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***America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq*, by James Dobbins**

***Strategic Insights*, Volume III, Issue 2 (February 2004)**

Reviewed by [Douglas Porch](#)

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America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq, by James Dobbins, et al. Santa Monica, California: Rand, 2003. ISBN: 0-8330-3460-X. Pp. xxix, 244.

Nation-building—that is, the use of military force to introduce democratic values—is not an activity that comes naturally to Americans, the Rand team believes. The post-World War II reconstruction of Germany and Japan were anomalies forced by circumstance, isolated endeavors now vanished into a haze of greatest generation memory. The mission of America's military forces is warfighting. Post-combat stabilization and reconstruction operations are best left to the United Nations. Neither the Departments of State nor Defense place nation-building high on their "to do" list. So aberrational is nation-building for the United States, so unique and unlikely-to-be-repeated is each excursion into national rehabilitation, that every mission virtually starts from scratch.

All that must change, say the authors, because with the decision to invade Afghanistan and Iraq comes the requirement to assemble regimes sympathetic to democratic values. Nation-building, it appears, has become the inescapable responsibility of the world's only superpower (xv). Even the once reconstruction-shy Bush administration now shoulders the white man's burden. If post-war reconstruction is our fate, we best sharpen our nation-building skills—and fast.

The Rand team has assembled a quick primer—a "how to" manual" Ambassador Paul Bremer classifies *America's Role in Nation-Building* on a jacket blurb—that draws lessons from seven post-conflict reconstruction cases involving U.S. forces, beginning with the successful post-1945 rehabilitations of Germany and Japan, through the Somalia disaster, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo and finally Afghanistan. While fully acknowledging that every case is unique, the Rand team believes nonetheless that the past is a prologue that U.S. nation-builders can profitably mine for reconstruction policy and strategy guidance in Iraq.

And they are undoubtedly correct. Many of their conclusions are both obvious and commonsensical:

- Unless the United States is willing to invest sufficient numbers of troops and cash, and stick around long enough to get the job done— a minimum of five years—then success will probably elude us.
- It is much easier to run the rehabilitation on our own, as did MacArthur in Japan, than negotiate with partners who may have different priorities, as Lucius Clay was forced to do in Germany. But unilateral intervention is more costly and seldom results in as thoroughgoing a democratic transformation or leads to regional reconciliation.
- Unity of command in an operation is compatible with multilateral effort so long as all major participants share a common vision and shape international institutions accordingly. Large

garrisons of occupation intimidate spoilers, limit casualties, and lower risks in the long run. Regional hostility to a mission makes it "nearly impossible to put together a fragmented nation."

- Holding members of the *ancien régime* accountable for past injustices can give a tremendous boost to the process of democratic transition. But purges and trials draw occupiers into murky ground where the frontiers between guilt and innocence are difficult to define in alien cultures long on ancestral animosities, where compromise is not a cultural reflex, among people forced to make wrenching survival choices in difficult situations. Sitting in judgment should be embarked upon only if the occupier has a deep, long-term commitment to the overall operation.

This formulaic approach is all the more surprising given that the study's principle author, James Dobbins, is celebrated for his poor opinion of Bush-inspired approaches to nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan.[\[1\]](#)

A second problem is context, which the authors acknowledge but tend to give short shrift. Post-1945 Germany and Japan were ethnically homogeneous, boasted developed economies, and chose not to contest their rehabilitation—all nice to have conditions that undoubtedly helped the Germans and Japanese to succeed. Yet Rand treats the two losers of World War II as democratic *tabula rasa* scraped clean of memories of political parties, electoral experiences, opposition newspapers, and middle class sensibilities. "The pace of economic growth and political transformation in the German and Japanese cases suggest that the basics of democracy were put in place during a period of economic deprivation," Dobbins' team insists (162). But one can argue that Nazism, like Japanese militarism, was a recent and transitory experiment whose destructive consequences were readily apparent to Germans and Japanese. The authors appear deaf to the possibility that Germans and Japanese were, in large measure, recovering militarists in the process of rediscovering their equilibrium, rather than civilization's outcasts undergoing a forced democratic initiation. The benefit of this interpretation is that Iraq looks all the more like a blue chip prospect for a successful democratic transition.

One factor that greatly helped along the post-1945 rehabilitation process that was widely acknowledged at the time was "Soviet frightfulness." Defeat had taken Nazism and Japanese "self-sufficiency" off the table as political options. American impositions may have been humiliating and irksome, but, as Adenauer wrote in 1946, "Asia stands on the Elbe." The German leader lamented that Hitler had broken with German's European past, temporarily exiling Germany from the "West" where it rightfully belonged. Likewise, Japan was—and is—the most Westernized country in Asia.[\[2\]](#) In short, the marketing of democracy as a global political value is undoubtedly a noble project. It may even take root given the right circumstances. But it may also be true that some places—and some regions—make stony receptacles for this sort of political experimentation. The authors fail to consider that "America" and its allegedly universal democratic values, may appear alien to Islamic culture and hence face rejection. Germany had lively, if imperfect, democratic traditions reaching past Weimar into the Kaiserreich. After all, the Socialist SPD had been the largest party in the Reichstag in 1913, and they did not get to that position by keeping their mouths shut. Starting with the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan saw imitation of the successful nations, down to their political systems, as the means to respectability. And "successful" and "Western" were synonymous.

Dobbins et al. point to the relative success of Bosnia and Kosovo as evidence that even the backward Balkans can be redeemed for democracy and tolerance. But Balkan bloodletting unleashed by the breakup of Yugoslavia appeared criminal, desperately anachronistic, and thoroughly out-of-place on a European continent self-consciously toiling to bury a violent past. Bosnia and Kosovo were, in effect, regional outliers. By contrast, no Islamic Treaty of Rome exists to counter ethnic hatreds, pan-Arab nationalism, and religious fundamentalism. Nor is there a Soviet bugbear to frighten Iraq into choosing the "West."

"The record suggests that nation-building creates ties of affection and dependency that persist for a substantial amount of time," the authors conclude (xxv). This reading of "the record" suggests an American conceit that all transformations seek to imitate our democratic experiment.[\[3\]](#) It is certainly true that ex-colonial masters and their subjects are entwined in a love-hate relationship. But one may well

search in vain to find Indians nostalgic for the Raj, Iraqis or Egyptians who long for a return of the British, Afghans homesick for the Soviets, or southerners wistful for Sherman. (all of these are perfect examples of the use of military force in a colonial enterprise that was to transition these countries to democracy.) Western Europe and Japan nestled close to the United States in the Cold War. Now that the Soviet Union has collapsed, the deep strain of anti-Americanism has reemerged as a potent force in European domestic politics. Might the authors concede that some candidates for democratic reconstruction could view the imposition of allegedly universal American democratic values as an attack on their cultural values, or as a mechanism through which some "collaborators" stay in power, get rich, or escape punishment for wartime conduct?

A third problem is that the cases are chosen so as to eliminate those that might less easily fit the mold. Many will be surprised to learn that, according to the authors, "The post-World War II occupations of Germany and Japan were America's first experiences with the use of military force in the aftermath of a conflict to underpin rapid and fundamental societal transformation" (xiii) *Gone With the Wind* is apparently a slow sell in Santa Monica. The Philippines are ruled out of consideration on the curious reasoning that colonial transformations take several generations and hence do not make the cut. By doing so, the authors weaken their case, as the Philippines can be classified as a relative nation-building success. After all, most radical cultural shifts take several generations to accomplish. Cuba and Puerto Rico after 1898 seem to have been forgotten.. Vietnam as a nation-building exercise escapes consideration on the curious grounds that it was a "status quo" war, thereby ignoring the social and political transformations—the nation-building strategies—that occupy the core of successful counter-insurgency campaigns. Indeed, it is certainly possible to argue that Iraq, at least in the Sunni Triangle, is in effect a counter-insurgency operation masquerading as a democratic transition. So, the authors beg the question of whether the United States could have won Vietnam had we poured in more troops and cash, and were prepared to stay indefinitely.

This brings us to the \$64,000 question: does the past give us any useful insights about the future of Iraq? The authors admit that a country with no tradition of pluralist democracy; where authoritarian rule and settlement of disputes by force is the norm; where the majority of the population, split by ethnic, communal, tribal, geographical and religious aspirations, has no real tradition of political compromise; and where the middle class has been "hollowed out" by decades of Baathist rule, poses a significant challenge. The capture of Saddam was certainly a home run. But, as the *New York Times* noted, Saddam belongs to Iraq's past, not to its future.^[4] To continue the baseball analogy, we are still in the bottom of the third inning. The military, police, civil administration and justice system need to be reconstituted, restructured and purged of its most Baathist elements. Iraq's economy needs a thorough overhaul. In short, Iraq has a long way to go.

Not to worry, the Dobbins team assures us. A relatively efficient civil service and oil to finance long-term development gives the United States something to work with. But it is clear that pre-war assumptions that Iraqi oil would speed prosperity have fallen victim to the insecurity throughout the nation. The real issue, the authors believe, is not how soon U.S. forces can leave Iraq, but how fast and how much power should be transferred to the Iraqis and to the international community while Washington retains enough power to oversee an enduring transition to democratic stability.

This is a book informed by a faith that democracy is transferable across cultures, that context and customs are simply "problems" that perseverance can overcome, rather than potentially insurmountable impediments to success in nation-building. The Rand team also fails to consider the counter-insurgency dimension of the Iraqi situation, perhaps because they were writing before the current insurgency gained momentum. "What distinguishes Germany, Japan, Bosnia and Kosovo on the one hand, from Somalia, Haiti, and Afghanistan on the other," the authors assert, "are not their levels of economic development, Western culture, or national homogeneity. Rather, what distinguishes these two groups is the level of effort the international community has put into their democratic transformations" (161). Unfortunately, this argument is too mechanical and totally ignores context. It may be that some situations are simply beyond redemption.

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