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Democracy-Building Will Be Tougher This Time

By Henry Butterfield Ryan
History News Service



We hear constantly these days that the United States will build a city on a hill in Iraq, a constitutional democracy whose example will change the Middle East. We built democracies in West Germany and Japan after

World War II, and that, people say, proves we can do it in Iraq. But the differences between Iraq and Germany or Japan are far too great to make them credible models for this task.

Both Germany and Japan had had important experiences with democratic institutions within memory of their postwar populations. The Weimar Republic's parliament, the Reichstag, governed Germany after World War I until Hitler seized control in 1933.

Japan developed a strong democratic movement in the late 19th century. It created a parliament with a house of representatives whose members after 1925 were elected by universal manhood suffrage and who eventually formed Japan's cabinets, much as in the United Kingdom, for example. The Japanese military usurped the parliament's role in the mid-1930s.

Although these democratic institutions were too fragile to resist the militarism that swept much of the world in the 1930s, we were not introducing new concepts of government in those defeated nations.

Iraq is a different matter. That country has seen incessant military takeovers, assassinations, political executions, and factional and ethnic rebellions since the mid-1930s. No one there can remember an extended period of guaranteed human rights, freedom of expression or the rule of law so essential to modern democratic institutions.

Both Germany and Japan had literate, talented, industrially and technologically competent populations, a huge help in building a modern democratic society. Iraq does not have them to nearly the same degree, although its population is relatively advanced for the region.

Both the German and Japanese populations were far more homogeneous than Iraq's, which has profound religious and ethnic divisions. And in the case of Germany, the people had close cultural, religious and historical ties with Americans, which eased the post-war relationship. Iraqis certainly do not.

Germany and Japan were devastated by prolonged total war, in a way we assume Iraq will not be, making them more prone to accept the Allies' democratic program. The Japanese emperor, who still had enormous prestige, even called for cooperation with the victors. Saddam Hussein, if he survives, is unlikely to follow that example.

Those who believe democracy-building in Iraq is a feasible U.S. war aim should remember that in Germany and Japan the process was not a quick one. Forming the new governments involved Allied administrators for a decade in Germany, work admittedly hindered by the Cold War, and for seven years in Japan. American officials today talk of a one- or possibly two-year commitment in Iraq.

After World War II the vanquished regimes lacked any influential sympathizers who could possibly have challenged us. Quite to the

contrary, fear of Soviet expansionism encouraged them to cooperate. Iraq, by contrast, has multitudes of sympathizers throughout the Muslim world. They undoubtedly view our invasion and occupation as oil imperialism, a blow against Islam and a major strike in support of Israel. In that emotional environment we can expect terrorist groups to gain credibility. Indeed, our increased security precautions at home it make clear that we do.

So even if, theoretically, we could build the complex infrastructure needed for democracy and the protection of human rights, we are likely to end up in a hostile sea with terrorism complicating our task. The Americans may well be seen as the new crusaders linked with the old imperialists, the British.

If it takes a leap of faith to believe we can turn Iraq into a democracy any time soon, it takes an even greater one to imagine that Jeffersonian democracy will spread simply by example to the other autocracies in the region. And if it did it would create a conflict of interest for Washington because many of those regimes are aligned with the United States.

The German and Japanese examples prove only one thing -- building democracies is not an easy job. There is good reason to believe it will be harder than ever in Iraq.

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