Comparisons in Nation Building:
Korea & Iraq

by Jonathan Stafford

As the American experiment in nation building winds down in Iraq, a perception is slowly being created that combat operations in Iraq are largely over and that the United States is on its way from largely disengaging from Iraq. As the lull in violence in Iraq continues an increasing number of American leaders and opinion makers from both sides of the political debate on Iraq are declaring that the country is stabilizing and becoming a democratic state. For example US President Barack Obama has said:

> [E]very mission that's been assigned, from getting rid of Saddam to reducing violence to stabilizing the country to facilitating elections, you have given Iraq the opportunity to stand on its own as a democratic country. That is an extraordinary achievement.[1]

Some media pundits have even declared Iraq a "victory" and speculate that US military operations in the country are largely over[2]. Each side of the political debate has their own reasons for declaring stabilization and victory in Iraq. Despite the political calculations behind these views, should these claims of stabilization and "victory" in Iraq be heeded?

The best way to determine if Iraq is on a glide path to becoming a US allied democratic state or the biggest foreign policy blunder in US history is by comparing the country to other historical nation building efforts the United States has conducted in recent history. Often times the war in Iraq is compared to America's failed effort in nation building in Vietnam. However, many forget that America's efforts in nation building amidst an ambiguous and unpopular war actually pre-dates the Vietnam Conflict. America's first nation building effort amidst an unpopular war was not in Vietnam, but rather in Korea.

Historical Comparisons

Despite the many comparisons to the Vietnam Conflict, it is actually the Korean War where the US effort in Iraq most closely resembles. Of course no historical comparison is entirely perfect because of the unique variables involved in each conflict; nevertheless both Iraq and Korea share some interesting similarities that may very well help policy makers predict what may lay ahead for the future of Iraq.

One of the first similarities between Korea and Iraq is that prior to each conflict, both countries had been ruled by a minority that at times practiced brutal population suppression in

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[1] Major Garrett, "Obama Makes Surprise Visit to Iraq, Meets with Top Commander", *Fox News*, 07 April 2009, http://www.foxnews.com/politics/first100days/2009/04/07/president-obama-makes-surprise-visit-iraq/
[2] Jeff Jacoby, "Bush's Folly is Ending In Victory", *Boston Herald*, 25 March 2009 http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2009/03/25/bushs_folly_is_ending_in_victory/

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order to maintain their rule. In Korea the Japanese formerly began the colonization of the Korean peninsula with the signing of the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty in 1910 that was a by-product of Imperial Japan's victory over Russia during the Russo-Japanese War[3].

The Japanese during the colonization of the peninsula would implement policies that would effectively subdue the Korean population. The vast majority of important governmental positions were held by ethnic Japanese. The Japanese also controlled all the important positions in the police and military. The Korean language and culture was deemphasized with many Koreans taking Japanese names and swearing loyalty to the Japanese emperor in order to attend school and hold military and governmental positions.   These measures effectively turned the peninsula into a police state that allowed the Japanese to instantly crackdown on any Korean independence movements. This police state would exist on the Korean peninsula for the next 35 years until Japan's defeat at the end of World War II[4].

In Iraq the situation was very similar with a minority, the Sunni Baath Party seizing power in 1963. This power grab eventually set the stage for the rise of the Baath Party's most brutal leader, Saddam Hussein coming to power in 1979. Much like the Japanese, the Sunni minority implemented measures to suppress the Shiite majority as well as creating a cult of personality around Saddam Hussein. Also similar to the Imperial Japanese; the Baath Party would rule for only a few decades before being disposed of by a coalition military action lead by the United States.

In both Korea and Iraq the vacuum of power following the successful US wars to overthrow the established rulers of each country led to bloody civil wars that the US military was caught in the middle of. Each of these civil wars had roots for their hostilities already simmering below the surface before the vacuum of power made actual blood-letting possible. In the case of Iraq the religious & ideological differences between the country's Sunnis and Shiites helped lead to internal strife and in many cases actual ethnic cleansing in that country.

In Korea ideological differences also led to their civil war, but it was political not religious ideology that caused it. The political ideological differences between Communism and Capitalism proved even more blood thirsty than the religious ideological battles that continue to plague Iraq as roughly 1 million Koreans would die in the Korean War[5] compared to just 87,215 Iraqis that have died to date in Iraq[6]. In the case of Korea, these ideological differences still divide the country, where with Iraq the country has not been divided, but the differences remain to such an extent that senior US leaders have seriously considered dividing Iraq[7].

The extent and deadliness of each of the civil wars in Iraq and Korea was agitated by outside influences that hoped to shape the political make up of each respective country to their own advantage. In Iraq, both Iranian and Al Qaeda operatives prolonged the hostilities between Sunnis and Shiites with bombings, assassinations, and ethnic cleansing campaigns of mixed Sunni/Shiite neighborhoods. These provocations only furthered tensions on each side of the

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[3] Andrew C. Nahm, An Introduction to Korean History & Culture, (Hollym, 2004), page 175
[4] *Ibid*. p. 182
[5] *Ibid*. p. 255
[6] Kim Gamel, "AP IMPACT: Secret Tally has 87,215 Iraqis Dead", *Associated Press*, 24 April 2009, http://www.fox40.com/pages/landing_world_news/?AP-IMPACT-Secret-tally-has-87215-Iraqis-=1&blockID=273916&feedID=24
[7] Shailagh Murray, "Senate Supports Plan to Divide Iraq", *Washington Post*, 26 September 2009, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/26/AR2007092601506_pf.html

Sunni/Shiite divide that nearly brought the country to the point of no return. Before the Korean War both the Communist Russian and Chinese governments provided arms, training, and men to the North Korean Army in preparation for their attack on South Korea. With the opening of the Russian archives following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was learned that Josef Stalin himself authorized North Korean strongman Kim Il-sung to attack South Korea[8].

Probably the most interesting similarity between Korea and Iraq is how these ambiguous and unpopular wars led to sweeping political change back in the United States. Harry Truman was the American President that decided to get the US involved in the Korean War that began in June 1950. Much like with the war in Iraq, the Korean War was a war of choice where President Truman wanted to make a stand against the aggressive spread of Communism. President Truman's "Police Action" in Korea to this day carries the same infamous connotation as President George W. Bush's "Mission Accomplished" banner at the conclusion of major combat operations in Iraq.

Both Bush's decision to invade Iraq and Truman's decision to involve the US in the Korean War were at first popular with the American public as the US military appeared to be quickly wrapping up decisive combat operations. During the Korean War General McArthur was confident enough that victory was imminent that he made public statements that troops could be home by Christmas of 1950[9]. However, the war would drag on for over two more years when the Chinese decided to enter into the war. Truman's once popular decision had become so unpopular with the American public that he decided to not even seek re-election in 1952. Truman was the only US President to leave office with lower approval ratings than the widely unpopular George W. Bush[10].

The man that would replace President Truman, Dwight Eisenhower ran on a campaign of ending the war in Korea and his election would bring to an end 20 years of Democratic rule in Washington, DC. Within seven months of taking office, President Eisenhower would sign the Armistice Agreement that officially ended the Korean War. However, Eisenhower signed security agreements with the South Koreans that assured continued US involvement on the peninsula for many years to come.[11] Likewise Barack Obama came to power much like Eisenhower, by campaigning on a promise to end the war in Iraq and his election brought to an end many years of Republican dominance in Washington, DC. As promised, since taking office President Obama has announced his plans to withdraw combat troops from Iraq, but much like President Eisenhower before him, the security agreement with the Iraqi government assures US military involvement in Mesopotamia for many more years.[12]

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[8] Serge Schmemann, "Soviet Archives: Half Open, Dirty Window On Past", *New York Times*, 26 April 1995, http://www.nytimes.com/1995/04/26/world/soviet-archives-half-open-dirty-window-on-past.html
[9] "Not Home for Christmas: The GI's In Korea", The Harry S. Truman Museum & Library, http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/korea/large/gi.htm, accessed 30 April 2009
[10] Jacob Leibenluft, "Why Was Harry Truman Less Popular than George W. Bush?", *Slate*, 05 May 2008, http://www.slate.com/id/2190659/
[11] Jean Edward Smith, "How to End A War, Eisenhower's Way", *New York Times*, 11 April 2009, http://100days.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/04/11/how-to-end-a-war-eisenhowers-way/
[12] Peter Baker & Thom Shanker, "Obama's Iraq Plan has December Elections as Turning Point for Pullout", New York Times, 25 February 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/26/washington/26troops.html

What These Similarities Can Tell Us

As I have shown there are plenty of similarities between the Iraq conflict and the Korean War. So what can these similarities tell us about what the future of Iraq may hold? The first historical trend from Korea worth considering is that democratic elections are not necessarily a sign of nation building success.

Following the defeat of the Imperial Japanese after World War II, the United States installed long time Korean exile and independence activist Syngman Rhee as the leader of what became known as the Republic of Korea (ROK). Rhee would go on to lead the country through the Korean War and won 74.6% of the vote in a popular election held in 1952[13]. However, Rhee's resounding democratic victory was not a sign of a nation building success because below the surface Rhee's government was autocratic, inept, and hopelessly corrupt. By the next Presidential election in 1956 the public had become more politically conscious and Rhee was only able to win the election after the mysterious death of his main rival ten days before the election. Rhee was eventually forced to resign from office in the wake of massive public demonstrations in 1960 because he was linked to the tampering of election results that year[14].

In Iraq the current Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's political party received an impressive provincial election victory in 2009 keeping Maliki in power[15], but in parliamentary elections the following year accusations of fraud was rampant and a government has yet to be formed in the wake of the elections[16].

That leads to the next historical trend worth considering, which is that political instability is not always a sign of a failed nation building policy. In South Korea following Rhee's resignation the political turmoil set the stage for the military coup that occurred in 1961 when Major General Park Chung-hee sent his American trained troops and American made tanks to secure the nation's capitol Seoul and seize control of the government. Park would go on to establish a military junta and eventually declare himself President in 1963. He would go on to rule the country for the next 18 years[17].

Prior to Park seizing power the Republic of Korea Army had gone through over a decade of US military training, equipping, and mentoring. The ROK Army may have been woefully trained and equipped in 1950 when the North Koreans invaded, but by 1961 this was no longer the case. The ROK Army had become the most respected institution in the country due to the rampant corruption average Koreans saw in their elected government. So when Park seized power, the majority of South Koreans actually welcomed it.

Park's coup would have never been possible if it wasn't for the fact that the US military had been so successful in the reestablishment of the ROK Army following the Korean War. Though many in the US at the time viewed the coup as a set-back for South Korea, Park ended up being the leader Korea needed at the time. Park was a committed Korean nationalist who was

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[13] Yong-pyo Hong, State Security & Regime Security: President Syngman Rhee and the Insecurity Dilemma In South Korea, (Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), page 104

[14] Andrew C. Nahm, An Introduction to Korean History & Culture, (Hollym, 2004), page 285

[15] Mark Kukis, "Iraq Vote: Al-Maliki Wins Big, But Secularists Encouraged", *TIME*, 05 February 2009, http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1877427,00.html

[16] Heather Robinson, "Iraqi Liberal Warns of A Fixed Election", *New York Post*, 18 March 2010, http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/iraqi_liberal_warns_of_fixed_election_W1bwDDjC4sW6PykJkaIrHL

[17] Andrew C. Nahm, An Introduction to Korean History & Culture, (Hollym, 2004), page 288

responsible for pushing through the economic reforms that in one generation turned South Korea from one of the world's poorest nations to the economic power it is today[18].

Currently the Iraqi military is going through a similar transition. Just like the state the ROK Army found its self in after the North Korean invasion of their country, the Iraqi military was in shambles after the US invasion of their country. Once again similar to Korea, the Iraqi military has now had six years of US military training, equipping, and mentoring that has drastically improved their capabilities and confidence[19]. Currently the Iraqi military is being fielded and trained with M1A1 Abrams tanks, which ironically were the same tanks that spearheaded the US assault into Iraq six years ago[20]. Would anyone be surprised if five years from now these very same tanks are used to secure Baghdad in a military coup by an Iraqi General in the wake of political instability?

Here is another trend worth considering; today many critics within Iraq are suspicious of Iraqi leaders that have strong ties with Iran. The same was true when Park took power in South Korea; his domestic opposition was suspicious of him because of his close ties with Korea's archenemy Japan as well as his communist activities within South Korea prior to the Korean War[21]. During the Japanese colonial period, Park changed his Korean name to the Japanese name of Okamoto Minoru and joined the Imperial Japanese Army. His exemplary performance was recognized by his Japanese superiors by Park being accepted to and graduating from the prestigious Tokyo Military Academy, which was no small feat for an ethnic Korean at the time. He then went on to serve in the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II; stationed in the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo in China. After World War II, a disillusioned Park became involved in a communist cell within South Korea and was sentenced to death by Korean authorities when caught. Park eventually received a reprieve due to his cooperation with authorities and he was allowed to continue his military career. He would go on to serve with distinction during the Korean War.

The lesson to take from this is that Iraqi leaders that have close ties with Iran is not necessarily a bad thing. Park used his connections with Japan to bring in much investment from the Japanese government by signing a normalization treaty with them[22]. This investment was used to build the nation's first modern highway system that set the stage for the rise of Hyundai Motors in the coming years. The Japanese investment also created the nation's first major industrial conglomerate the Pohang Iron & Steel Company (POSCO) that to this day remains one of Korea's major industrial manufacturers by ranking fourth in the world in steel production[23].

Iraqi leaders with close ties with Iran could very well do the same thing by signing a normalization treaty with Iran in order to encourage investment within Iraq instead of taking a confrontational stance with the country. Can anyone imagine Iraq 25 years from now as one of

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[18] Seung-sook, Moon, "Cultural Politics of Remember Park Chung-hee", *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, Spring/Summer 2008, http://www.asiaquarterly.com/content/view/185/43/
[19] Robert Burns, "US Pleased, Worried, By New Found Iraqi Confidence", USA Today, 14 July 2008, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2008-07-13-2308528877_x.htm
[20] Joseph Giordono, "US Tanks Going to Iraqi Army", Stars & Stripes, 12 March 2009, http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=61277
[21] Seung-sook, Moon, "Cultural Politics of Remember Park Chung-hee", *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, Spring/Summer 2008, http://www.asiaquarterly.com/content/view/185/43/
[22] Andrew C. Nahm, An Introduction to Korean History & Culture, (Hollym, 2004), page 293
[23] World Steel Association Website, 'Top Steel Producers 2007", http://www.worldsteel.org/?action=storypages&id=284, accessed 17 April 2009

the world's leaders in manufacturing steel and automobiles because of Iranian investment into the country? Such a suggestion would have seemed equally ridiculous by many Americans when Park Chung-hee came to power in Korea in 1961; however Park through the normalization treaty he signed with Japan was able to get the investment necessary to make something that seemed so absurd at the time a reality.

Here is the most important historical trend people should learn from Korea; the biggest concern most Americans have today about US involvement in Iraq is how many more years will the US military continue to take casualties there? If one looks at Korea as a historical example, the answer is probably one many Americans are not going to find encouraging. Two years after the signing of the cease fire agreement that ended the Korean War, 641 US servicemembers would die by hostile action in Korea[24]. Additionally between 1966-1969, a full sixteen years after the Korean War, 211 US servicemembers would lose their lives in Korea. Most of these lives were lost in a period of increased hostilities due to North Korea's efforts to infiltrate communist agents into South Korea to foster an insurgency to topple the Park Chung-hee regime[25]. The effort ultimately failed, but it cost the lives of dozens of US military personnel during this period.

Can American leaders and most importantly the American public visualize a resurgent Al Qaeda infiltrating agents into Iraq ten years from now in an attempt to start an insurgency to oust the ruling Iraqi government? Even more so can anyone picture over 200 US servicemembers being killed in a multi-year effort to squash an insurgency in Iraq a decade from now as well? I doubt few American leaders and the public in general expect such a scenario, but as history has shown us they should.

Conclusion

For a variety of reasons, America's nation building experience in Korea shows that the current US nation building project in Iraq will most likely face enormous challenges in the years ahead that few people right now can even begin to visualize. As I have demonstrated, the challenges American leaders should be most prepared to react to and prepare the American public for are:

- political turmoil due to corruption
- a military coup
- Iraq possibly allied with Iran
- a restart of the insurgency
- US military casualties for many more years to come

The challenge for US leaders is to begin now to prepare for these contingencies, which will undoubtedly call for a long US military presence in Iraq of some sort despite much speculation to the contrary. Thomas Ricks sums this dilemma up quite well with this recent statement:

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[24] The Korean War Educator, "Part V - Deaths Caused By Hostile Action – Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and Offshore Korea After January 31, 1955", http://www.koreanwar-educator.org/topics/casualties/obrien/obrien_chpt3.htm#Chapt3PartII, accessed 17 April 2009

[25] Daniel Bolger, "Scenes from an Unfinished War: Low Intensity Conflict in Korea, 1966-1968", http://www-cgsc.army.mil/carl/resources/csi/Bolger/bolger.asp, accessed 17 April 2009

I think staying in Iraq is immoral, but leaving Iraq is even more immoral. There are no good solutions. The least bad solution is staying in smaller numbers for many years to come.[26]

Additionally American leaders are likely going to be faced with difficult political decisions that may be contrary to their stated ideological positions. However, such decisions contrary to one's ideology may be necessary because they are in the best interest of the United States. For example when Park Chung-hee seized power in Korea the US was pragmatic and worked with Park instead of ostracizing him as a dictator and abandoning South Korea. Supporting Park may not have been moral, but withdrawing from South Korea was not in the US's strategic interests in 1961. Likewise if a coup was to happen in Iraq, ostracizing that leader would most likely not be in the US's strategic interests either. The likelihood of having to support an Iraqi dictator is a decision that US political leaders should be prepared to react to now and not after the fact.

Likewise American policy makers shouldn't be surprised if another insurgency breaks out in Iraq a decade from now. The insurgency the North Korean leader Kim Il-sung launched against South Korea in 1966 was not initiated because Kim thought South Korea was weak; Kim launched it because South Korea was becoming too strong. With the US bogged down in Vietnam he gambled that then was the time to try and topple Park's regime before South Korea became too strong. North Korea's insurgency actually demonstrated the confidence the South Korean people had in Park's leadership because many of the communist infiltrators sent into South Korea to organize the insurgency were turned in to the police by the very people they were trying to recruit to overthrow the South Korean government[27].

If such an insurgency was launched in Iraq ten years from now by Al Qaeda or the Iranians this doesn't necessarily mean the Iraqi government is weak either; it could actually mean they are growing stronger and this is one last attempt to overthrow the government. A vigorous joint US & ROK military response to the communist infiltration in South Korea led to increased casualties over this period, but ultimately the defeat of the North Korean sponsored insurgency solidified the status of the ROK government in South Korea. It also had the side effect of drastically reducing US casualties on the Korean peninsula in the decades after this period. Likewise the US would be wise to consider a just as vigorous response to any future insurgency launched in Iraq as well. A decisive response to crush any insurgency would ultimately reinforce the legitimacy of the Iraqi government and in future years reduce the number of casualties suffered by US troops.

The challenges that Iraq will face in the future will likely be difficult, however the US experience in Korea provides a good example of what victory in Iraq can look like. The event that most demonstrated to the world that South Koreans won the Korean War was over was the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. The fact that the ROK successfully hosted these games only 35 years after the end of the Korean War was a defining moment for the people of South Korea. The games clearly showed the world that South Korea was no longer a poor and impoverished country, but a modern, affluent, and newly democratic country that successfully hosted what was

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[26] Michael J. Totten, "The Dissidents' War", http://www.michaeltotten.com/archives/2009/04/the-dissidents.php, accessed 30 April 2009
[27] Daniel Bolger, "Scenes from an Unfinished War: Low Intensity Conflict in Korea, 1966-1968", http://www-cgsc.army.mil/carl/resources/csi/Bolger/bolger.asp, accessed 17 April 2009

regarded at the time one of the best Olympic Games ever[28]. Even more significant was that the North Koreans could do nothing to stop the games from happening in South Korea. The North Koreans made many threats, but the world still came to Seoul in 1988 and the world continues to come to South Korea as they have hosted a number of international events since then, such as the 2002 World Cup and the 2005 APEC Summit.

So what does this tell us about nation building and ultimate victory in Iraq? What it tells us is that if Baghdad is hosting the 2040 Olympic Games then our nation building efforts have been a success and victory in Iraq can be declared. Until that day comes, US leaders best be prepared to deal with the future challenges and hard decisions that history tells us lies ahead to make something as ridiculous as the 2040 Baghdad Olympics possible.

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[28] "Modern Korea Through Foreign Press", Korea.net, http://www.korea.net/news/Issues/issueDetailView.asp?board_no=19568, Accessed 05 May 2009