

Do Not Neglect Culture

Feature Article

By Nassrine Azimi, Director of Hiroshima office for Asia and the Pacific region of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research.

The Rand Corporation recently published a study called “The Beginner’s Guide to Nation-Building.” It covers the basics with clarity and objectivity, defining the roles of the military, the police and the judiciary; distinguishing humanitarian relief from economic stabilization and development, explaining the complexities of governance and democratization.

But the book has almost nothing about what is clearly the Achilles’ heel of recent nation-building adventures: culture. No single chapter is devoted to it – nothing on the role of culture in countries being rebuilt and, just as reminded that six of the seven cases of nation-building initiated in the last decade by the United States were in Islamic countries, we do not learn much of the lessons of this extraordinary experience.

How, for example, did it inform the dispatch of some 120,000 mostly Christian soldiers to Iraq – a Muslim country and one of the most ancient civilizations on earth?

Neither do we learn much about what kind of cultural preparations, if any, were undertaken in advance of embarking in Afghanistan, also an ancient and proud land, with subtle values and vulnerabilities not readily accessible to the Western mind.

The fault, however, may not lie as much with the Rand book as worst a shallow and cynical exercise in public relations.

This was not always so. The U.S. occupation of Japan between 1945 and 1952, so often cited as a model for Iraq, was quite different. America planners then appeared to have asked themselves some hard

questions about dealing with a country they barely knew or understood, with which they had fought for almost four years, and which lay in ruins.

Shoichi Koseki, a Professor of Constitutional Law in Tokyo, has described some of the American preparations for the occupation of Japan, which started while the United States was still at war. Already in 1944 for example, more than 1,500 American military and civilian administrators were being put through intensive six-month courses at America's best academic institutions – Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Michigan, and Northwestern.

They studied with teachers educated in Japanese universities, learning not just about politics and economy, but also the language, and the workings of local government and the educational system of Japan. Ruth Benedict's "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword" was mandatory reading.

The U.S. Department of War, for its part, closely studied Japan's prewar cinema. Weeks after the occupation began; American officials were consulting with local filmmakers and writers about the use of film in the country's postwar reconstruction.

Certainly those were different times, and Japan was a different country. But the Japanese were probably just as alien to the Americans as Iraqis and Afghans are to Western nation-builders today.

Surely it is naïve to believe that it was easy for the proud and sophisticated Japanese – physically starving and spiritually exhausted as they were by the end of the war-to see the youthful, well-fed and self-confident GIs taking over their cities and streets.

**In recent nation-building operations,
Culture has been at best an afterthought.**

Still, by any post-conflict reconstruction standard of today, the U.S. occupation of Japan was an outstanding achievement. At least part of that success can be ascribed to the fact that in the midst of the chaos, confusion and sacrifices of a war, the Americans had the wisdom to operate on the fundamental assumption that knowledge and culture matter.

Last year, on a trip to Kabul, my colleagues and I found that our small guesthouse receive satellite TV, with endless channels. Many were dedicated to pornography. What a gift to the Taliban!

This is not a pious point. In nation-building as in life, perceptions matter, and missing the subtlety of the symbols and values of others is an unforgivable strategic error.

General Douglas MacArthur, the supreme commander in Japan after World War II had a clear vision of the need for respecting the dignity of the defeated Japanese. He extended this understanding even to his own dress – he is said to have frequently changed shirts in the torrid heat and humidity of Tokyo, understanding that living up to Japanese standards of cleanliness would reflect well upon his position and his policies as well.

Some weeks ago at a gathering in Hiroshima of managers of cultural heritage from Asia, the soft-spoken and thoughtful Afghan participant read to us the sign that stands at the entrance of Kabul Museum: “A nation is alive if its culture is alive.”

The far-reaching implications of these simple words should become the mantra of all aspiring nation-builders.

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