Strategic Insight

The Lessons of a Successful Military Occupation

by guest analyst Michael Bernhard. Michael Bernhard is an Associate Professor of Political Science at The Pennsylvania State University. His research is on the political economy of democratic survival, and the role of institutions in democratic consolidation. He is presently completing a book on the role of institutions in attempts to build democracy in twentieth century Germany and Poland. His recent work has appeared in Comparative Politics, The Journal of Politics, Comparative Political Studies, and East European Politics and Societies.

Strategic Insights are published monthly by the Center for Contemporary Conflict (CCC). The CCC is the research arm of the National Security Affairs Department at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Naval Postgraduate School, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

May 5, 2003

In 1945, following the defeat of Nazi Germany, the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain and France assumed control over the territory of a defeated enemy. With the inability of the wartime allies to devise a plan to govern Germany at the conclusion of the war, the three western powers embarked upon a separate policy that resulted in the transformation of their zones of occupation into the Federal Republic of Germany. This was a great moment in the annals of American foreign policy. Because the occupation led to the creation of a successful democratic state, military victory produced substantial long-term political gains. Not only was a great scourge defeated, but the coordinated actions of the western powers gave birth to a new and powerful ally. What lessons does this provide for how we should now conduct ourselves in Iraq?

First, the US Military Occupation Government moved quickly to share authority with local civilians in its zone of occupation. Even before the war was over, mayors were appointed in many German cities. Because of pressure to bring US forces home, German civilian administrators were given important responsibilities in running the zone of occupation. Faster than any other occupying power, the United States moved to hold municipal and state-level elections. By 1946, the German states under our control wrote their own constitutions, and this provided invaluable experience for many of the West German politicians who would go on to write the exemplary German constitution, the Basic Law. At that time, US officials acted on the conviction that the only way to create a democracy was to allow those under their control to practice it as quickly as possible. This is one reason why the American occupation produced a minimal amount of resentment it. Today, given the volatility of relations between American and the Arab world, minimizing local resentment of the US occupation of Iraq also could help calm the "Arab Street."

Second, though the United States was in many ways the prime mover behind the creation of a separate and democratic West German state, it accommodated the interests of the other occupying powers and consulted with those strongly affected by the political and military status of Germany. The initial moves to create an integrated economy and a healthy currency were taken in partnership with the British. The decision to create a German state was a multinational enterprise, not only involving the United States, France, and Great Britain, but Belgium, the Netherlands, Holland, and Luxembourg (all of whom had been occupied by their powerful German neighbor twice in recent memory). To reassure our allies, US officials agreed to measures that made the engine of German heavy industrial power, the Ruhr, subject to international controls. France and the Benelux countries no longer had to fear that the restoration of German sovereignty would pose a threat to their security. This not only bestowed international legitimacy on German redemocratization, but led to European economic cooperation that subsequently resulted in the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community, a precursor to the European Union. Today, taking the international community's concerns into account will ensure that US actions acquire

international legitimacy, help lift doubts concerning US motives, and may well promote cooperative relationships which can help build a positive future for Iraq.

Third, democracy in Germany was created from the ground up. Local civilian rule was followed by self-government at the level of the state. The eleven German states created after the war became the constituent units of a democratic federation. Federalism has served the Germans well. It has protected local customs, cultural differences, and diverse religious practices, while enabling the Germans to have a strong and effective national government. Federalism also worked to assured Germany's neighbors that the Nazi experiment with centralized state power would not be repeated. In Iraq, a federal arrangement can serve to ensure that its diverse ethnic, religious, and regional differences will not tear the country apart. Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds, Christians, Kurds, and Turkmen all have grievances toward and fears about the "others." The only way that they will be able to live together without a repressive state is if they have substantial autonomy to run their own affairs. At the same time, the only way for a grievously persecuted group like the Kurds to have the freedom to pursue their own way of life without antagonizing the Turks, the Iranians, or the Syrians, is through self-government in the framework of a federal Iraq.

Fourth, speed is of the essence in restoring full sovereignty to Iraq. At first glance, the prolonged occupation of West German until 1949 may seem to contradict this. After all, Germany was defeated militarily in 1945, and the Basic Law was not ratified until four years later. However, the London decisions to create a separate West German state came only in 1948 after a complete failure of four-power negotiations on the German question. Once that decision was taken, a West German state was up and running in a year and a half. If US military victory is to be seen as liberation and not an unwelcome occupation, the Iraqis need to be running their own affairs without US interference within one year following the end of the war. Speed is of the essence because there is no outside threat to keep the Iraqis quiescent in the same way that Soviet behavior in the East pushed West Germany into line with US policy.

Fifth, in the drafting of the German Basic Law, the allies, largely at the behest of Lucius Clay, the American Military Governor, delayed its promulgation by several months because Clay hoped that German federalism could be improved by modeling it on the American pattern of government. Clay was a good friend to Germany and an outstanding military governor. This was the only major mistake he made during his tenure as military governor. Luckily, the crisis it caused, which nearly sabotaged the writing of the Basic Law, only delayed its promulgation by two months. US officials need to allow the Iraqis to write their own constitution and forge their own institutions in ways that respond to their own visions of a democratic Iraq.

Sixth, the United States provided generous assistance for the economic reconstruction of the western zones of occupation and the Federal Republic through the Marshall Plan. While assistance also created jobs in America and helped to spur on the postwar US economic boom, American assistance provided much needed capital for the reconstruction of the German economy. President Truman and his advisors understood that the success of German democracy hinged on the success of the German economy. The Iraqi economy is in shambles due to the Iran-Iraq war, the first Gulf War, a prolonged period of sanctions, mismanagement and greed by Saddam and his cronies, and the most recent war. If Iraq is to become a democracy, its economy must be rebuilt and redirected to promote the welfare of its society. For this reason the needs of Iraqi people must not take a back seat to the interests of the organizations participating in the reconstruction of the country.

Seventh, denazification in Germany dealt harshly with the leadership of the regime. Its leaders were severely punished. Criminal organizations like the SS and the Gestapo were banned, their leaders imprisoned when possible, and their former members barred from public life for a substantial period. Though not by design, but more due to expedience linked to the outbreak of the Cold War, the military government did not severely repress all those who cooperated with the Nazi regime. Sometimes those who committed morally repugnant acts escaped with light or no punishments. Repressive regimes reach deeply into society. People make adaptations to them in order to survive, and act in ways they would not under more "normal" circumstances. This understanding should not be construed as a plea to deny justice to the victims of political murder or torture, but rather a call to be understanding of those who paid

lip service to regime for reason of careerism, self-preservation, or expediency. Many people with critical skills necessary for the rebuilding of Iraq were complicit in small ways in supporting Saddam's bloody rule. Those skills are needed for the postwar reconstruction, and their employment in that fashion may help to atone for past wrongs.

The United Nations' military victory in the European theater in World War II was preserved because US occupation of Germany resulted in the creation of a new democratic state that entered into a long-term and mutually beneficial alliance with the United States. The military occupation succeeded because US officials allowed the vanquished to shape and practice their own democracy in a relatively short time. Americans now face a similar challenge in the Middle East and the US occupation of Iraq must be as benign, empowering, cooperative, and farsighted as it was forty years ago in Germany. If Americans fail in this regard, Iraq will become a quagmire that will make a shambles out of US Middle East policy and will create grave doubts about American intentions and the efficacy of US power.