with his two wives, Mileva and Elsa?
Plenty of his correspondence with colleagues was about the science that he was working so hard on. But I wanted to show the personal side of the discoveries and ruminations. For somebody with hair like that, he did awfully well with the women. At one point he couldn't decide whether to marry his second wife Elsa or her daughter Ilse, who wrote to a friend, "Albert refuses to take a position on this".

Will the play be performed again?
I don't know. It was like a high-energy experiment: we just let the actors collide with the material. Whatever particles came out of it we could observe for a short time, and now it has evaporated. ■

Interview by **Jascha Hoffman**, a writer based in