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Occupational Hazard

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Occupational Hazard

Abstract

"The Other War" describes how the patrols, supply convoys, checkpoints, raids, and arrests, which make up the daily routines of U.S. soldiers in Iraq, sometimes involve degrading and abusive treatment of Iraqi civilians. Through interviews with some of those soldiers, the article portrays the everyday tragedy of the Iraq war and demonstrates how the very policies used to "secure" the country are creating greater insecurity and sparking Iraqi resentment of the occupation. The authors' main point is that such abuses are inevitable under what they call "misguided and brutal colonial wars and occupations" like Iraq, "the French occupation of Algeria... the American war in Vietnam and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory." They hope to convince us that such "colonial" occupations are wrong because they inevitably lead to abuses like those they document.

Keywords

Human rights, Iraq, United States, War, Soldiers, Civilians, Humanitarian aid

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Occupational Hazard

by Michael Goodhart

“The Other War” describes how the patrols, supply convoys, checkpoints, raids, and arrests, which make up the daily routines of U.S. soldiers in Iraq, sometimes involve degrading and abusive treatment of Iraqi civilians. Through interviews with some of those soldiers, the article portrays the everyday tragedy of the Iraq war and demonstrates how the very policies used to “secure” the country are creating greater insecurity and sparking Iraqi resentment of the occupation. The authors’ main point is that such abuses are inevitable under what they call “misguided and brutal colonial wars and occupations” like Iraq, “the French occupation of Algeria... the American war in Vietnam and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory.” They hope to convince us that such “colonial” occupations are wrong because they inevitably lead to abuses like those they document.

I am persuaded that occupation goes hand-in-hand with abuse, a point I will return to in a moment. I am not persuaded, however, that this connection is limited to “colonial” occupations. If this is correct, it has sobering implications for peacekeeping missions and humanitarian interventions.

The authors rightly condemn the abhorrent actions described in the article, which might constitute [war crimes](#). Indeed, from a normative political theorist’s point of view these actions are so clearly wrong that they do not require additional commentary. I also think the authors are right to condemn the larger [fiasco](#) that is the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Though I wonder why, in their view, only liberal democratic countries make such blunders—perhaps the Soviet invasion of [Afghanistan](#), the Russian destruction of [Chechnya](#), the Indonesian occupation of [East Timor](#), the ongoing Chinese colonization of [Tibet](#), and other examples merely slipped their minds.

Turning then to the wider implications, the authors contend that occupation is morally hazardous because it creates extreme security risks to soldiers while simultaneously giving them extraordinary power. Occupation is risky for many reasons, including the wide availability of [small arms](#), the ease of assembling deadly [remote explosive devices](#), the proliferation of sophisticated communication technology, and the difficulty of differentiating friend from foe among the population. It is fairly easy to understand how this vulnerability creates stress that—combined with soldiers’ frustration at being unable to identify and confront the enemy and their almost limitless and largely unaccountable authority—can lead the troops to engage in cruel and degrading treatment of civilians. That does not make such abuses or the policies that condone them justifiable—it simply makes them predictable.

The main point is that the types of abuse chronicled in “The Other War” are almost inevitable side-effects of occupation (they result from what we might call the *structural* characteristics of occupation). If that is correct, then all occupations, not just “colonial” ones, are likely to cause similar problems. After all, peacekeeping and humanitarian missions often look a lot like “colonial” occupation on the ground, with raids, arrests, checkpoints, shadowy insurgents, and all the rest. These similarities will only grow as peacekeeping increasingly morphs into peace-making (peacekeepers have in fact come under intense attack in theaters like Sudan, Lebanon, East Timor, and the Balkans in recent years).

Of course, bad policies—such as telling soldiers that the “Geneva Conventions don't exist at all in Iraq, and that's in writing if you want to see it”—can increase the likelihood of abuse, as can racism and cultural ignorance. Yet even if racism, ignorance, and bad policy are more likely in “colonial” occupations (a big “if”), the structural problems with occupation are still likely to lead to some abusive behavior. Besides, it seems naïve to imagine that soldiers participating in “good” missions will necessarily behave better than their “colonial” counterparts, as a recent [U.N. report](#) on sexual misconduct by peacekeepers reminds us.

If my argument is correct, humanitarian and peacekeeping missions will predictably result in cruel and degrading treatment of civilians by occupiers. This conclusion will upset those who admire, as I do, the brave and important work done by soldiers struggling to make and keep peace and aid the distressed parts of the world. But it is worth pointing out why it is upsetting: It makes such missions harder to justify.

My point in making this argument is not to discourage peacekeeping or humanitarian missions. It is to highlight that we—citizens, policy-makers, human rights advocates—have a responsibility to grapple with the structural hazards inherent even in “good” occupations and to minimize the risks to civilians and soldiers alike. It is at least possible that the measures necessary to provide reasonable security for occupying soldiers entail an unacceptable level of risk to civilians. It is also possible that while bad policies might worsen the problem, even good policies might be insufficient to reduce the risk to civilians to “acceptable” levels (whatever that might mean). These possibilities must be taken seriously, for the sake of those who humanitarian missions are intended to help and for the sake of the soldiers we ask to help them. This is especially important as demands for intervention in dangerous and ongoing conflicts increase.

“The Other War” gives the impression that the problem with the occupation of Iraq is its “colonial” character. Yet the article itself suggests that much of the problem with the occupation of Iraq is simply that it is an occupation. Ending the Iraq war is an important policy priority, but distaste for current American policy and disgust with reported abuses should not disguise the hazards inherent in occupation. Addressing these hazards is itself an urgent priority.

Michael Goodhart is Associate Professor of Political Science and Women's Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. His research focuses on democratic theory and human rights, especially in the context of globalization. He has published on these subjects in Human Rights Quarterly, Perspectives on Politics, the Journal of Human Rights, Polity, and elsewhere. Goodhart's first book, Democracy as Human Rights: Freedom and Equality in the Age of Globalization, was published by Routledge in 2005. He is book review editor at Polity and a past president of the APSA organized section on human rights. For more information visit www.pitt.edu/~goodhart.