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JOHN W. DOWER'S book on the U.S. occupation of Japan -- "Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II" -- won numerous honors, including the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 and a National Book Award. A specialist in Japanese history, Dower is the Elting E. Morison Professor of History at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Who wants to be occupied?

Shigeru Yoshida, the conservative politician who served four terms as prime minister of Japan in the wake of World War II, put the matter succinctly in a later reminiscence about living under Gen. Douglas MacArthur's "GHQ" (General Headquarters). Whenever he heard the dreaded acronym, Yoshida said, he immediately thought "Go Home Quickly!"

The Americans did not do anything of the sort, of course. The occupation of Japan began in August 1945, and MacArthur himself spoke about wrapping things up in a few years (he had his eye on the 1948 presidential election). In fact, occupation authorities did not depart Japan until April 1952. The occupation lasted more than 6 1/2 years, almost twice as long as the Pacific war itself. And today, a half-century later, U.S. forces are still there -- overwhelmingly and abrasively in Okinawa, and less blatantly throughout the rest of the Japanese archipelago.

If the occupation of Japan offers any lesson for the present situation in Iraq, it is probably this spectacle of interminable entanglement. It is easier to move the viceroys and armies into foreign territory than to get them out. Occupations and empires have their own inexorable logic.

In other regards, the occupation of Japan -- evoked so frequently these days by American policy-makers and pundits desperate for a rosy postwar scenario -- offers little that might be taken as a model for what to expect in Iraq.

Even Yoshida's disgruntlement suggests how different the situations are. He swallowed his bile and cooperated with the conquerors, and virtually all of his compatriots did likewise. There were no anti-American protests following Japan's defeat. Not a single incident of terrorism or violence against the occupying forces took place.

Circumstances unique to the Japanese situation help explain this. The basic structures of government remained intact after the war -- from the emperor on top through a strong central bureaucracy (shorn of the military) right down to the grass-roots level. Despite a broad spectrum of political opinion that ranged from conservatives like Yoshida to the Communist Party, social cohesion prevailed -- a sharp contrast to the religious, ethnic and tribal schisms that define Iraq. Nor did the Americans arrive in Tokyo, as they have in Baghdad, with a platoon of expatriates in tow -- apparently anointed through some murky process in the Pentagon to lead the way to a new political order in the homeland they left long ago.

The occupation of Japan was certainly not free of disorder and corruption. Wholesale looting of military supplies took place in the two weeks between the emperor's surrender broadcast and the arrival of the first U.S. troops. Much of this was carried out by military and civilian officials and big businessmen, with vast quantities of this material subsequently being diverted in piecemeal fashion to a voracious black market that flourished from 1945 to 1949. A good portion of the proceeds from this corruption made its way into the coffers of the emergent political parties, mostly but not exclusively on the conservative side. No organized gangs backed their trucks and buses up to the great museums, however. No mobs trashed the libraries. And no carpetbaggers flooded in from outside to cash in on a reconstruction boom.

Under Gen. MacArthur, the Americans introduced a sweeping agenda of reforms. The centerpiece of these was a new constitution that established popular sovereignty, relegated the emperor to the status of "symbol" and guaranteed a truly progressive range of civil rights including gender equality. The fact that the Japanese had seriously experimented with the forms and ideals of civil society before the militarists assumed power in the 1930s made people all the more receptive to such "democratization." Iraq has no comparable historical engagement with democracy.

A different economic model

Where economic policy is concerned, the Japanese case offers a particularly sharp contrast to what is unfolding in

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Iraq as Americans with a fervent belief in small government and big business move in to impose a style of capitalism that will spread at least some (and maybe a lot) of Iraq's wealth to U.S. companies.

The idealistic vision of "economic democracy" promoted in the initial, reformist phase of the Japanese occupation reflected the liberal philosophy associated with President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. In practice, this entailed both encouragement of a strong labor movement and enactment of a radical land reform that essentially dispossessed an entire class of rural landlords and transferred their holdings to small farmers.

Until the Cold War intervened, trust-busting and diversification of corporate share-holding was another occupation priority. Even the conservative MacArthur joined in, arguing that the concentration of wealth in the hands of the zaibatsu oligopolies was both feudalistic and a form of "socialism in private hands." Economic democratization was also promoted by creating a tax structure that bore more heavily on the rich.

Defeated Japan was also ironically blessed by what had hitherto seemed a curse: its lack of natural resources. No outside economic interests were clamoring to get in, as opposed to what we see in oil-rich Iraq today. Indeed, almost no outsiders wanted in on the Japanese economy in general. Until 1950, when the Korean War sparked a military procurements boom in Japan (a "gift from the gods," in Yoshida's phrase), the country's economic prospects seemed dim and forbidding.

Rebuilding from within

There was no Marshall Plan for Japan, and the burden of reconstructing that shattered land fell almost entirely on the Japanese themselves. This, too, was a blessing. In the wake of shattering defeat, Japan's military was abolished, war-related military production was forbidden, and a huge population of planners, capitalists, managers, engineers, and skilled and unskilled workers was forced to redirect its energies to productive civilian enterprises.

Men who only yesterday were building military aircraft turned their talent to developing the great "bullet train" railway system that crisscrosses Japan today.

Manufacturers of tanks converted to manufacturing heavy construction equipment. Large electronic companies like Hitachi and Toshiba moved from subcontracting for the military to producing consumer goods. Great companies like Honda and Sony rose out of the ashes from humble beginnings.

Economic reconstruction was abetted by outside help, but not of the direct-investment or direct-engagement sort projected for Iraq. The quality-control that is seen as so quintessentially Japanese today, for example, was actually introduced to Japanese engineers and corporate leaders in 1949 by the American statistician W. Edwards Deming, who found no market for his ideas in an American economy that was already humming without him. And after the Korean War, Americans took great care to provide Japanese corporations with access to U.S. licenses and patents that would hasten the country's reconstruction as a Cold War ally.

'Pro-state and anti-foreigner'

There are, however, even more striking differences between the economic policies pursued in occupied Japan and the agenda being advanced for Iraq by the Bush administration. Apart from the early ideals of economic democratization, U.S. planners followed a quite rigorous agenda that might be summarized as "pro-state and anti-foreigner."

Consistent with New Deal thinking -- and, indeed, consistent with the lessons of successful wartime planning, and with the history of developing economies more generally -- the government was assigned a major role in setting priorities and guiding reconstruction. Under GHQ's auspices, the central Japanese ministries and agencies engaged in economic matters became even more powerful than they had been during the war. It was none other than the Americans themselves who, in 1949, promoted the creation of the powerful Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) for the explicit purpose of expediting Japan's export-oriented productivity. (By the 1970s, of course, MITI was being denounced by Americans as a perfect example of Japan's unfair trade practices.)

It was also while under the eagle's wing that the Japanese government introduced legislation restricting foreign influence over the domestic economy. Optimal "self-sufficiency" was the key to such thinking, and until the bubble burst around 1990, these policies paid off handsomely for Japan. The economic power that so astonished the world in the 1970s and 1980s reflected this "state-in, foreigners-out" philosophy.

Spoils of war?

This is a far cry from the economic scenarios that dominate the news about Iraq today. Access to oil, lucrative reconstruction contracts and ideological agendas of sweeping "privatization" have become entangled -- and inevitably so -- with talk about the spoils of war. The perception of war profiteering is in the air, compounded by the taint of a crony capitalism that reaches into the highest circles of American lobbyists and policy-makers. (The U.S. government, for instance, recently awarded a huge reconstruction contract to Bechtel, which has close ties with the Republican Party.)

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The administration's hard-core "free market" ideology cannot help but affect what political allegiances U.S. leaders pursue or how they try to structure or influence Iraq's new government and laws.

"Occupation" is a many-tiered affair, as Americans are beginning to learn. The language-impaired viceroys who arrived with the victorious troops are but one level of this. Their chosen native subalterns are another, as are the foreigners to whom both destruction and reconstruction constitute a lucrative gravy train. And, of course, no matter what "regime change" may eventually entail, or when the interim American viceroys may leave, U.S. military bases are surely in Iraq to stay.

To a great many Iraqis intent on controlling their patrimony and promoting their own interests, this looks very much like the new face of empire. Small wonder that cries of "Go Home Quickly" have already begun to fill the air.

Small wonder, too, if -- unlike Shigeru Yoshida's muted mutterings -- these words soon turn to deeds.

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