



(Photo by Andrea Comas, Reuters)

More than three thousand former Iraqi soldiers from the disbanded Iraqi army protest in front U.S. soldiers next to the headquarters of the U.S.-led administration in Baghdad, 2 June 2003. The angry soldiers shouted slogans and vowed to launch suicide attacks on U.S. troops unless they were given wages and compensation.

# The Particular Circumstances of Time and Place

## Why the Occupation of Japan Succeeded and the Occupation of Iraq Failed

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Before the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the U.S. occupation of Japan from 1945 to 1952 was often invoked as evidence that Americans knew how to do occupations right. Consequently, at the outset of Operation Iraqi Freedom, it was assumed that, just as we Americans had done previously with non-Western Japan, we would be able to defeat non-Western Iraq and then turn it into a beacon of democratic hope in the benighted Middle East just as we had established Japan as an enlightened democratic state in the Far East. Confident in the already developed template of Japanese occupation, we would walk away with a new and successful ally left in place.

Of course, that is not what our occupation of Iraq resulted in. In retrospect, the main question has now become: Why did the Japan occupation succeed and the Iraq occupation fail? But, additionally, we should ask ourselves if the assumptions and supposed lessons drawn from the occupation in Japan were faulty to begin with?

Professionally, as a historian, I have studied extensively the U.S. occupation of Japan. Additionally, I was assigned to serve in the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Baghdad to help establish the ground work for the occupation of Iraq while I was on active duty in the U.S. Army. This background has perhaps given me the ability to offer a unique perspective due to my familiarity with the details of the occupation of Japan complemented by personal observations collected from my practical experience participating in establishing the ground floor phase of coalition efforts to successfully occupy and transform Iraq.

Consequently, in my view, the most concise answer to why the two occupations differed is captured by John Dower in his book *Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor / Hiroshima / 9-11 / Iraq*, which can be summarized as follows: the roles of the U.S. occupying apparatus and the central and local Japanese government entities through which it worked had been “tailored to the particular circumstances of time and place in Japan.”<sup>1</sup> In Iraq, they were not.

Though “location, location, location” was the real key difference, other factors were important. But before addressing those factors, the next question should be, why do Americans consider the occupation of Japan to be a success?

## Success in Japan

To some extent, the idea that Japan became a democracy, an economic powerhouse, and a loyal U.S. ally mainly as a result of prescient and consciously developed American postwar occupation policies is a holdover from the influence of an outdated historiography of Japan that also claimed Japan was the first non-Western state to successfully industrialize—during its Meiji Restoration—primarily because it copied Western techniques. The implication in such histories of course is that the Japanese, as a people, had no special originality in either political philosophy or industrial organization—that such had to be borrowed from the outside. From such an erroneous perspective, almost all of Japan’s previous history is thus ignored. In this distorted view, modern Japanese history starts when Commodore Matthew Perry opens up a secluded Japan, which begins to copy from the superior West, dispensing almost entirely with the cultural and sociopolitical influence of Japan’s past. Such a notion is absurd on its face, but has often been accepted without questioning it.

Similarly, in many of the initial histories written about the American occupation, the extensive influence of Japan’s own complicated, multi-faceted cultural and social history simply disappear. According to such facile histories, a new Japan emerges as a result of the occupation, molded by America in its own image, as if World War II had wiped the Japanese historical slate clean, and this new Japan only succeeded to the degree it learned from its occupier.

Fortunately, later histories of Japan have restored more honest depth to the record and have acknowledged Japanese agency in the direction of postwar recovery, giving better context when explaining Japan’s foundational steps toward modern industrialization during the Meiji Restoration as a precursor to Japan’s later success during the occupation and its aftermath. For example, while it is true that Japan imported technologies and entire factories from the West as it industrialized around the turn of the last century, it is more accurate to recognize that Japan had already arrived at a proto-industrial stage independently prior to Perry’s arrival, just as it was already experimenting and struggling with democratic concepts and institutions. Just as Great Britain had moved from cottage-industry production into factory production before the advent of the steam engine, Japan, too, had independently developed a proto-factory



(Images courtesy of Sonoma Valley Museum of Art)

The organizational mindset that would serve as the foundation for the introduction of heavy manufacturing and industrialization is reflected in artwork depicting the step-by-step process of nineteenth century Japanese paper making.

system, which it then later more effectively mechanized with imported machinery.<sup>2</sup> More careful historians have come to realize Japan's rapid transformation into a developed European-style nation-state at the end of the nineteenth through the beginning of the twentieth centuries was—while impacted by the West—not a radical change from the path toward modernization Japan was already on. Both nascent industrialism and capitalism were developing and flourishing from native roots independent of Western influence, as was an independent strain of democracy.

The consensus of current American-written history of Japan is that the Meiji Restoration, with all its

ramifications, was a fundamentally conservative movement, led by capable bureaucrats, revolutionary in some respects but merely the result of reforms in other respects.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Japan's industrialization was not sui generis. Though the Japanese did import ideas and material from the West, these ideas and material were interpreted and reworked by the Japanese, and textured by their own history and culture. Consequently, in the end, on closer examination, the West fundamentally has had only a relatively moderate impact on the managerial and cultural direction of Japanese industrialization and capitalism.

Similarly, while America's seven-year occupation of Japan did greatly influence the country, most of the successes Americans have a tendency to attribute to the occupation are fundamentally Japanese, not American, in origin. For example, did Japan emerge as a Western-style democracy? Yes, and no. Before World War II, Japan already had a democratic tradition of its own that had flowered, particularly in the 1920s, during what is known as the Taisho Democracy. Japan's democratization after the war is better interpreted as a return to, and strengthening of, this tradition after postwar demilitarization had removed the dominant influence of Japanese militarists, rather than the exclusive product of imported institutions and practices from the West.

Did Japan become an economic powerhouse primarily because the West taught it how to do so? No.

It is true by 1955, three years after the end of the relatively generous policies the United States applied during occupation to rebuild the country, Japan's economy was again producing at wartime levels, and by 1968 Japan had the second largest economy in the free world. While there are many reasons for this success—a subject that has its own extensive historiography—certainly the primary reason for this success was not the material assistance from the West, but the hard work of a well-educated, highly disciplined populace with a high degree of cultural habituation to community cooperation and



(Photo courtesy of National Diet Library, Japan)

A crowd assembles before the House of Representatives Gate, 5 February 1913. The Taisho Democracy existed 1912–1926 during the reign of Emperor Taisho in Japan.

responsiveness to hierarchical authority—prerequisites for successful modern industrialization. Some key policies, like land re-distribution to former tenant farmers, which produced a larger, more stable middle-class agricultural sector, were effected by occupation fiat. However, in the end, the economic miracle can be traced mainly on a consistent arc back through Japanese history to deeply embedded

region during the time period in general, to include such factors as the breakout of the Korean war and Western stand-off with Communist China.

Japan remains a key ally as evidenced, for instance, by it continuing to host a large contingent of the U.S. military on its soil. But, this did not come about because of any farsighted, consciously developed occupation policy. Rather, it resulted from a Japanese policy put in place to accelerate the end of the occupation. Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida agreed to allow American troops to remain stationed in Japan as a carrot to the U.S. government to receive a peace treaty that restored Japan's sovereignty. Further, another key reason Japan is one of America's most important allies in the region is Japan's development of its modern, professional, and capable Self-Defense Force. Not only was the develop-

ment of such a force not foreseen by occupation planners, but was actually opposed by many since it was contrary to initial occupation policy that sought to demilitarize Japan permanently. Indeed, many who created the policy for occupied Japan considered the demilitarization of the erstwhile empire the most important goal of occupation. Thus, this development, often cited as a key success of the occupation—Japan as a strong ally—was the result of spontaneous reactions to events and not the result of long-term planning by the occupation force. Indeed, it represents a 180-degree turn from initial, strongly held positions among those who formulated and executed the original occupation plans.



(Photo by Arthur Curllis, U.S. Army)

Industrial training experts watch as a light bulb machine drop bulbs down to other workers who sort them according to defects 25 January 1951 at Tokyo Shibaura Electric Co. in Tokyo, Japan.

cultural factors already inclined to foster the kind of cooperative social organization conducive to organizing heavy industrialization, of which the occupation was a part but not the main factor.

Were the policies of the occupation consciously formulated to mold Japan into the staunch U.S. ally it is today? Japan did become an ally, and it remains one. However, this particular development was arguably inevitable despite the occupation, owing to the expedient circumstances that developed in the East Asia/Pacific

## Reasons for Success

Again, after the close-to-the-bone histories written by those who had worked in the American occupation, more recent histories have stressed the continuities between wartime, occupation, and post-occupation Japan.<sup>4</sup> Such studies tend to conclude that the successes of Japan during and after the American occupation have more to do with Japan and the Japanese people than with the policies or actions of the American occupation. But, even so, the American occupation of Japan

was more successful than the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Although many points of comparison can be made, I will outline three I regard as key reasons explaining why that can be reasonably demonstrated by events.

**Psychological Acceptance of Defeat.** The Japanese, as a people, recognized they had been defeated long before the fact was acknowledged by their leaders. Most were starving, and their cities were being incinerated at will by their enemies. Near the end of the war, they were ready to lay down their arms—to do anything to end their misery, but continued nonetheless out of national fealty rooted in reverence for their emperor.<sup>5</sup>

In Iraq, the situation was more problematic. The United States defeated Saddam Hussein's armed forces, but many people did not regard those armed forces as representative of their interests or of national identity. As a result, many Iraqis were happy enough to find themselves out of their dictator's hellish embrace as enforced by an oppressive military, but had no personal sense of defeat. However, any initial relief they felt at the end of Hussein's rule exercised by the state security apparatus soon evaporated when it became clear the occupying forces could not provide security or civil stability. Consequently, the conflict had not been a war of the people as Japan's had been. The Iraqis were ready to start anew, just as the Japanese had been, but the fear they had previously had of Hussein and his thugs was soon replaced by a Hobbesian sense of insecurity due to lack of security, domestic chaos, and inept civil administration by the occupying force led by the CPA.

While working in the Office of Policy, Planning, and Analysis (OPPA) of the CPA, I was a member of a small staff responsible for the CPA's strategic plan. During the course of this work, I had the opportunity to collect insights regarding some Iraqi perspectives toward our occupation. For example, one Iraqi I spoke to in the OPPA said—while he did not wish for the return of Hussein or a brutal and merciless individual like him—Iraq was nevertheless insecure because it did not need democracy so much as a strong hand, a strong leader to hold dissent in check and enforce social order and stability.<sup>6</sup> Whether one agrees with that assessment or not, at that time Iraq was clearly deficient in leadership, especially leadership recognized, respected, and feared enough by all Iraqi people to forgo rebellion against the government.

**Leadership.** Moreover, below the highest levels, the character of leadership differed at every level when comparing Iraq to postwar Japan. The Japanese had been indoctrinated to revere their emperor as a god. Although starving, demoralized, and largely resigned that Japan's defeat was inevitable, the Japanese would have continued to fight if the emperor had not instead asked them to “endure the unendurable” and accept occupation.

By comparison, there was no leader of similar stature or influence among the Iraqis. The lack of such a unifying figure over the state was not Iraq's only leadership problem. After World War I, Japan embraced the idea of total war, requiring the mobilization of everyone in a combatant nation, perhaps more completely than any other nation.<sup>7</sup> The resulting human machinery of bureaucrat and technocrat able to efficiently administer the state remained intact after World War II—with the exceptions of the armed forces and War and Naval ministries—and was therefore available to immediately oversee and manage reconstruction during the American occupation if given the chance. As a result, going into the occupation, the U.S. government decided to minimize the troops required by governing through the existing and competent leadership structure already in place with minimal vetting to remove die hard militarists.

In comparison, the national and local leadership of Iraq's managerial class had atrophied during Hussein's reign and consequently, unlike what was available during the occupation of Japan, represented only the bare bones of an effective managerial class of Iraqi bureaucrats that might otherwise have been able to help manage the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Iraq under U.S. occupation. Further, in contrast to policies used in Japan, rather than vetting and preserving what remained of the former Iraqi bureaucracy under Hussein, the United States introduced a draconian program to remove all Ba'athist party members from government, which in practice meant almost all leaders in government at all levels. The subsequent de-Ba'athification program thoroughly expunged what remained of managerial expertise from the former Iraqi government, effective and otherwise, which resulted in removing from positions of authority the only real institutional expertise available on long established modes of Iraqi governance. This decision resulted in social

and political chaos followed by the painful necessity of trying to select and develop fresh, politically acceptable leadership at practically every level. In contrast to the relatively efficient transition to national administration and governance in the Japanese occupation, the process used in Iraq effectively stymied efforts to normalize and efficiently manage reconstruction and governance throughout Iraq for the better part of the following decade during and after the occupation.

**Military- versus Civilian-led Occupational Government.** Additionally, the method of leadership the United States employed was radically different from the situation that prevailed in the Japanese occupation as compared to that in Iraq. The occupation of Japan was overseen and administered through a U.S. military government. As a result, the American leadership was overwhelmingly military, which provided well-defined levels of responsibility and a clear chain of command up to Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP—an acronym that came to denote both MacArthur and the overall bureaucracy of the occupation). Under military occupational government, similar to wartime, soldiers were assigned in organized units, remained for relatively long periods of time under military discipline and direction, and were given specifically assigned tasks and missions as directed by the chain of authority, the progress of which they were required to report. One result was accountability and follow through at all levels.

By comparison, although under the Department of Defense, and supported by Combined Joint Task Force 7, Iraq's CPA was little more than an ad hoc exercise for the year of its existence.

My office, OPPA, worked directly for the CPA director, Amb. L. Paul Bremer. He was a decisive man, but he could only get to so much in his inbox each day as he tried to function in an organization that was constantly in flux with no clear chain of command and little accountability to him directly within each organization. While there were several capable leaders immediately below him, below them was a chaotic and dysfunctional organizational structure that provided

little continuity, and little real leverage in terms of actual power to get things done. Moreover, staffers—most of whom were political appointees of some kind—filtered in and out of the CPA with dizzying speed. Some were there for weeks, some for months, some

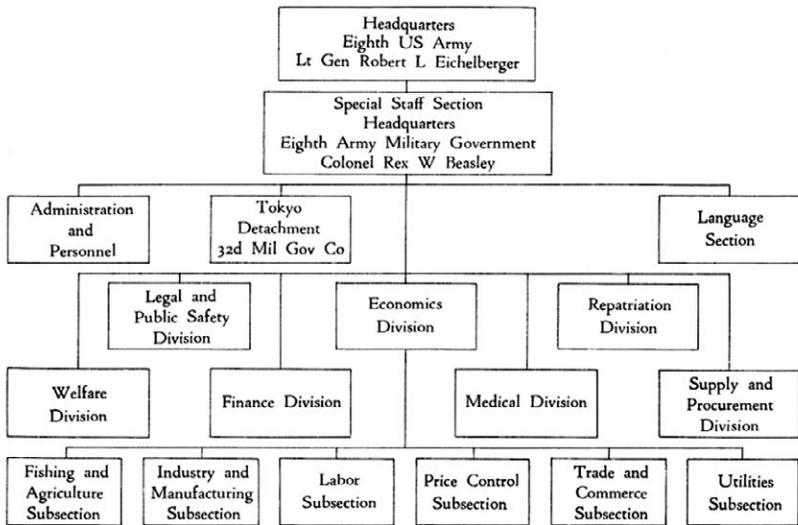


(Image courtesy of Flickr)

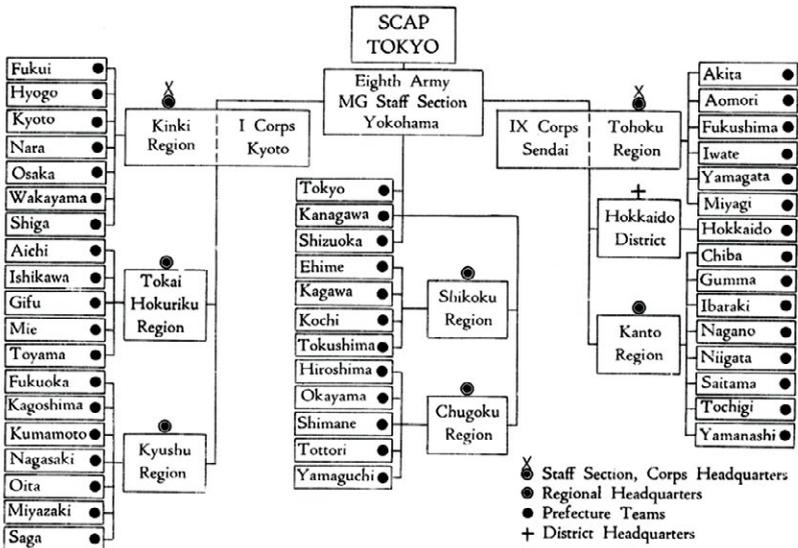
Demobilizing World War II Japanese Army veterans awaiting a train in Sasebo, Japan, circa 1945.

for just a few days. But very few stayed for the length of the CPA's short existence, and even fewer remained from the time of the CPA's predecessor, the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Activities (ORHA). Consequently, there was little in the way of institutional memory or established networks of personal relationships with the Iraqis.

As noted, even for their short stints in the organization, few staffers actually worked directly for the CPA. Instead, many reported back to their home offices without any direct accountability to Bremer. Consequently, there was no clear chain of command and weak mechanisms for assigning and enforcing authority. For example, one individual, who had somehow attached himself to the OPPA, had volunteered to come up with an antiterrorism policy for the Interim Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), which he committed to have ready to deliver to the IGC by a date fixed in December 2003. That individual also kept desks in two other CPA sections, and we did not see much of him in the weeks prior to the due date of the policy. But, twenty-four hours before the policy was due to the IGC, he



Organization of Eighth Army Military Government Section, January 1946



(Image courtesy of Library of Congress, Plate No. 66)

Unlike the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq, the occupation of Japan was overseen by a highly organized U.S. occupational force military government subject to military discipline and internal oversight. Moreover, unlike the CPA, the U.S. occupational authorities made the decision to administer the reconstruction effort through the already established existing Japanese civil service and local government structures that had survived the war after vetting such bodies to eliminate residual militarist sympathizers.

showed up and said he would not be able to get it done, and then he left.

We had no authority over the individual to require him to stay and deliver what was committed. As a result, we were then compelled to hastily write a draft policy, which we delivered on the promised date. Nonetheless, the lack of accountability and follow-through was not only an inconvenience, but was an embarrassment at the time. It was a disservice in terms of wasted time, but also was a failure to comply with a

promised commitment to deliver on time a well-developed policy to members of an institution that desperately needed it to proceed with establishing order in their country. Such failures only helped undermine IGC confidence in the CPA's competence and trust in the United States.

Failure to have the ability to hold this individual accountable to finish the project also compelled us to contract out for development of a more fully thought out and developed policy, which was an unanticipated expense and administrative issue that produced greater needless delay. Fortunately, we were able to obtain the services from a world-class terrorism expert whom we contracted through the RAND Corporation, and the end result was a fuller and well written policy though it was done well after when it had been promised for delivery.

Unfortunately, this kind of incident was not uncommon in the CPA, and was due mainly to lack of authority vested in the CPA to hold people accountable resulting in lack of follow-through, which was in stark contrast to the U.S. administration of the Japanese occupation. In SCAP, a directive to a subordinate was, in almost all cases, a legal order from a superior officer. Consequently, there were few problems with follow-through.

**Preparation.** Additionally, in a closely related issue, unlike the Japanese occupation experience, CPA staffers, for the most part, were not particularly prepared by background, education, experience, or personality to work in the occupation environment of Iraq. This highlights another key difference between the two occupations by comparing the strategic foresight involved in what would be required for a successful occupation. The United States began planning for the occupation of Japan as early as 1942.<sup>8</sup> For example, both the Department of the Navy

and the Department of War set up civil affairs courses for potential occupiers—at Columbia University and the University of Virginia, respectively. As time went on, other schools were added.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the United States also began to plan and prepare for the occupations of Axis countries after the war.

Initially, the plans for occupation were crafted by individual organizations: the Army, the Navy, and the State Department.

These first plans were not coordinated and thus often were at cross purposes. But, in the final months before the defeats of Germany and Japan, an interagency body—the State, War, Navy Coordinating Committee (SWNCC)—was created, which worked surprisingly well. It was also in the last months before defeating Germany and Japan that President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had wanted civilian occupation authorities, was persuaded that only the U.S. military had the large-scale capacity to take on the myriad tasks of occupation. Consequently, he directed the Department of War to take charge, which it did by establishing military commanders and command structure over the interim governments.

In contrast, though the United States had been planning for the combat operations for a potential invasion of Iraq for an even longer period than had been done for war with Japan—during the ten-year period after the first Gulf War—the pleas by various military leaders during that time to also stress planning for the post-invasion did not gain traction. Within U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), for instance, promising beginnings on such planning were not followed through.<sup>10</sup> As a result, few initiatives, such as developing a pool of regional experts through formal schooling to serve as leaders in a potential occupation, as was done in preparation for dealing with the end of



(Photo by Staff Sgt. Russell Bassett, 115th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

Oregon National Guard and Japan Ground Self Defense Force troops salute the U.S. and Japanese flags during the Orient Shield 2007 opening ceremony 9 October 2006 at the Sekiyama Maneuver Area in Honshu, Japan. Japan has emerged as one of the United States most important allies. However, this occurred as a matter of defense policy expediency and not by U.S. design.

World War II, were put in place. In sum, there was no similar serious effort to consider and prepare for the occupation of Iraq before the invasion of Iraq.

This was true despite the fact that, unlike during World War II, an organization to coordinate interagency policy, the National Security Council, did exist prior to the invasion of Iraq. But, in the end, it was not used as effectively as SWNCC had been to coordinate occupation policies across the government.

Finally, just as Roosevelt and others wanted civilians in charge of occupied territories, the Bush administration felt the same way about occupying Iraq. The difference was that Roosevelt was finally persuaded that only the military had the physical capacity together with the necessary command and control structure to take on the myriad tasks involved in occupations.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, this realization did not sink in for the Bush administration. Though the Department of Defense was placed in charge, it responded by organizing the CPA (and ORHA before it), without a clear chain of command in place and with no specifically delineated responsibilities nor authority to enforce accountability. As a result, the occupation remained a hodgepodge of loosely affiliated organizations with no command and little control throughout its short existence.



(Photo by Ahmed Saad, Reuters)

People shout slogans during a demonstration against the poor quality of basic services and power outages, and call for the trial of corrupt politicians 2 October 2015 in Baghdad, Iraq.

## Conclusion

Though the American occupation of Japan was generous and constructive toward the Japanese people, the successes of the American occupation of Japan nevertheless mostly stem from the formative socio-cultural characteristics of the Japanese people, as extensively chronicled in Japanese history, and the resulting efforts of the Japanese themselves. Prior to World War II, Japan was a developed country moving toward modernization that for nearly two decades starting in the early twentieth century tragically fell captive to radical, militarist leaders who took Japan into what the Japanese have since called the “Dark Valley.”

With those militarists defeated and discredited, Japan was able to take advantage of a battered but knowledgeable and capable Japanese bureaucracy at all levels, well-educated and motivated workers, and a favorable international environment to forge the Japanese “economic miracle,” both during and after the occupation.

Those factors did not exist in Iraq. It was not a fully developed industrialized country before Hussein’s dictatorship, and what infrastructure it had, for instance, was ravaged by Hussein’s wars, his neglect and, finally, the sanctions of the post-Gulf War decade. As just one example, while I served in the CPA, we

rarely met our electrical output goals. The national hodgepodge of electrical grids the occupation inherited from the Hussein regime was in much poorer condition than almost anyone had realized before the war. But even as we were consistently laying new wire in an effort to build the infrastructure for restoration and modernization of Iraq as a whole, the lack of a sense of civic responsibility in many sectors of the Iraqi populace and economic desperation combined with poor overall security to protect rebuilding efforts continually blocked progress; as new electrical lines were strung, they were quickly brought down by thieves who stole from them the copper wiring later sold in Turkey.

Also, prior to the war, Iraq did not have a reliable corps of public servants or state organizations dedicated to serving the entire Iraqi people, and did not have a population with a strong sense of national identity reflected in loyalty to the common nation-state. It rather was a state riven by long standing ethnic and religious divides. Nevertheless, either due to inexcusable ignorance or tacit dereliction in rejecting the counsel of experts who knew better, we went into the occupation with much less planning and coordination than we did for Japan. Moreover, as a final point, we spent much less time there than in Japan in

a committed effort to rebuild the national infrastructure and establish democratic governance.

Common sense might have indicated that since Iraq was a less-developed country with a less homogeneous population, and much less of a tradition of either industrialization or democratic rule, to achieve our goal of producing a democratic, capitalistic Iraq should have been recognized as a commitment that would require a long time—perhaps generations.

In summary, occupations require enlightened leadership, extensive training and education, and whole-of-government efforts, even in countries that may share a heritage of industrial development and democratic traditions where our desire is to return the country to a peaceful and stable democracy. However, the planning requirements should be seen as even more

important for less-developed countries without an indigenous democratic tradition or experience in modern industrial organization and economic management. Going into the occupation of Iraq, we ignored or misinterpreted our prior, extensive experience in the occupation of Japan (and postwar Germany), tacitly assuming the Iraqi people, freed from Hussein's criminal abuse, would spontaneously produce a stable, friendly democracy led by a corps of altruistic and patriotic Iraqi managers that we quickly discovered did not exist. For any future occupation duties, we have to learn from the past, pay attention to what area experts tell us, closely tailor the occupation to the present situation, avoid dogmatically using assumed templates from past experience, coordinate across the government, and keep our eyes and policies focused on the art of the possible. ■

### Biography

Col. David Hunter-Chester, U.S. Army, retired, has a PhD in East Asian studies. His military career included assignments in Germany, Iraq, and the Pentagon, and he spent fifteen years in Japan.

## Notes

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6. My observations of the Iraq occupation are almost entirely personal, from my time serving in the Coalition Provisional Authority's Office of Policy, Planning and Analysis (CPA, OPPIA), December 2003 through May 2004. Carol Gluck described histories of the American occupation of Japan written by former officials of

that occupation as "history written close to the bone," noting a lack of detachment, and I am aware the same can be said of my personal observations of the occupation of Iraq. For Gluck's comment, see Carol Gluck, "Entangling Illusions—Japanese and American Views of the Occupation," *New Frontiers in American-East Asian Relations: Essays Presented to Dorothy Borg*, ed. Warren I. Cohen (New York: Columbia Press, 1983), 174.

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