Iraq and Vietnam: Some Unsettling Parallels

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For the generations that experienced the Vietnam War, the current conflict in Iraq frequently brings about a sense of déja vu. True, there are some significant differences between the two episodes; contrary to the cliché, history never truly repeats itself. Yet there are also an alarming number of similarities.

One major difference is that US forces in Vietnam had to fight against well-organized guerrilla forces (the Vietcong) and, as the war continued, against even better trained and organized units of North Vietnam's military. Both the Vietcong and their North Vietnamese masters had a clear-cut political objective—to unify Vietnam under communist rule.

The conflict in Iraq is much less well defined. Adversaries of the US occupation force include the remnant of Baathist supporters of Saddam Hussein's regime, Sunni nationalists (who may have disliked Saddam but fear that Iraq will either fragment or come under Shiite domination), various Shiite militias and death squads, the al Qaeda organization in Iraq, and assorted criminal gangs. All have their own agendas, and those agendas are often bewildering to American military commanders. The conflict in Iraq resembles a Hobbesian struggle of all against all rather than the kind of conventional insurgency the United States encountered in Vietnam. Outright terrorism (attacks on innocent civilians) plays a greater and more prominent role in the Iraq struggle than it did during the Vietnam War, as well.

A second major difference concerns the scope of the mission. At Vietnam's peak, the United States deployed more than 530,000 troops there. The highest number in Iraq is the current figure (160,000), following President

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Bush's much-touted "surge" of forces to secure Baghdad and Anbar province. The number of casualties in Iraq reflects that smaller-scale commitment. The Vietnam War cost the lives of more than fifty-eight thousand troops in twelve years; the total for four years of the Iraq war is just under thirty-five hundred.[1]

Yet another significant difference is that all of the American troops serving in Iraq are volunteers, whereas in Vietnam a large portion were draftees. That difference not only puts moral considerations into an altered context (since all the troops in Iraq presumably knew and accepted the risk of combat when they joined the military), it also changes the political context. The absence of a military draft is almost certainly one reason why there have been few large and angry antiwar demonstrations on America's college campuses, in marked contrast to the Vietnam era. Most American youth are simply not exposed to the dangers of the Iraq war.

Despite such important differences, there are enough similarities in the two conflicts to warrant the sense of déja vu. In a number of troubling respects, both generations of US officials shared a set of dubious assumptions and made the same types of policy errors.

One major assumption in the early stages of the conflicts was that victory would be relatively easy. In the case of Vietnam, the US effort started out with economic aid and the dispatch of a few hundred military advisers. At a May 1962 press conference shortly after a trip to South Vietnam, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara affirmed that he had "seen nothing but progress and hopeful indications of further progress in the future," adding "every quantitative measure we have shows we're winning this war."[2] A year later, McNamara authorized the Department of Defense to announce that "we have turned the corner in Vietnam." And General Paul Harkins, commander of US forces in Thailand and South Vietnam, claimed that the war could be won "within a year."[3] America's military involvement in that country would go on for nearly another decade.

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1. The raw figures tend to exaggerate the extent of the differences in casualty rates, however. Battlefield medical care is much better in the Iraq conflict than in previous wars, including Vietnam. If the medical capabilities of the Vietnam era were present in Iraq, the total number of fatalities would be eight thousand to ten thousand, not thirty-five hundred.
2. Quoted in Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: First Vintage, 1989), 289–90.
3. Quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy and the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 982.

Years later, US officials were still making optimistic pronouncements, despite the falsification of their previous predictions. In July 1967, General William Westmoreland, the commander of US forces in Vietnam, assured McNamara that "North Vietnam is paying a tremendous price with nothing to show for it in return. The war is not a stalemate. We are winning, slowly but steadily."[4] In November, Westmoreland told reporters, "I am absolutely certain that whereas in 1965 the enemy was winning, today he is certainly losing."[5] Less than three months later, communist forces launched the Tet offensive, their largest attack of the war.

US overconfidence regarding Iraq was epitomized by the spectacular visual of President Bush landing on deck of the USS *Abraham Lincoln* and then addressing the troops beneath a large "Mission Accomplished" banner. Kenneth Adelman, head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency during the Reagan years, famously predicted that the mission would be "a cakewalk." In December 2003, prowar syndicated columnist Mark Steyn predicted that "in a year's time Baghdad and Basra will have a lower crime rate than most London boroughs."[6] Furthermore, there would be "no widespread resentment at or resistance of the Western military presence." Pentagon officials assumed that US troop levels in Iraq would be down to no more than sixty thousand, and perhaps as few as twenty-five thousand to thirty thousand, by the end of 2003.[7]

As in Vietnam, events in Iraq soon discredited the easy victory scenarios.[8] Yet the optimists remained tenacious, clinging to their predictions of imminent victory in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary.

In May 2005, Vice President Dick Cheney asserted confidently that the Iraqi insurgency was in its "last throes."[9] When the Iraqi parliament

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4. Quoted in "Taking Stock," *Time*, 14 July 1967, www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,899625,00.html.

5. Quoted in "1967: Westmoreland Tells Media the Communists Are Losing," History.com, www/history.com/tdih.do?action=tdihArticleCategory&id=1501.

6. Mark Steyn, "Movers and Shakers Have Moved On to the Next 'Disaster,'" *Daily Telegraph*, 4 December 2003.

7. Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 248.

8. See Ted Galen Carpenter, "Escaping the Trap: Why the United States Must Leave Iraq," Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 588, 14 February 2007, 4–6.

9. "Interview with Dick Cheney, Lynne Cheney," *Larry King Live*, CNN, 30 May 2005, transcript, 4.

approved the Islamist-leaning government of Nouri al-Maliki in April 2006, the editors of the *National Review* hailed the development as the triumph of democracy and stated that the "purveyors of doom now have some explaining to do."[10] In spring 2007, Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte was still stressing that many things were "going right" in Iraq.[11]

Similarly, even as the optimistic pronouncements about Vietnam continued, US actions confirmed that the missions were not going well. By the time of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, the few hundred US military advisers in Vietnam had grown to more than sixteen thousand. Yet victory still eluded Washington and its South Vietnamese clients. In August 1964, the United States escalated its effort by launching air strikes against targets in North Vietnam. And in early 1965, the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson made the fateful decision to send tens of thousands of combat troops.

Hopes for an early withdrawal of American forces from Iraq evaporated well before the end of 2003. Subsequent predictions of a draw-down of US troops faded as well. Finally, in January 2007, the Bush administration adopted precisely the opposite course, announcing a surge that would send an additional 21,500 (ultimately 26,000) troops to the Iraq theater.

In both conflicts, predictions of imminent success were accompanied by military escalation and an indefinite prolongation of the mission. The Vietnam War ultimately lasted more than a decade. The Iraq war is now well into its fifth year, with no end in sight.

Closely related to the unfounded optimism in Vietnam and Iraq was the effort by policy makers and other supporters of the war to find scapegoats for the increasingly obvious failures. One common allegation was to attribute US setbacks to interference by outside powers. Declassified Central Intelligence Agency documents from the Vietnam War period asserted that Soviet and Chinese aid was greatly complicating Washington's mission. One report contended that there was "substantial evidence that the political position of the Soviet Union and Communist China on the war, and the amount of material assistance to the war effort, are highly significant influences on Vietnam-

10. "A Major Victory," editorial, *National Review Online*, 24 April 2006.
11. John D. Negroponte, "What's Going Right in Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, 4 May 2007.

ese Communist policy." Another document stated that Soviet and Chinese military and economic aid was "absolutely vital to North Vietnam's ability to adequately defend its territory and to support the insurgency in South Vietnam."[12]

One encounters similar arguments with regard to the increasingly chaotic situation in Iraq. Michael Ledeen, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and a vocal supporter of the war, insists that as long as Iran and Syria remain intact, America's problems in Iraq will persist: "Like it or not, we are in a regional war, and cannot be effectively prosecuted within a narrow national boundary. There will never be decent security in Iraq as long as the tyrants in Tehran and Damascus remain in power."[13] Bush administration officials routinely accuse Syria and, especially, Iran of interfering in Iraq and undermining the US mission there.[14]

The other favorite scapegoat for prowar types is the domestic antiwar faction. General Westmoreland charged that America's adversary had "gained support in the United States that gives him hope that he can win politically [that] which he cannot win militarily."[15] Looking back in the late 1980s, Westmoreland also attached blame to members of Congress: "The military did not lose a battle of consequence and did not lose the war. The war was lost by congressional actions withdrawing support to the South Vietnamese government despite commitments made by President Nixon."[16]

Supporters of the Iraq war also excoriate critics both inside and outside Congress. Vice President Cheney blasted Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid when Reid stated that the Iraq war was "lost." Impugning both the senator's

12. "Declassified CIA Documents on the Vietnam War," II-2, 6–7, 26 August 1966, www.vietnam.ttu.edu/star/images/041/04114192001b.pdf.
13. Michael Ledeen, "Engage! If You Want to Win the Debate, Win the War," *National Review Online*, 23 November 2005, www.nationalreview.com/ledeen/ledeen200511230844.asp.
14. See, for example, Rowan Scarborough, "Casey Cites Iran Hand in Attacks by Iraqi Shiites," *Washington Times*, 23 June 2006; White House, "Fact Sheet: The New Way Forward in Iraq," January 2007, 6, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-3.html; and CBS News.com, "US Forces Fighting Iranians in Iraq," 12 January 2007, www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/01/12/politics/main2355951.shtml.
15. "1967: Westmoreland Makes Controversial Remarks," History.com, www.history.com/tdih.do?id=1803&action=tdihArticleCategory.
16. Quoted in Bill McCloud, "What Should We Tell Our Children about Vietnam?" *American Heritage Magazine* 39, no. 4 , May–June 1988, www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1988/4/1988 4 55.shtml.

judgment and integrity, Cheney said, "What's most troubling about Senator Reid's comments yesterday is his defeatism. . . . It is cynical to declare that the war is lost because you believe it gives you political advantage."[17] William Kristol, editor of the *Weekly Standard*, and Frederick W. Kagan, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, openly charge that opponents of the war hope for a US defeat: "If the Democrats get their way and General Petraeus is undermined in Congress, the progress [of the surge] may indeed prove short-lived." They add that "a resolute president will need to prevent defeatists in Congress from losing a winnable war in Iraq."[18]

Perhaps the most significant common assumption of the two generations of policy makers was that the conflicts were far more important than the stakes involved in the specific country. In the case of Vietnam, the guiding assumption was the domino theory—the belief that the fall of South Vietnam to communism would create a disastrous ripple effect throughout East Asia and beyond. Indeed, that assumption surfaced years before the United States became an active participant in the Vietnam War. In the mid-1950s, President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned that the communization of Vietnam would have far-reaching implications: "You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is a certainty that it will go over very quickly. So, you could have the beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences." He warned that the abandonment of South Vietnam would lead to the loss of all Indochina, then Burma, then Thailand, then Malaya, then Indonesia. Nor was that all. The toppling dominoes would move on to threaten the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, and the principal geopolitical prize in East Asia: Japan. He concluded that "the possible consequences of the loss [of Vietnam] are just incalculable to the free world."[19]

Supporters of the Vietnam War echoed Eisenhower's arguments throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. In a November 1969 address to the nation, President Richard M. Nixon warned that "the precipitate withdrawal of Ameri-

17. Quoted in Carl Hulse and Jeff Zeleny, "Bush Accuses Democrats of Playing Politics with Iraq," *New York Times*, 24 April 2007.

18. William Kristol and Frederick W. Kagan, "Wrong on Timetables: The Democratic Congress Doesn't Understand What Is Going On in Iraq," *Weekly Standard*, 4 April 2007, 2.

19. Quoted in Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 180. For a discussion on Eisenhower and the Domino Theory, see Robert Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 41.

can forces from Vietnam would be a disaster not only for South Vietnam but for the United States and for the cause of peace." A withdrawal would lead not only to calamity in the rest of Southeast Asia, the adverse effects would be global: "Our defeat and humiliation in South Vietnam without question would promote recklessness in the councils of those great powers who have not yet abandoned their goals of world conquest. . . . This would spark violence wherever our commitments help maintain the peace — in the Middle East, in Berlin, eventually even in the Western Hemisphere. Ultimately, this would cost more lives. It would not bring peace; it would bring more war."[20] Writing a decade later, Nixon's national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, still justified the Vietnam commitment on those grounds.[21]

Such alarmism was not confined to Republican presidents. Senator Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson, a Democrat from Washington, opined that if America allowed South Vietnam to collapse, so would all of Southeast Asia, and "Europe would probably fall."[22] President Johnson repeatedly argued that global freedom and security were indivisible — that a communist victory in South Vietnam would imperil those values elsewhere. "All of our efforts," Johnson stressed on one occasion, "however distant in geography and degree, from NATO to SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization], from OAS [Organization of American States] to Vietnam, grow out of our obligations to keep the peace and preserve freedom and liberty in the world. That is why our gallant and our brave and courageous young men are manning the ramparts today . . . to assist the poor Vietnamese protect their liberty."[23]

Many years later, former secretary of state Dean Rusk conceded that such assumptions drove US policy in Vietnam. He emphasized that the "overriding problem before us in Southeast Asia was the same problem that all mankind faces: how to prevent World War III." He noted that deterrence requirements had impelled the United States to form its various collective security treaties: "If I had thought there was no connection between the events in Southeast Asia, the broad structure of world peace, and the possibility of a third world

20. "Nixon on Vietnam: Address to the American Public," 3 November 1969, www.cnn.com/Specials/cold.war/episodes/11/documents/nixon.speech/.
21. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1979), 228.
22. Quoted in "Scoop Jackson: Running Hard Uphill," *Time*, 17 February 1965, www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,912853,00.html.
23. Lyndon Johnson, "Remarks at an AFL-CIO Rally in Detroit, September 5, 1966," www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27828.

war, I might have advised differently on Vietnam. But in Southeast Asia, and in that pattern of aggression practiced by North Vietnam, I saw what I thought were the seeds of conflict for future war."[24]

Supporters of the Iraq war likewise contend that the consequences of an American defeat would reverberate far beyond Iraq. In his January 2007 State of the Union address, President Bush stated that a premature US withdrawal (which he never defined) would lead to chaos in Iraq. And out of that chaos "would emerge an emboldened enemy with new safe havens, new recruits, new resources and an even greater determination to harm America. To allow this to happen would be to ignore the lessons of September the 11th and invite tragedy."[25] Vice President Cheney is equally emphatic about reject- ing calls for a prompt troop withdrawal: "A precipitous American withdrawal from Iraq would be a disaster for the United States and the entire Middle East. . . . A sudden withdrawal of our coalition would dissipate much of the effort that's gone into fighting the global war on terror and result in chaos and mounting danger."[26] Proponents of the Iraq war repeatedly assert that radical Islamic terrorists will "follow us home" if the mission in Iraq fails.[27]

Yet a 2006 National Intelligence Estimate, portions of which were declas- sified in September, concluded that the Iraq war has served as both a recruit- ment mechanism for al Qaeda and as a training arena for terrorists where they can hone their murderous skills.[28] Given that sobering reality, as well as evidence that the US military presence in Iraq has greatly antagonized Muslim populations around the world,[29] one could argue that withdrawing

24. Dean Rusk (as told to Richard Rusk), *As I Saw It* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 494–5.

25. "President Bush Delivers State of the Union Address," 23 January 2007, www.whitehouse .gov/nes/releases/2007/01/20070123-2.html.

26. Associated Press, "Cheney Says US Withdrawal from Iraq Would Spark Mideast Disaster," *International Herald Tribune*, 12 March 2007.

27. For examples, see the comments of House Minority Leader John Boehner, Sen. John McCain, and President Bush in Kathy Kiely and David Jackson, "Iraq Veto Stands: Dems Vow New Push to End War," *USA Today*, 3 May 2007; Kim Chipman and Kristin Jensen, "Republican 2008 Candi- dates Say Mistakes Made in Iraq," Bloomberg.com, 3 May 2007; and Karen DeYoung and Walter Pincus, "Al Qaeda in Iraq May Not Be Threat Here," *Washington Post*, 18 March 2007.

28. Mark Mazzetti, "Spy Agencies Say Iraq War Worsens Terrorism Threat," *New York Times*, 24 September 2006.

29. See, for example, Zogby International, "Five Nation Survey of the Middle East," December 2006, aai.3cdn.net/96d8eeaec55ef4c217_m9m6b97wo.pdf; and "World View of US Role Goes from Bad to Worse," WorldPublicOpinion.org, 23 January 2007, www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/press releases/stories/2007/01_january/23/us.shtml.

US forces from Iraq would remove a major grievance and reduce rather than enhance the terrorist threat.

Allegations that a defeat for the United States in one theater automatically produces catastrophic global consequences are extremely dubious. The failure of the mission in Vietnam did not lead to dramatic strategic gains for either China or the Soviet Union. China, in fact, began to emerge as a US strategic partner against Moscow during the final stages of the Vietnam War, and little more than a decade later China had become a valued economic partner as well. The Soviet Union did add a few more client states in the Third World, but most of them were small, poor nations (for example, Laos, Mozambique, and Yemen) that did little or nothing to augment Moscow's strength. Indeed, one could make a credible case that the clients that the Soviet Union acquired in the 1970s and 1980s were political and economic liabilities rather than assets.

Even in East Asia, the toppling dominoes that Eisenhower and subsequent American leaders feared so much proved to be a very short row. Cambodia and Laos followed South Vietnam into the communist camp, but no other nation in the region did. That was a far cry from worries that the entire swath of countries from India to Japan would go communist. America's other alliances remained intact despite the fall of South Vietnam. If allied capitals in East Asia and Europe wondered about America's credibility and reliability, their concerns were extremely muted.

Most significant, the Soviet empire itself collapsed barely one-and-a-half decades after the failure of the US enterprise in Vietnam. In short, the parade of horrors that US officials and other supporters of the war predicted if the United States did not prevail in that small Southeast Asian nation failed to materialize. The Vietnam conflict appeared to have almost no lasting impact on the larger geopolitical environment. The only material difference is that fifty-eight thousand Americans and more than 3 million Vietnamese met premature deaths.

Cato Institute foreign policy analyst Justin Logan aptly summarizes the reason that the United States persisted so long in Vietnam: "The issue of credibility was so central to America's Vietnam policy that tens of thousands of Americans died in the pursuit, not of victory, but of saving face." That stubbornness was inexcusable. He notes that an 11 September 1967

secret memo from the US intelligence community concluded that the effects of an "unfavorable outcome" in Vietnam would be "probably more limited and controllable than most previous argument has indicated."[30] Yet the US intervention continued for more than another four years — and some thirty-eight thousand additional American deaths — after that memo was given to US policy makers.

One should likewise be extremely skeptical about the dire consequences that Iraq war proponents contend would accompany US failure to win that conflict. Failure in Iraq would assuredly be a setback for the United States. America's terrorist adversaries will portray a pull-out as a defeat for US policy. But there is a great difference between a setback and a devastating defeat. Even if the United States leaves Iraq without having attained its goal of creating a stable, united, democratic, pro-Western model for the entire Middle East (which was an impractical objective in any case), America will remain an economic and military superpower. And one of the advantages to being a superpower is that the country can absorb setbacks without experiencing catastrophic damage to its core interests or capabilities. Failure in Iraq does not even come close to threatening those interests or capabilities.

The final similarity between the Vietnam and Iraq wars flows directly from the flawed assumption that the political and strategic stakes in those small countries were enormous. That assumption led the United States to make and sustain foolishly oversized commitments. The Vietnam intervention lasted more than a decade, cost more than $650 billion (measured in 2007 dollars), and squandered the lives of more than fifty-eight thousand troops. The Iraq war has already lasted more than four years, and the toll in treasure is already approaching $500 billion, while the toll in blood is some thirty-five hundred American lives. Moreover, the financial figures measure only the direct costs of those conflicts. Significant indirect costs, such as the expense of long-term medical care for wounded veterans, amount to many billions of dollars more.

It is impossible to justify such enormous sacrifices for such meager stakes. That is the primary lesson that the United States failed to learn in Vietnam and is now apparently failing to learn in Iraq.

30. Justin Logan, "Would Leaving Iraq Damage US Standing in the World?" *Chicago Sun Times*, 24 February 2007.