

# Winning the peace

It's only by closely studying the past that our present military leaders can secure the future of post-war regions, says **LORD PADDY ASHDOWN**

Iraq is a poor advertisement for intervention by the international community. The level of violence there has been horrendous since the fall of Saddam Hussein and daily life remains enormously difficult for most citizens. For the most part, the presence of foreign troops and administrators is widely resented. The tragedy is that the Americans and their allies had a huge wealth of experience from other countries on which to draw and enjoyed wide popularity among Iraqis at the start of the occupation. But they ignored every past lesson, lost the golden hour after the fall of Saddam's statue and with it the support of the people they were trying to help.

For BBC World Service, I have been looking at the common threads that run through international interventions in four very different countries and considering what we can learn from the past. I am convinced that, despite the disaster of Iraq, the international community has an increasingly important role in the world's hotspots. In an ever more interdependent world, bodies like the UN and the EU are inevitably being drawn into helping to resolve conflicts and rebuild shattered nations. And despite the high-profile failures, we do know how to do this; we have succeeded in post-conflict reconstruction more often than we have failed and the world is a safer place because of it. One estimate is that intervention by the UN has halved the number of wars and more than halved the number of casualties in conflicts round the world since the end of the Cold War.

## EARLY LESSONS

The allied occupation of Germany after World War II – particularly in the British zone – held a great many lessons for the future. The first instinct was to punish the Germans; British troops were forbidden even to speak to civil-

ians. Huge swathes of German industry were dismantled. And the authorities embarked on a vast programme of denazification, removing tens of thousands from their jobs. Germans were heard saying that they looked forward to the Fifth Reich, because the Fourth was as bad as the Third.

The policy was disastrous, and Germany was only saved because of the Russian threat. The Allies soon came to realise that they needed Germany as a partner against the USSR. Denazification was abandoned. The Allies reversed their policy of dismantling German factories and replaced it with the Marshall Plan and a strenuous programme to encourage German economic growth. By 1949, Germany was on the way to its economic miracle.

## A CATASTROPHIC SUCCESS

The lesson was clear. You cannot run a country if you remove most of the people with administrative experience. You must do everything in your power, by harnessing the efforts of the local population, to restore basic services like water and electricity, so that people can see that their lives are being improved.



→ People watch, among the Berlin rubble, an American cargo plane arrive with food and supplies



← Iraqi men are questioned by US paratroopers in the village of Jadida during a search for weapons caches

None of this was done in Iraq where the war has been described as a catastrophic success. Victory was won so quickly that very little thought and almost no planning was devoted to managing the peace.

Officials at the US State Department had done some preparation, but a matter of months before the war started they were cut out of the loop and reconstruction was entrusted to the Department of Defense. Those on the ground lacked any experience of the tasks before them and, in turn, were micromanaged from Washington by officials who knew even less.

Debaathification mirrored the early mistakes of denazification. The whole Iraqi army was disbanded. The result was a double whammy. Not only was there a dangerous security vacuum, rapidly filled by the looters and the insurgents but there were also large numbers of unemployed ex-army officers, smarting from the loss of prestige and income, all too happy to join the opponents of the new order.

After such conflict, the priorities should be first security, second restoring services and third getting the economy going as fast as possible.

All require planning and substantial resources, often a great deal more than needed for the war itself. Yet time and time again, the international community has found itself effectively running a country with no plans in place.

## CAREFUL PREPARATION

There was another fundamental mistake in Iraq. For far too long, the US failed to bring in neighbouring states like Syria and Iran, which had an enormous stake in regional stability. Yet 12 years earlier, the UN had been successful in stabilising El Salvador after an exceptionally bloody civil war in large part by involving neighbouring states who were desperate that the conflict did not spill over its borders onto their soil. Again, the lessons were ignored.

So the conclusion from Iraq is not that the international community should never intervene again. It is rather that future interveners should study history and prepare carefully.

And these are the lessons of history: leave your prejudices at home, keep your ambitions low, have enough resources to do the job, do not lose the golden hour, make security your first priority, involve the neighbours and remember that post-conflict reconstruction is not for the faint-hearted; it requires toughness, strategic patience and a willingness to stay until the task is finished. ■



● **LORD ASHDOWN** presents a four-part series about the role of the international community in rebuilding shattered countries. Lord Ashdown, former High Representative in Bosnia-

Herzegovina, is the author of the book *Swords And Ploughshares* published by Orion books. [bbcworldservice.com/programmes](http://bbcworldservice.com/programmes)

**Despite the high-profile failures, we have succeeded in post-conflict reconstruction more often than we have failed and the world is a safer place because of it**