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U.S. Occupation of Iraq Recalls Failure in Korea

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SEOUL -- The spectacle of political confusion in Iraq today provides a window into the past. Rather than emulating the successful occupation of Germany or Japan as originally envisaged by U.S. policy planners, it is increasingly a carbon copy of the occupation that failed in Korea. And as Yale historian Paul Kennedy reminds us, "although history never repeats itself exactly, it should never be ignored entirely."

Just like Korea more than 50 years ago, the United States has literally walked into a revolution. Like Iraq, Korea was simultaneously liberated and occupied by the U.S. and the Soviet Union -- allies in the war against Japan but Cold War adversaries. As in Iraq, the Korean occupation got off to a bad start by retaining Japanese officials and their Korean collaborators of the colonial government, earning the enmity of the Korean population.

But by far the most egregious error was the refusal to recognize the legitimacy of any authority apart from the American military government. Thus, neither the Korean Provisional Government newly returned from China, the Korean People's Republic that greeted the Americans on their arrival in Seoul nor the network of People's Committee's that the Koreans had created themselves throughout the Korean Peninsula following the collapse of Japanese rule met with the approval of South Korea's new American rulers.

But while the Russians shrewdly packed the People's Committees in the North with their communist proteges, the Americans suppressed their activity in the South, leaving a proud people without any symbol of native authority. Instead of a government Koreans could identify with, the Americans set up appendages to the military government starting with a so-called Representative Democratic Council to advise the military government that was neither representative nor democratic. It was later superseded by a South Korean Interim Government and South Korean Interim Assembly; both lacked popular support and marginalized the majority leftist political parties.

The political caldron that was post-World War II Korea was always in danger of boiling over and helped ensure the failure of the American military government. Lt. Gen. John Hodge, the Gen. Jay Garner of his day, likened it to a volcano awaiting "a political upheaval for its own self-purification" and "in a pique of frustration" offered to resign rather than preside over it. (The only difference was that his offer wasn't accepted.)

For the remainder of the three-year occupation, the American military government struggled to maintain a semblance of political order, facing down strikes and putting down sporadic uprisings by the left and vigilante attacks by the right, the most gruesome of which occurred in Yosu and Cheju -- the latter claiming tens of thousands of lives. (The failure of these leftist insurgencies eventually led North Korean leader Kim Il Sung to adopt an alternative strategy of frontal assault on the Republic of Korea -- the rightist successor to the American military government -- which he unleashed on June 25, 1950.)

The problem in Korea yesterday was the fear of communism; the problem in Iraq today is fear of political anarchy -- the internecine political struggle between Shiites, Kurds and Sunni coupled with pockets of former Ba'ath Party resistance and an Iranian religious fifth column, all against the backdrop of a supercharged political and degraded security environment.

The safe way, as the Americans see it, is an occupation government of indefinite duration with Iraqis serving as advisers. This amounts to putting an Iraqi face on the occupation with U.S. civil administrator Paul Bremer now calling for a political council, much as Hodge did in Korea, while shelving plans for an Iraqi provisional government. Understandably, those who would participate are viewed as American "lackeys" without popular support.

Paradoxically, in Korea the Americans and Soviet had struck a deal at the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers for just such a provisional government but the plan was scuttled, in part attributable to the American fear that it might be a prelude to a Soviet takeover. Nevertheless, after three years of military rule, the U.S. was more than ready to pull out, accepting a Soviet offer for mutual withdrawal. The United Nations was even brought in to supervise and rubber-stamp the results of the 1948 election, although it was kept at arms length in its efforts to curb South Korean

leader Syngman Rhee's increasingly authoritarian rule.

Such fears in Iraq today are entirely unfounded. By delaying the establishment of an Iraqi provisional government as originally envisaged, the Americans are helping to ensure the failure of the precarious peace they fought so valiantly to attain. Let's not make the same mistake we did in Korea by smothering the country in an American security blanket, turning tail and having the U.N. cover the trail.