Comparing the American Occupations of Germany and Iraq

By Thomas W. Maulucci, Jr.

The 2003 war against Iraq and the subsequent occupation of the country by American-led coalition forces has led to frequent comparisons with previous American attempts at “nation building” overseas. By far, the most popular comparison has been with Vietnam, and not just by left-wing critics of the Bush administration. For example, on October 18, 2006, New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman, who initially supported the invasion of Iraq, described the upswing in violence against American troops during Ramadan 2006 as the “jihadist equivalent of the Tet Offensive.” When George W. Bush admitted Friedman “could be right” in a TV interview later that same day, the Vietnam metaphor became a topic for the mid-term election campaign. The post-war situation in Iraq also has been compared to the one in the Philippines in 1898, British India in 1947, and Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Also prominent, however, has been imagery from World War II in Europe and its aftermath. This trend actually dates back to the Gulf War of 1990, when George H. W. Bush compared Saddam Hussein to Adolf Hitler, warned that the 1930s had demonstrated the dangers of appeasing dictators, and briefly raised the prospect of a new Nuremberg trial. The George W. Bush Administration has re-employed these analogies and also upped the ante by equating its entire “War on Terror” with the struggle against the Axis Powers during World War II. On March 19, 2006, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld even summed up what was at stake in the occupation to the Washington Post by stating that “turning our backs on post-war Iraq would be the modern equivalent of handing post-war Germany back to the Nazis.” Therefore it is not surprising that the occupation of Germany from 1945-49 would be used

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as one of the benchmarks in the public debate about the occupation of Iraq (for the purposes of this article, I will focus on the period before the transfer of power to an interim Iraqi government – in other words, the period from April 2003 to June 2004).

In recent years, the history of American attempts at post-war reconstruction of occupied countries during the twentieth century has received considerable scholarly attention. The basic conclusion of this literature is that American successes at “nation building” are few and far between, and that Germany along with Japan represents the major exception. Despite this, the American experience in post-war Germany was not taken under active consideration for Iraq by the Bush administration. This in itself was not necessarily tragic since there were significant differences in the two cases. Yet some general lessons could and should have been learned from the occupation of Germany. The most important of these were the need for an adequate occupation force and a unified on-site command structure, as well as the danger of changing the basic paradigm for running the occupation before stability had been achieved.

Germany As A Model For The Occupation Of Iraq?

Noah Feldman, a New York University law professor who served as an advisor during the process of drafting the Iraqi constitution, remembered that those going with him on a military plane to Baghdad were deeply immersed in the latest books on the German and Japanese occupations—and unfortunately not on the Middle East or Iraq. Despite this anecdote, the German example does not seem to have influenced occupation planning directly, with one major exception. Washington Post reporter and author Thomas Ricks claims that Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith, both strong advocates of the Saddam-as-Hitler analogy, thought of the occupation of Germany when they drafted plans for strict “de-Ba’thification” that were implemented in Iraq in May 2003. That apart, the German example served at best as a general guidepost or, at worst, as Ricks put it, as “an excuse” to give the impression that an occupation strategy had been thought out.

Those responsible for the occupation of Iraq realized that the two cases were not compatible. For example, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in 2003 and 2004 and initially nicknamed “the MacArthur of Baghdad” by the Iraqi press, recognized this clearly. On the one hand, he believed that Iraq had to become a long-term “success story” like Germany and Japan if the coalition’s work was to be judged positively in
Bremer compared “de-Ba’thification” policy with “de-Nazifization” and with the prohibition of militarism in Japan. He used the German example with President Bush and Congress to argue that the new Iraqi state must not be burdened with crushing debts. He also complained that there was no Iraqi “Ludwig Erhard” to deal with economic problems there.

On the other hand, Bremer also knew that the Allies after World War II had enjoyed much more time to plan the occupation of Germany than his CPA had. Moreover, the Coalition had defeated a “hated regime” in Iraq, not an entire country as had been the case with both Germany and Japan. As a result, Iraqis who were glad to be rid of Saddam Hussein might well be unhappy about the continued occupation of their country by non-Muslims. Germany had a much higher degree of political, ethnic, and cultural unity than Iraq, and there was also the outside threat of the Red Army that ensured German cooperation with the Allies. Finally, Bremer knew that Germany’s economy, although in very bad shape in 1945, had been one of the most dynamic and diversified in the entire world before World War II, while Iraq’s was largely dependent on the oil industry.

The Question of Occupation Forces

Despite the aforementioned differences, some very useful advice related to the German example was available for planners by the summer of 2003. In particular, the RAND Corporation published a study comparing the occupations of Germany, Japan, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. It recommended that local elections be permitted early on in the occupation, as had been the case in the first two of those countries, to be followed by national elections later. The report also warned that Germany and Japan, unlike Iraq, had homogeneous societies and no geographic neighbors that could or would interfere in the process of post-war reconstruction. However, its central message was that democratic nation building seemed possible if the United States contributed sufficient personnel and financial resources. The report concluded that “the highest level of casualties has occurred in the operations with the lowest levels of U.S. troops, suggesting an inverse relationship between force levels and the level of risk.” The study recommended that 526,000 troops plus a military police force of around 53,000 were needed in Iraq through 2005 if Kosovo was taken as a model and 258,000 soldiers if Bosnia was chosen. For the initial year of occupation, about one soldier for every twenty inhabitants was necessary. The German case was not directly considered since the level of forces throughout the country was far higher in 1945 than in either Kosovo or Bosnia, with more than 1.6 million troops in the American zone alone, but it certainly reinforced the notion that more was better. This advice was consistent with the force levels for Iraq proposed
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at a National Security Council briefing in February 2003. Analysts have pointed to a number of mistaken decisions that greatly complicated the Coalition’s chances for a successful occupation of Iraq, regardless of whether success was defined as the Bush Administration’s maximum goal of remaking that country into a unified liberal democracy with a well-functioning market economy or the minimum goal of simply keeping it harmless, peaceful, and united. Most of them took place within the first twelve months after the fall of Baghdad, which a recent episode of *Frontline* on PBS labeled as the “Lost Year in Iraq.” These include CPA Orders Number One and Two from May 2003, which excluded Ba’thists from leading positions in public life and disbanded the Iraqi military. These actions created an active security threat in the “Sunni Triangle”, massive indiscriminate arrests of Iraqis in September 2003 by the American military in a misguided attempt to quell the insurgency, and the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, which started in the wake of these arrests and which broke into the international media in April 2004.

However, the first and probably worst errors came in the first weeks of the occupation in April and May 2003 and were linked to insufficient occupation forces. These included the Coalition’s tolerance of massive looting and its inability to secure sites where weapons and explosives were stored. The looting caused many Iraqis to wonder whether the Coalition forces had really come to liberate them and also to question their power and efficiency. The fact that American soldiers guarded the Oil Ministry but no other government buildings in Baghdad helped reinforce suspicions about the invaders’ motives. Coalition troops had little notion of what they should be protecting because they expected to find a grateful population, as well as a still functioning Iraqi government and military that would keep order. Nonetheless, even if they had attempted to intervene, there were far too few of them stationed in major urban areas like Baghdad (initially, only two brigades were in that city).

Assumptions made by the civilian leadership in the Defense Department largely explain the inadequate force levels. Ever since serious contingency planning for an invasion of Iraq had started in 2001, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz among others had argued for as small an invasion force as possible, somewhere around 125,000 troops. This fitted their conception for a new lean, mean, American military that would rely heavily not on manpower but on high technology. This contrasted with advice from the Joint Chiefs of Staff that between 400,000 and 500,000 coalition troops would be necessary for a successful invasion and occupation.
Other actors within the American government and military accepted the limited force levels because they found an additional argument compelling. According to Rumsfeld, the U.S. military did not engage in nation building. Therefore, his model for an Iraqi Occupation was Afghanistan, where a minimal deployment of forces seemed to produce excellent results. The Defense Department’s civilian leadership assumed that the Iraqi state would not totally collapse with the fall of Saddam Hussein and that remaining elements of the Iraqi army and police, as well as new volunteers, would be willing to help provide security.\(^{23}\) In late 2002 and early 2003 the State Department’s “Future of Iraq Project” and the Army War College said it was possible to rely on indigenous military and police forces. The White House endorsed the strategy of letting Iraqis do most of the work.\(^{24}\) This also meant that Kurds, who had their own militia, and Shiites, who initially did not, would have to be willing to accept the return of a police and military dominated by Sunnis and Ba’thists, which was an unlikely scenario. Another assumption widely held in the American government, that the international community would offer support to the occupation, including with police forces, was unrealistic from the start given the controversy over the decision to go to war in the first place.\(^{25}\)

In 2003 Anthony Cordesman wrote that due to continued personnel losses, “some three months after the fall of Baghdad, it was still unclear whether the United States and Britain really were in the conflict termination phase and moving toward nation building or whether they were moving toward low intensity conflict.”\(^{26}\) By 2006 it was clear that many parts of Iraq outside of Kurdistan were experiencing serious sectarian conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites. Nonetheless, the Department of Defense has resisted calls for significant troop reinforcements even after Rumsfeld’s resignation following the midterm elections of that year. This time the civilian leadership was supported by the professional military, including General John Abizaid, head of the U.S. Central Command from July 2003 to April 2007. Abizaid argued that more American troops in Iraq might actually make tensions worse given the prevailing conditions in the country. But the limited size of the new U.S. military also played an important role in his calculations, as he told Congress in November 2006: “We can put in 20,000 more Americans tomorrow and achieve a temporary effect...[but] when you look at the overall American force pool that’s available out there, the ability to sustain that type of commitment is simply not something we have right now with the size of the Army and Marine Corps.”\(^{27}\)
Apparently in contradiction to this advice, in January 2007 new Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced a “surge” of 21,000 soldiers plus additional military police to help the Iraqi government regain control over Baghdad. They would join the 132,000 American and 14,010 Coalition troops in Iraq that month. However, the scale of this increase should not be exaggerated. In November and December 2005, 160,000 American and 23,000 Coalition soldiers were in Iraq around the time of elections to the national parliament. Another sign that reinforcements should not be expected is the fact that Gates and senior military leaders in March began to talk up yet another historical analogy with Iraq in case the surge fails: El Salvador in the 1980s, where a small number of American advisors sufficed to train local security forces. This situation contrasts sharply with post-war Germany, which saw massive numbers of Allied troops establish an occupation and effectively demilitarize the country in 1945. Despite attempts made by then National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice in 2003 to equate violence by Iraqi insurgents with Nazi “Werewolves” in the late 1940s, the American military occupation did not encounter any serious armed resistance. The fact that Nazism had been discredited in the eyes of most Germans, if by no means totally rejected by them, played a major part in this. So too, however, did the monopoly on force retained by the Occupation Forces throughout Germany, which allowed them to devote their attention to other serious problems like food shortages and a massive influx of refugees. Notably, the massive drawdown from the American zone in 1945-46 from more than 1.6 million combat troops to around 200,000 had no significant impact on the internal security situation there. Nor did the onset of the Cold War in 1947 or the division of Germany in 1948-49, a period in which the number of American combat forces fell even further, have an impact on internal security. Only the Korean War would lead the United States to increase the number of its divisions in Germany from two to six. One lesson from this seems to be that having a sufficient or even more than sufficient level of forces in the early stages of an occupation is desirable for achieving internal peace and stability.

Problems of Planning and Leadership

Much has been made of the fact that the occupation of Iraq was poorly planned, especially before the transfer of power to Iraqis in June 2004. The Department of Defense, in charge of the preparations, appointed retired general Jay Garner to plan and lead the US Office for Humanitarian Assistance. Garner did not have adequate time or resources for this task. For example, he started this job only about eight weeks before the invasion concluded. The Department’s civilian leadership also insisted that his staff be politically acceptable, which meant especially that they could not come from the State Department.
Already by May 1, 2003, Garner had been replaced as head of the CPA by Bremer, who brought his own people and agenda. However, Bremer also had little time to prepare, and the CPA and its offices in Iraq remained inadequately staffed. Moreover, its activities have been described as a “children’s crusade” and an adventure in “heroic amateurism” since much of its personnel consisted of young people without significant experience in government, let alone in Middle Eastern affairs. Instead of expertise, political credentials were often the crucial factor in hiring. Finally, due in no small part to the security situation, both Garner’s and Bremer’s staffs remained isolated from Iraqi society in their headquarters, which quickly gained the label the “Emerald City” or “Oz.”

While the lack of preparation and adequate staff for Iraq reached unprecedented proportions, there are a few parallels with the German case. For example, although American planning for Germany can be traced back to 1942, exact guidelines were never hammered out. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s attitude was that there was no need to do this before troops were on the ground there. Even the famous Joint Chiefs of Staff Directive 1067, which called for the “Four Ds” of demilitarization, de-Nazification, de-cartelization, and democratization, was very vague and could be interpreted in quite different ways by the State Department, the Department of the Treasury, and the War Department. Moreover, the Office of the American Military Government in Germany (OMGUS) was staffed by officers who as a whole had little experience in running an occupation or with Germany. Those that did have knowledge of the country were often civilian recruits whose military ranks were too low for them to have much of an influence on how OMGUS actually functioned. Specific policies would be developed only after the occupation started, even if pre-war planning for Germany was far more extensive and certainly far more helpful than the planning for Iraq.

What was clearly different, however, was that in Germany, one agency, the War (later Defense) Department, ran the military occupation until it ended in August 1949, and the head of OMGUS was in charge of both military and political affairs. This allowed for a unified policy on the ground, regardless of bureaucratic infighting back in Washington. This stands in stark contrast to the situation in Iraq before the transfer of power. The National Security Council was entrusted with supervising the CPA in October 2003, taking it out of Defense’s hands. This was just after Bremer, out of frustration with the guidance he had been receiving, had published an article in the Washington Post on September 8, outlining his conception for a long-term occupation without first consulting either the Pentagon or the White House. However, at no time did either Garner or Bremer have any control over the American...
military, as Bremer discovered soon after he arrived when he suggested that strict measures be taken against looters.

**The Danger of Rapid Paradigm Shifts**

One final comparison between Germany and Iraq deserves mention. Every American attempt to occupy and reconstruct foreign countries since 1898 has inevitably depended on a considerable amount of improvisation.\(^{37}\) In Germany, for example, a major shift occurred starting in 1946, as the American government began to de-prioritize reuniting the country on the basis of the “Four Ds” in favor of creating an anti-communist, capitalist state in the Western part of the country. However, despite serious initial resistance from the War Department to the idea of a long-term commitment, there was never any question of ending the occupation and transferring power to Germans until the conditions had stabilized and that country was no longer a threat to international peace.\(^{38}\)

Yet in Iraq, there were at least two major changes in the basic paradigm for the occupation.\(^{39}\) Initially, the Defense Department clearly expected to transfer power rapidly, and this was also Garner’s strategy. This strategy may have been unrealistic in terms of securing Iraqi cooperation and stabilizing the country since it relied on continued use of personnel and structures associated with Saddam Hussein’s rule. Yet it made good sense in one key respect: if the United States was unwilling to devote significant troops or resources, it needed to rely on Iraqis from the start. Then Bremer entered the picture in May 2003 with a full-fledged program of nation building. The summer of 2003 was the only time that active work was done to implement the neo-conservative vision of a liberal-democratic Iraq with a free-market economy that would serve as a beacon to the entire Middle East. Many of Bremer’s calculations, especially the idea that time was needed if Iraqi society was to be truly transformed, also made good sense in the abstract, although they did not take the reality of limited American forces plus a highly divided Iraqi society into account. Subsequently, Bremer was reined in by the National Security Council (NSC) in October 2003 and told that the transfer of power to Iraqis had to take place by June 2004. The exact reasons for these changes remain unclear. For example, Bremer claims to have received George W. Bush’s approval for his overall plan.\(^{40}\) However, objections from the NSC and State Department about what they saw as Garner’s and Bremer’s increasingly independent actions seems to have played an important role, as did the political undesirability of Bremer’s conception for a long-term occupation with a presidential election coming up.
Nothing better reflects the lack of a comprehensive vision for the occupation than this inability of the Bush administration to make a decision on the fundamental nature of the occupation. Either Garner’s or Bremer’s conceptions might have been successful if properly supported with resources (a huge if), but not both in combination. Subsequent attempts to return to Garner’s strategy of relying on the Iraqis, whether by strengthening the central government or working with local groups, have yet to provide wholly satisfactory results, making the missed opportunities of 2003-2004 seem even more serious. For example, General David Petraeus, the current US commander in Iraq, has adopted a new strategy of relying on both counterinsurgency tactics and deals with important Iraqi local constituencies outside of the central government to maintain order. The substantial decline in civilian deaths in Iraq in 2007 after this strategy was introduced may simply reflect the unfortunate fact that sectarian cleansing has been highly successful in many areas during the last few years. It is also questionable whether dealing with local leaders and militias will promote either national unity or more effective rule by the Iraqi central government.

Conclusion

In the end, comparing the occupations of Germany and Iraq probably has limited value. We might easily conclude that the two cases are far too dissimilar. Indeed, Bosnia and Kosovo, societies that suffer from serious ethnic and religious divisions, seem like much better choices to provide actual policy guidelines for Iraq. Some experts, most notably former U.S. Ambassador Peter Galbraith, believe that chances for keeping Iraq together as a nation state were minimal at best due to the centrifugal forces unleashed there after Saddam Hussein’s fall. Yet Germany also offers lessons about the need for an appropriate commitment of resources, a unified leadership on the ground, and an overall agreement on the basic nature of the occupation. The failure to provide any of these things in Iraq reflects the lackadaisical way in which the Bush Administration approached the occupation of that country.

-Tao Zeng served as lead editor for this article.

NOTES


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5 The comparison with Hitler was not simply invented for rhetorical purposes. Saddam Hussein and other leaders of the Ba’ath Party in Iraq admitted that they admired the German dictator (as well as Joseph Stalin), and the Ba’ath Party often has been compared to the Nazi Party in terms of its organization and tactics. Russell A. Berman, “Saddam and Hitler: Rethinking Totalitarianism”, Telos 125 (Fall, 2002), 121-139, here 124-127.


8 Galbraith, 97.

9 He mentioned the connection drawn by Wolfowitz and especially Feith between De-Ba’athification and De-Nazification in the “The Lost Year in Iraq”, directed by Michael Kirk, Frontline, PBS, October 17, 2006.


12 Ibid., 42.

13 Ibid., 119-120, 173.

14 Ibid., 201.

15 Ibid., 36-39.

16 Dobbs et al., 195, 205.

17 Ibid., 153.

18 Ibid., 197-99. For the one to twenty ratio, see Bremer, 9-10.


21 Galbraith, 113.


23 Gordon and Taylor, 105-108.


25 See for example ibid., 108.

26 Cordesman, 517.


The US also took steps to create an effective military constabulary of around 30,000 men which began work in mid-1946. Supplementing the constabulary was the German civilian police, which like other aspects of local administration had by that time come under the auspices of the German State Governments in the US Zone.
33 On Garner’s mission see Galbraith, 95-97, 114-117; Ricks, Fiasco, 80-81, 101-109, 154-155; Woodward, 152-183.
34 “The Lost Year in Iraq.” This was not merely an American problem--British offices in Iraq working under the CPA also were terribly understaffed and suffered from a lack of Middle East experts. See Mark Etherington, Revolt on the Tigris: The Al-Sadr Uprising and the Governing of Iraq (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 238-239.
37 See for example Steven R. Weisman, “A Foreign Policy of Try, Try Again”, NYT, Jan. 18. 2004.
38 Boehling, 17-20, 270.
39 These shifts are well explained in “The Lost Year in Iraq.”
40 Bremer, 11-12.
42 Galbraith, 218-224.