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Discussion of "Notes From Ground Zero: Power, Equity and Postwar Reconstruction in Two Eras"

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Discussion of "Notes From Ground Zero: Power, Equity and Postwar Reconstruction in Two Eras"

by Mark Selden

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I. Introduction

The following are comments on the essay "Notes From Ground Zero: Power, Equity and Postwar Reconstruction in Two Eras" by Mark Selden, Professor of Sociology and History at Binghamton University, which appeared as Policy Forum Online 04-26A on June 30, 2004.

This report includes comments by Scott Snyder, Senior Associate at the Asia Foundation.

This article originally published by Japan Focus.

For more information please see: <http://japanfocus.org/125.html>

II. Comments on Essay by Mark Selden

1. Comments by Scott Snyder

I think this essay strays far afield from the focus of the NAPSNet forum, which is focused on NE Asia--not Afghanistan or Iraq. The author also does not make any constructive suggestions or recommendations for dealing with the issue, only engages in attacks and critiques.

I guess I never took seriously the idea of Japan as a model for either Afghanistan or Iraq and in fact don't see a serious effort by the Bush administration to replicate the Japan experience in either country, a point that Selden affirms. If there was a conscious effort by the Bush administration to replicate the experience in Japan (and here I find Jim Fallows' recent Atlantic Monthly article on the subject to be an excellent investigative piece), Selden proves why such an effort would be fallacious. To that extent, I accept the article's relevance, although it is a considerable effort to put in for a point that I consider to be relatively obvious.

Surely, the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan (or for that matter, within the Bush administration) are much more complex than portrayed in Selden's essay, but that complexity does not come through. My impression is that many of the Bush administration approach and this essay suffer from the same core problem: an insistence that messy realities conform to one's own theory about how the world should work rather than taking the world as it is and working in that context.

Perhaps he might also have mentioned the relevance or applications from these cases for the debate about North Korea if indeed any of the cases are relevant. That would be most interesting.

2. Response by Mark Selden

My "Notes From Ground Zero" attempted to assess the analogy repeatedly advanced by the George W. Bush administration between the widely heralded American occupation of Japan half a century ago and the troubled American invasion of Iraq and the flawed "postwar reconstruction". This is an important time for such an exercise as one segment of American occupation has just been brought to an unseemly end with the transfer of pseudosovereignty to an Iraq administration that is bereft of legitimacy and has been left with neither the financial nor administrative resources to achieve any of the asserted goals of the American war and occupation: democracy, sovereignty, social peace, development among them.

Scott Snyder asks for constructive suggestions or recommendations. The single most important suggestion is that the United States reverse a course of reckless aggression that has brought destruction and destabilization, at great cost to Iraq, the Middle East, the United States and the international order. In suggesting that the most powerful analogy to the occupation of Iraq was not the US occupation of Japan but the Japanese colonial adventure in Manchuguo, I wished to underline the costs both to an occupied people and to democracy at home, and to suggest that national priorities that lead to Armageddon abroad, the descent into barbarism as illustrated by the routinization of political assassination and torture, and the dismantling of the welfare state at home merit reexamination. Are these issues of any relevance to Japan, now embarking as a watchdog on behalf of US interests in Iraq in violation of its Constitution? Are they of any relevance to readers interested in issues of development or democracy in East Asia and globally?

What policies make sense with respect to Iraq following the transfer of certain formal powers to the handpicked Iraq administration? What is most striking in my view is the continuity of the effort to sustain American domination of Iraq through the permanent stationing of 138,000 US troops supplemented by allied troops and US mercenaries, and the farflung base structure designed to support US primacy in the region. This, together with the dismantling of much of the previous Iraq administrative structure, the tying of the hands of the present administration by a series of neoliberal policies that deny fiscal authority to the government, and the transfer of many of the most lucrative sectors of the Iraq economy to American firms, has created a situation that ties the hands of any Iraq administration.

Policies that sharply reduced US domination of Iraq, including the systematic withdrawal of US forces and elimination of US bases, coupled with a stronger international presence, including the United Nations and European nations, both governments and NGOs, might create more hopeful conditions for relief, reconstruction and reform agendas that will be essential for the reconstruction of Iraq and a reduction of international tensions in a region that is super charged. It seems certain that if that multinational presence is predominantly military, the needs of the Iraqi people and society are unlikely to be met. Whatever the changes, we should not of course expect peace and development to reign any time soon. What can be said with confidence is that the US has embarked on a course that has brought disaster to Iraq and the region and disgrace to the United States. The Bush administration's attempt to hide the fact that fundamental elements of its flawed policies remain in place seems certain to add fuel to the fire.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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