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In a recent speech in London, President Bush declared that not only were we making "substantial progress" in Iraq but that "much of it has proceeded faster than similar efforts in Germany and Japan after World War II."

What are we to make of this murky use of history? The truth is that what is happening in Iraq presents a stunning and fundamental contrast to what took place in occupied Japan and Germany over half a century ago — and not a positive one.

Six months after our occupation of Iraq began, more than 180 GIs have been killed and well over 2,000 wounded. Iraqi casualties are even higher. No one seems to be in charge, and there is still little agreement about who should be.

Now consider Japan. Here was a populace socialized to think in terms of death before dishonor — an adversary whose greatest wartime innovation (after the preemptive strike on Pearl Harbor) was the terrifying kamikaze suicide attack. Yet in the wake of defeat, and in the midst of widespread misery, not a single serious incident of violence against the occupying forces was reported.

What is more, six months after Japan's surrender in mid-August 1945, Gen. Douglas MacArthur presided over an efficient military government in Tokyo that soon stabilized at between 5,000 and 5,500 military and civilian personnel devoted to "civil affairs." Esprit was high. Would-be American reformers were looking forward to being joined by their families. That doesn't sound much like Iraq today.

Half a year into the occupation of Japan, policies aimed at achieving "demilitarization and democratization" were well underway. A few weeks after MacArthur's arrival in Tokyo, the U.S. released its official "post-surrender" policy. In the seventh week of the occupation, the Japanese government was told, in lengthy detail, precisely what repressive laws and institutions to abolish.

One week later, on Oct. 11, MacArthur issued a famous statement calling for "liberalization of the constitution" and rapid implementation of democratization in five fundamental areas — emancipation of women, unionization of labor, liberalization of education, establishment of a judicial system that protected people's rights and democratization of economic institutions. Basic reforms were soon in place that enlisted the energies, expertise and support not only of American and Japanese officials but of a broad spectrum of ordinary Japanese as well.

Where the Japanese government faltered, moreover, the Americans were ready and able to take even more decisive action. This occurred most dramatically, as it happened, almost precisely at the half-year point on the critical issue of constitutional revision. In February 1946,

after it became clear that the conservative government could not bring itself to propose drastic reform, MacArthur's staff stepped in to write a model charter, guide it through several "governmental drafts" and then oversee its deliberation and adoption in the national parliament.

All this was accomplished amid suffering and hardship that surpassed what we see in Iraq today. About 3 million Japanese died in World War II, out of a population of about 70 million. Sixty-six major cities had been bombed, and perhaps a quarter of the national wealth destroyed. The sprawling Tokyo-Yokohama area was largely rubble — a devastated landscape that astonished the first Americans who landed in Yokohama and made their way to the capital. Millions were homeless. Malnutrition was widespread. Between 5 million and 6 million repatriates were flooding in from overseas.

So why did the occupation of Japan succeed? Here are a few reasons:

The Japanese surrender — after a protracted war — was not merely formal but "unconditional." Emperor Hirohito ordered the military to lay down its arms, and then he remained in place to endorse the occupation and its agenda. Political and administrative institutions carried on intact, top to bottom.

In this milieu, virtually no one — neither among the victorious powers throughout Asia nor even within Japan itself — challenged the legitimacy of the occupation. And "legitimacy," with all its far-reaching moral as well as legal connotations, matters enormously.

Unlike Iraq, which emerged as a construct of British and European power politics in the wake of World War I, Japan was a "natural" nation, never before conquered in a recorded history that traces back well over a millennium. It was also a nation that had been seriously "modernizing" since the mid-19th century. Historians of Japan invariably dwell on the many manifestations of "democracy" and "civil society" that were already taking root before militarists took over in the 1930s.

Even in the midst of unprecedented defeat, moreover, strong traditions of social cohesion held the ravaged country together. Though the occupation forces encountered an unexpectedly vigorous range of political and ideological ferment — ranging from conservatives through liberals and social democrats to socialists and communists — Japan was spared the religious, ethnic, tribal and regional fault lines that undermine stability in Iraq.

There was a different attitude on the part of the Americans as well. U.S. officials had three years to plan "post-surrender" strategy rather than rushing through it as they have done in Iraq. In 1945, no one dreamed — as happened this time around — that a small, makeshift team of civil-affairs specialists could just march into a complex, ravaged land with a few changes of clothing and install a government of handpicked favorites.

Japan was also spared egregious incompetence, blind hubris and blatant war profiteering on the part of the occupiers. No one went into defeated Japan thinking of it as a new Gold Rush. Although the nation lay in ruins in 1945, it was essentially taken for granted that the Japanese government and private sector, working together, should assume primary responsibility for economic reconstruction.

Until the end of the occupation in April 1952, it remained basic policy to encourage Japanese "self-sufficiency." Thus, in 1949 and 1950, the Americans promoted legislation pertaining to foreign exchange, trade and investment that provided a basis for governmental protection and promotion of domestic industries.

Here — to return to President Bush's speech — is the one area in which U.S. policy in occupied Iraq has unquestionably "proceeded faster" than in Germany and Japan after World War II. It has done so, however, by promoting policies and priorities that were simply unthinkable then. Reconstruction has been turned over to foreign corporations led by American firms, and sweeping "privatization" measures have been proposed that call for placing the entire economy — except for oil — up for sale.

As announced in September, these measures would cap corporate taxes, slash tariffs and permit foreign companies to not only buy 100% of Iraqi firms but also immediately repatriate any profits. Even the conservative Economist magazine, which supports this extremist agenda, calls it a "yard sale."

Viewed in a cold light, almost everything that abetted stability and serious reform in postwar Japan is conspicuously absent in the case of Iraq. The president's opportunistic use of history really does little more than expose the old drunk-and-the-lamppost syndrome that we see also in corporate accounting and intelligence gathering: The lamppost is being used for support rather than illumination.

Gen. MacArthur, staunch Republican that he was, must be spinning in his grave.

John W. Dower, a professor of history at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is the author of Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II (W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), which won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for nonfiction. This

John W. Dower (/authors/view/8467)

John W. Dower is emeritus professor of history at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His books include Empire and Aftermath: Yoshida Shigeru and the Japanese Experience, 1878-1954 (http://www.amazon.com/dp/0674251261/?tag=theasipacjo0b-20) (1979); War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War (http://www.amazon.com/dp/0394751728/?tag=theasipacjo0b-20) (1986); Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II (http://www.amazon.com/dp/0393320278/?tag=theasipacjo0b-20) (1999); Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor / Hiroshima / 9-11 / Iraq (http://www.amazon.com/dp/0393340686/?tag=theasipacjo0b-20) (2010); and two collections of essays: Japan in War and Peace: Selected Essays (http://www.amazon.com/dp/1565842790/?tag=theasipacjo0b-20) (1994), and Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering: Japan in the Modern World (http://www.amazon.com/dp/1595589376/?tag=theasipacjo0b-20) (2012).