

## PARALLEL WARS? CAN “LESSONS OF VIETNAM” BE APPLIED TO IRAQ?

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As the invasion of Afghanistan temporarily sputtered in late 2001, reporters asked Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld if the U.S. might be getting into another Vietnam. “All together now: Quagmire!” Rumsfeld mocked.<sup>1</sup> Several months after the occupation of Iraq, Rumsfeld was again queried about the Vietnam parallel and again rejected it. “It's a different era,” he said. “It's a different place.”<sup>2</sup>

True on both counts. And yet, more than two years later, the term “quagmire” hasn't gone away, and the Vietnam parallels have proliferated.

Melvin Laird, Secretary of Defense in the Nixon Administration, recently wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, “The Vietnam War that I saw, first from my seat in Congress and then as secretary of defense, cannot be wrapped in a tidy package and tagged “bad idea.” It was far more complex than that: a mixture of good and evil from which there are many valuable lessons to be learned. Yet the only lesson that seems to have endured is the one that begins and ends with “Don't go there.” The war in Iraq is not “another Vietnam.” But it could become one if we continue to use Vietnam as a sound bite while ignoring its true lessons.”<sup>3</sup>

I teach a course on US foreign policy and a course on the Vietnam War. Until 2004 I made great efforts to avoid linking Iraq and Vietnam. The “lessons of Vietnam” are numerous but often contradictory. Perhaps one of the most salient of these is “be very careful in applying analogies.” Yuan Foong Khong, a former student at the Claremont Colleges, now at Oxford, wrote a classic book titled *Analogies at War*, in which he painstakingly analyzed the various ways in which analogies were misused by US decisionmakers during the Vietnam war. The book appeared in 1992, just as US foreign policy decision makers were grappling with the new and unfamiliar terrain of the post Cold War world. Khong analyzed in detail how and why decision makers resort to analogies when confronted with novel problems. They serve as a cognitive filter which transforms the unfamiliar into something recognizable, and reduces complexity to manageable proportions. The pitfalls of this conceptual screening process are many, however. The wrong analogy may be chosen - perhaps Kennedy and Johnson would have been better served with cautions about the French experience in Indochina than with bracing lessons from Munich and Korea.

Or, a potentially useful analogy may be misinterpreted or misapplied, as in the case of the misguided application of British experience in the Malayan Emergency to Vietnam.

Here is a brief reviewer's summary of Khong's book. "In this splendid study, Yuen Foong Khong has laid open the weakness but easy attraction of reasoning by analogy in the making of foreign policy decisions. Reasoning by analogy has characterized much post-Second World War international discussion, especially in the United States. Now 'no more Vietnams' has joined 'no more Munichs' and no more Koreas' in the standard package of policy rationalizations...The importance of this volume is not merely its help in explaining American decisions leading to the Vietnam war. It is also a useful pointer to the use of the most frequently cited foreign policy analogy in the United States today: 'no more Vietnams'. As Yuen Foong Khong shows in his conclusion, Vietnam has led to the drawing of a number of 'lessons' for policy-makers. One is that interventions must only occur where American interests are vital; the other is that short, sharp interventions with a certain exit route and a high probability of 'winning' are essential."

One might argue that this lesson, as summarized by the reviewer, should have cautioned against launching a war of choice, based on shaky premises, with no Plan B in place if the optimistic scenario did not work out. However, as the reviewer, also prophetically noted in 1993, "[Khong] argues that reasoning by the analogy of Vietnam will be no more successful than reasoning by the analogies of Munich and Korea."<sup>4</sup>

So let us again emphasize Secretary Rumsfeld's caution that Iraq is not Vietnam. And yet, the Vietnam analogies have become part of the debate about the conflict in Iraq. We should try to understand why this has happened, before moving to the more obvious issue of whether these analogies shed any light on America's current problems in Iraq.

The Vietnam analogies actually predated the American invasion and occupation of Iraq. The most often cited was the parallel between the Tonkin Gulf resolution, and the congressional pre-authorization of the use of armed force to overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime. The similarities most often mentioned were the blank check nature of the Congressional authorization of military action, and the allegations of Presidential deception to gain Congressional assent.

One important non-parallel is the nature of the decision making process in the two conflicts. It is clear that both President Kennedy and President Johnson were pulled reluctantly along the path of escalation in Vietnam, while in Iraq the impetus for escalation came from the top. Because of Presidential reluctance to raise the stakes in Vietnam, the decision making process was prolonged and complex. In Iraq, it is hard to speak of a decision making process. A senior official of the Bush administration later said "There was no debate about the wisdom of going to war. ... No discussion of pros and cons, of what might happen, no planning for the unexpected. It was just something we were going to do."<sup>5</sup> Bob Woodward's book on the planning of the Iraq invasion revealed that there was never a formal meeting to ratify or even discuss the merits of the idea, and that neither the Secretary of State or Secretary of Defense was ever specifically asked if they agreed with the wisdom of this policy. Clearly Iraq will not go down as a model of good decision making process for future generations. If the Best and the Brightest did not, in the final analysis,

come up with the right answers to the Vietnam conundrum, it was not for lack of discussion and debate.

Once the Iraq invasion had apparently succeeded - leading President Bush to declare "mission accomplished" - the Vietnam references tailed off. As many conservative commentators noted, the invocation of "another Vietnam" is based on the identification of "Vietnam" with defeat. The term "Vietnam" is shorthand for "failure."

So, it is not surprising that the Vietnam parallels reemerged in public discussion around the time the media began to question the view of Iraq as a success story. It would take more careful research to identify the exact point at which this shift in public discourse took place, but a Lexis search suggests that it was probably at the beginning of 2004 that Vietnam analogies reentered the picture.

It was at this juncture that the issue of how to cope with a growing insurgency surfaced. For nearly a year following the Iraq invasion, the administration maintained that the low level resistance came from isolated "dead enders" - followers of Saddam Hussein who had not reconciled themselves to the loss of power and privilege - and outside agitators. The spread of armed opposition to the occupation raised the question of how and why it had happened, and what to do about it.

As Confucius said, a vital aspect of legitimizing power is "rectification of names" - gaining control over political discourse by asserting the right to assign labels, and therefore meaning, to political events.

In traditional Chinese thought, the power to define the categories into which social life was organized was an essential attribute of political power. Fung Yu-lan discusses this in his classic study of Chinese philosophy, citing an ancient text which says, " 'Should a true King arise, he must certainly follow the ancient terms and make new ones.' . . . Thus the invention of new names and determination of their meaning is a function of the ruler and his government. Hsun Tzu says: 'When the kings had regulated names, the names were fixed and the actualities distinguished. Their principles were thus able to be carried out and their will could be known. They thus carefully led the people to unity. Therefore, the making of unauthorized distinctions between words, and the making of new words, so as thus to confuse the correct nomenclature, cause the people to be in doubt, and bring much litigation, was called great wickedness. It was a crime like that of using false credentials or false measures.'"<sup>6</sup>

In addition to labeling the active opponents of the US occupation of Iraq "dead enders" to deny them the legitimacy of the status of combatants, and to underline the hopelessness of their futile resistance, the Bush administration refused to call the resistance an insurgency, for fear of awakening the ghosts of Vietnam and raising the prospect that America would once again be stalemated in an unwinnable conflict. Subsequently the White House engaged in a similar exercise

in semantics in denying that the sectarian conflict in Iraq amounted to a “civil war”<sup>7</sup> - a repeat of earlier Administrations’ denials that the struggle in Vietnam was a civil conflict but was, rather, aggression from the outside. The Vietnam War spawned an entire lexicon of circumlocutions (“protective reaction strike”) which also reflected the government’s attempt to control political debate at that time.

After the invasion of Iraq and “mission accomplished,” an early straw in the wind that portended a reversion to analogies in public discourse came from within the government. This was the remarkable decision by someone in the Pentagon to show the classic 1965 film “the Battle of Algiers” by Gillo Pontecorvo. According to the Pentagon flyer which announced the screening of the film, the movie showed “how to win the battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas... Children shoot soldiers at point blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar?”<sup>8</sup>

Despite the efforts of the Bush Administration to stamp out the use of terminology that might serve as a reminder of Vietnam, some supporters of the Administration’s invasion of Iraq, took the offensive and introduced a revisionist view of the Vietnam war as a success, and therefore a useful model for Iraq. One of the early op ed discussions of counterinsurgency in late 2003 noted that, “Talk of counterinsurgency strategies inevitably summons up the trauma of Vietnam. It tends to paralyze analysis by turning every American small war into a replay of Vietnam and every casualty into a quagmire. But it shouldn't. Even in Vietnam, classic counterinsurgency strategies and tactics proved successful -- when given time and effort. There is no reason to believe they cannot work in Iraq where the insurgency problem is not as large or difficult, where there is no country like North Vietnam providing major assistance to guerrillas.”<sup>9</sup>

As we will see, many who made policy recommendations on how to achieve success in Iraq chose to deal with the troubling Vietnam experience by historical revision, turning failure into remembered success. By the end of 2003, some journalists were beginning to notice the revival of counterinsurgency, and the accompanying revisionism to make it applicable to Iraq. The Boston Globe reported that “....many still believe that small but highly motivated irregular forces have the ability to defeat large and lumbering military organizations. Indeed, throughout the 20th century, many wars of national liberation and communist revolutions were in fact won by irregular forces: T.E. Lawrence in Arabia (who aided Arab tribes against the Ottomans), Mao in China, Castro in Cuba, Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, the mujahideen of Afghanistan. Yet some military experts believe the whole idea of guerrilla warfare has been oversold. In his 1973 book, ‘Autopsy on People's War,’ political scientist Chalmers Johnson made the startling argument that ‘none of the people's wars of the Sixties did very well, including the one in Vietnam.’ More recently, a diverse school of revisionists - including military analyst Lewis Sorley, former CIA director William Colby, and maverick liberal journalist Michael Lind - have picked up on the idea that the Viet Cong were in fact defeated as a popular insurrection, although their North Vietnamese ally won a conventional war against exhausted South Vietnamese and American forces.”<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the author cautioned, “As the specter of protracted guerrilla warfare raises its head in Iraq, it's worth recalling the mixed lessons of the past. Successful counterinsurgency involves a deep familiarity with the local culture, which is difficult to gain on the fly. Gaining political legitimacy is the key to successfully defeating an insurgency, yet building such popular support can take years if not decades. Moreover, there's an inevitable tension between obtaining security for one's troops and winning popular support. Iraq, with its shadowy enemy of uncertain ideology, is very different from Vietnam. However, the troubling legacy of that conflict should cast doubt that there will be any easy or quick solution this time either.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite the showing of the Battle of Algiers, the Pentagon itself was more focused on present tactics and capabilities than on historical lessons. By the beginning of 2004, the military was split between two opposing views of dealing with the conflict in Iraq. One was the “kick down the doors” approach, using commandos and special mission units forces like Delta Force and the SEALs. The other was a more nuanced “winning hearts and minds” approach to counterinsurgency. The official Pentagon position was that the two approaches were complementary, but one well informed reporter wrote that “according to a classified Defense Department policy briefing on the war against the al Qaeda terrorist network and the Baathist insurgents in Iraq, the Bush administration is moving away from work with insurgents and favoring more direct action strikes.”<sup>12</sup>

But events soon forced a reconsideration of this position. By the Spring of 2004, it was apparent that the opposition to the occupation had escalated. New York Times reporters James Risen and John Burns wrote in April 2004 that “United States forces are confronting a broad-based Shiite uprising that goes well beyond supporters of one militant Islamic cleric who has been the focus of American counterinsurgency efforts, United States intelligence officials said Wednesday. That assertion contradicts repeated statements by the Bush administration and American officials in Iraq. On Wednesday, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld and Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that they did not believe the United States was facing a broad-based Shiite insurgency. Administration officials have portrayed Moktada al-Sadr, a rebel Shiite cleric who is wanted by American forces, as the catalyst of the rising violence within the Shiite community of Iraq. But intelligence officials now say that there is evidence that the insurgency goes beyond Mr. Sadr and his militia, and that a much larger number of Shiites have turned against the American-led occupation of Iraq, even if they are not all actively aiding the uprising.”<sup>13</sup>

Belatedly, the Army recognized that it had made a mistake in trying to efface memories of the Vietnam War by literally throwing away the hard won experience gained from that conflict. “The Army's historical memory contains a gap. ‘After Vietnam,’ recounts retired Army Colonel Robert Killebrew, ‘the Army just walked away from unconventional war.’ Understandably eager to put the most painful experience in its history behind it, and less understandably convinced that its conventional operations actually succeeded in Vietnam, the Army reverted to training for

the conventional wars it knew best. (In this, it was assisted by canonical texts like Colonel Harry G. Summers's *On Strategy*, a selective reading of the Vietnam War in which the author criticizes policymakers for relying too heavily on counterinsurgency tactics.) With the exception of the early '80s, when it enjoyed a brief vogue during the war in El Salvador, counterinsurgency all but disappeared from the Army's vocabulary. So much so that, according to an unsparing report by Army War College scholar Conrad C. Crane, when instructors planning a course on the topic went searching for lesson material at the Army's Special Operations School during the 1980s, 'they found that the staff there had been ordered to throw away their counterinsurgency files.'<sup>14</sup>

Faced with the reality of an expanding insurgency "For the first time in decades, the Army has issued a field guide to counterinsurgency warfare, an acknowledgment that the kind of fighting under way in Iraq may become more common in the years ahead. The Army field manual on counterinsurgency operations is the first since the early Vietnam era, and the first ever intended for the kind of regular Army units now embroiled in battles in Iraq, as opposed to the Special Operations forces who have taken the lead in previous counterinsurgencies. Under orders issued in February, the manual was prepared on an accelerated basis by the Combined Arms Center in Fort Leavenworth, Kan., and was distributed to all officers, in Iraq and elsewhere, beginning last month. An introduction says the "aftermath of instability" in Iraq that followed the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime underscored the need for an updated Army guide to counterinsurgency warfare. Until now, formal American military doctrine for fighting insurgencies has been so limited that many Marines were deployed to Iraq with copies of the Marine Corps' "Small Wars Manual," issued in 1940. The most recent Army guides on the subject, written principally for Special Operations forces, were prepared in 1963 and 1965, in the early stages of the Vietnam War. Like the Army, the Marine Corps is also updating its manual."<sup>15</sup>

Colonel John Nagl is the most prominent Army specialist on counterinsurgency, having taught the subject at West Point, written a book on the subject (*Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife*), and practiced it in the field in Iraq. A *New York Times* profile in January 2004 wrote that "The portions of his book that focus on Vietnam stress the erroneous and muddled thinking of American military and political elites, especially Gen. William Westmoreland, who (as the historian Max Boot recounts), when asked his solution to the Vietcong, replied with one word: "firepower." As a counterpoint in his study, Nagl quotes Marine Gen. Victor (Brute) Krulak, who concluded: 'You cannot win militarily. You have to win totally, or you are not winning at all.' For Nagl, Vietnam stands as an encyclopedia of what shouldn't be done. Foremost in the do-not-repeat category are the indiscriminate use of firepower, the resort to conventional tactics to fight an unconventional threat and the failure to implement an effective 'hearts and minds' campaign. The preferred strategy has been referred to as 'total war,' though the phrase is often misunderstood as referring to a scorched-earth strategy. John Waghelstein, a retired Special Forces colonel who led the team of American advisers in El Salvador in the 1980's, is regarded as an astute though controversial practitioner of counterinsurgency; he promotes the 'total war' strategy but does not define it as the vicious practices used by some of his pupils in the Salvadoran Army. Instead, Waghelstein, now a professor at the Naval War College, offers a

subtler definition. 'Total war means you use all the elements of national power,' he told me recently. 'It's at the grass-roots level that you're trying to win. You can kill enemy soldiers -- that's not the only issue. You also need to dry up their support. You can't just use the military. It's got to be a constant din of propaganda; it's got to be economic support; it's got to be elections. As long as you only go after the guy with the weapon, you're missing the most important part.' Ignoring the civic side of counterinsurgency has been likened to playing chess while your enemy is playing poker. Though this truism is now well known in the military, Nagl acknowledges that it is not being applied in Iraq as well as it could be."<sup>16</sup>

Although Nagl is definitely on the "hearts and minds" side of the Pentagon, he is nonetheless critical of some advocates of restrained firepower, like General James Conway of the Marines. Instead, Nagl stresses the importance of local knowledge and local forces. "The formation of "indigenous" forces, as they are called, is considered a paramount element of successful counterinsurgency. In his book, Nagl emphasizes that one of the many shortcomings of American policy in Vietnam was America's inability to build a capable South Vietnamese fighting force. 'Vietnamization,' when it finally came along in 1969, was too little, too late. During one of our discussions, Nagl explained the use of Iraqi forces as a matter of efficacy and necessity."<sup>17</sup>

Thus, as in Vietnam, insurgency has led to a focus on counterinsurgency, and the limitations of conventional US forces in implementing counterinsurgency have in turn revived another staple of the Vietnam era - indigenization of the military effort - called Vietnamization then and Iraqification now.

I won't go into the details of Vietnamization and Iraqification, but simply note a few questions raised by these issues. The first is the issue of comparability of cases. Despite all the problems of Vietnamization, many stemming from the colonial origins of most of the officer corps engaged in a nationalist conflict, these problems pale in comparison to the problem of re-integrating former Baathist officers into a force that seems to be dissolving into a cauldron of ethnic strife. A thorny problem for Iraq, which was less of an issue in Vietnam, was the question of whether or not the arms and training of an army would end up creating a force that might turn on its patron.<sup>18</sup>

Another issue is the question of whether or not indigenization aimed at building a new political system can succeed prior to the construction of the political basis of that system. Apart from the already difficult task of reintegrating former Baathist officers into the army, the problem of sectarian militias creates a formidable challenge. Indigenization first stresses building up a local army which seems to be viewed as a means to achieve a desired political end, but in both Vietnam and Iraq the US viewed the desired end somewhat differently from its nominal allies. By the time indigenization replaced the goal of a solution based on US military victory in both countries, the main US objective had become face saving extrication because of declining American political support. This inevitably leads to one of the most intriguing parallels between Vietnam and Iraq -

the concept of the decent interval - a face saving formula for US extrication for a conflict it felt it could no longer win.

But before we address the “decent interval” let us deal with two other matters related to indigenization. The first is the issue of what strategy US troops should pursue if the object is no longer a military victory and the main objective becomes turning over the fighting to the local allies. The second is how the Vietnam version of indigenization and the accompanying post Tet military strategy has been recast as a success. Without going into detail, let me simply say that based on my own research and personal observation during the Vietnam war, it is difficult for me to agree that the US belatedly found a winning military strategy after Tet, or to believe the somewhat contradictory second revisionist point that Vietnamization was a great success. Indeed, if it was the discovery of an effective US military strategy after Tet that was the main reason for turning the tide in Vietnam, what does this say about the role played by Vietnamization in the later years of the Vietnam War?

Let us return to the issue of the belated alleged discovery of a winning strategy in Vietnam. Lewis Sorley and others have recently advanced the view that after Tet the US found its General (Creighton Abrams) and a strategy (clear and hold) that - had they appeared earlier in the war - would have produced a different outcome. Even so, many of these revisionists argue, the military conflict was essentially won by 1970 or 1971.

An article by the Boston Globe’s Matt Steinglass has a useful summary of the contending views on this question. He writes, “Supporters of the American invasion and occupation of Iraq have often argued that it has little in common with the Vietnam War. But judging by President Bush's new "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq," unveiled Nov. 30 and promoted in a series of recent speeches, the administration itself may have started to see some parallels. The document envisions a three-pronged security strategy for fighting the Iraqi insurgency: "Clear, Hold, and Build." It is no accident that this phrase evokes the "clear and hold" counterinsurgency strategy pursued by the American military in the final years of the Vietnam War. For months, as the Washington Post's David Ignatius and The New Republic's Lawrence Kaplan have reported, influential military strategists inside and outside the Pentagon have been pushing to resurrect "clear and hold" in Iraq, claiming that the US effort to suppress the Viet Cong was actually a success. The argument that "clear and hold" vanquished the Viet Cong is made most forcefully in "A Better War," the 1999 book by Vietnam veteran and former Army strategy analyst Lewis Sorley. The book focuses on General Creighton Abrams, who replaced General William Westmoreland as supreme commander in Vietnam in 1968 and moved from Westmoreland's discredited strategy of seeking out and killing enemy soldiers ("search and destroy") to one of controlling and defending patches of territory and population ("clear and hold"). In Sorley's telling, this new approach, combined with the severe losses the Viet Cong suffered during the 1968 Tet Offensive, virtually wiped out the insurgency. By late 1970, Sorley writes, "the war was won."<sup>19</sup>

The Globe article comments that “the idea that the strategy that beat the Viet Cong could work in Iraq elides a fundamental question: Did “clear and hold” actually beat the Viet Cong? For most historians of the war, not to mention for those who fought on the winning side, the answer is no. And the lessons for Iraq are far from clear.”<sup>20</sup> My own research suggests that it was not a carefully crafted military strategy of counterinsurgency that led to the apparent “pacification” of the Mekong Delta and many other areas of Vietnam by 1971, but a policy of rural depopulation that emptied much of the countryside - probably not a tactic that should be repeated in Iraq, or even one which is relevant to the more urbanized Iraqi society.<sup>21</sup>

Yet Melvin Laird, who as Nixon’s Secretary of Defense was an ardent advocate of de-Americanization of the war - later known as Vietnamization has recently claimed that Nixon’s policies achieved victory in Vietnam. Laird is quite open about the stakes in this position: to accept Vietnamization as a failure would be to cast doubt on the future of Iraqification. Laird writes, “The truth about Vietnam that revisionist historians conveniently forget is that the United States had not lost when we withdrew in 1973. In fact, we grabbed defeat from the jaws of victory two years later when Congress cut off the funding for South Vietnam that had allowed it to continue to fight on its own. ...I believed then and still believe today that given enough outside resources, South Vietnam was capable of defending itself, just as I believe Iraq can do the same now. From the Tet offensive in 1968 up to the fall of Saigon in 1975, South Vietnam never lost a major battle.”<sup>22</sup> Clearly Laird has not reflected on (or does not agree with) General Krulak’s maxim that “You cannot win militarily. You have to win totally, or you are not winning at all.”

The question of whether South Vietnam’s army could defend itself was answered conclusively in 1975. Laird’s self serving attempt to blame the US Congress only serves as a reminder to would be local partners of the United States that total dependency has its costs, especial when national interests diverge. Was it really helpful to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to shape them in the image of the US army, so that the dependency on US air support and bountiful logistical supplies was built into the organization, precluding development of a self reliant armed force, and leaving the South Vietnamese at the mercy of the American electorate? It was not only Congress that pulled the plug after it tired of bearing the costs of Vietnam, it was the American people. We should reflect long and hard about whether democracy is compatible with Empire and, if not, which we value most.

The immense costs of the Iraq War will probably likewise be dramatically reduced once the direct US stake is reduced. A recent report stated that “The cost of the war in Iraq will reach \$320 billion after the expected passage next month of an emergency spending bill currently before the Senate, and that total is likely to more than double before the war ends, the Congressional Research Service estimated this week. ...Even if a gradual troop withdrawal begins this year, war costs in Iraq and Afghanistan are likely to rise by an additional \$371 billion during the phaseout, the report said, citing a Congressional Budget Office study. When factoring in costs of the war in Afghanistan, the \$811 billion total for both wars would have far exceeded the inflation-adjusted \$549 billion cost of the Vietnam War.” The article also pointed out that “Such cost estimates

may be producing sticker shock on Capitol Hill. This year, the wars will consume nearly as much money as the departments of Education, Justice and Homeland Security combined, a total that is more than a quarter of this year's projected budget deficit."<sup>23</sup>

It is not hard to imagine what will happen to the budget for Iraq's reconstruction in the event the bulk of US forces are withdrawn. As in Vietnam, the issue is competing priorities in a transformed strategic environment. Indeed Laird himself notes how the decline in American stakes affected the outcome. "The truth is, wars are fluid things and missions change. This is more the rule than the exception. It was true in Vietnam, and it is true in Iraq today. The early U.S. objective in Southeast Asia was to stop the spread of communism. With changes in the relationship between the Soviet Union and China and the 1965 suppression of the communist movement in Indonesia, the threat of a communist empire diminished. Unwilling to abandon South Vietnam, the United States changed its mission to self-determination for Vietnam."<sup>24</sup>

This shifted the stakes from stopping the spread of world communism to the survival of a non communist Vietnam - a desirable objective but not a life or death concern of the US. Even before the geostrategic context of Vietnam changed (because of the Sino-Soviet split and the belated recognition that Vietnam was the last of the wars of decolonization and not the first of the global revolutionary wars of national liberation that had spooked President Kennedy) the US did not place a high priority on salvaging the interests of its local Vietnamese partners. In fact the US was complicit in the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem, an ally of nine years standing, in what was arguably the key turning point in American involvement in the war. Shortly after that John McNaughton, Robert McNamara's chief deputy for the Vietnam war, gave short shrift to the importance of local allies in US calculations. He observed that US aims were "'U.S. aims: 70 percent--To avoid a humiliating defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor). 20 percent--To keep SVN (and then adjacent) territory from Chinese hands. 10 percent--To permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life. ALSO - to emerge from crisis without an unacceptable taint from methods used. NOT - to 'help a friend,' although it would be hard to stay in if asked out."<sup>25</sup>

Laird offered the following view of President Bush's responsibilities with regard to Iraq in light of a similar shift in the strategic context of the conflict. "The current President Bush was persuaded that we would find WMD in Iraq and did what he felt he had to do with the information he was given. When we did not find the smoking gun, it would have been unconscionable to pack up our tanks and go home. Thus, there is now a new mission, to transform Iraq, and it is not a bad plan. Bush sees Iraq as the frontline in the war on terror -- not because terrorists dominate there, but because of the opportunity to displace militant extremists' Islamist rule throughout the region. Bush's greatest strength is that terrorists believe he is in this fight to the end. I have no patience for those who can't see that big picture and who continue to view Iraq as a failed attempt to find WMD. Now, because Iraq has been set on a new course, Bush has an opportunity to reshape the region. 'Nation building' is not an epithet or a slogan. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, it is our duty."<sup>26</sup> But the signs of abandoning this grand

plan for reshaping the Middle East have been obvious for some time, and are another reason that US long term support for Iraqification may be in doubt.<sup>27</sup>

The first sign was the departure of Paul Bremer and the abandonment of de-Baathification. In fact, “Iraqification” itself was an acknowledgment that Iraq’s political future would have to be shaped by the forces in Iraq, and not by Washington’s preferred exiled leaders. The reconstitution of the Iraqi army was a link to the past as well.<sup>28</sup>

The Washington Post’s Robin Wright reported in August 2005 that the US had lowered its sights on what could be achieved in Iraq and quoted an Administration official as saying that that it was “shedding the unreality that dominated the invasion.” “The Bush administration is significantly lowering expectations of what can be achieved in Iraq, recognizing that the United States will have to settle for far less progress than originally envisioned during the transition due to end in four months, according to U.S. officials in Washington and Baghdad. The United States no longer expects to see a model new democracy, a self-supporting oil industry or a society in which the majority of people are free from serious security or economic challenges, U.S. officials say. ‘What we expected to achieve was never realistic given the timetable or what unfolded on the ground,’ said a senior official involved in policy since the 2003 invasion. ‘We are in a process of absorbing the factors of the situation we’re in and shedding the unreality that dominated at the beginning.’”<sup>29</sup>

This more sober evaluation was, not surprisingly, accompanied by increasingly explicit talk of extrication from Iraq. And, also not surprisingly, another ghost from the Vietnam era resurfaced: the concept of the “Decent Interval.” During the Vietnam War, this was a term used to indicate that the United States was prepared to accept defeat in Vietnam, so long as American responsibility for it was obscured by a “decent interval” between the U.S. withdrawal and the ultimate South Vietnamese collapse. The philosophical underpinnings of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam went through three clear stages. First was the recognition following the Tet Offensive of 1968, that a U.S. military victory was not possible. Second came the hope that Vietnamization - the use of the Vietnamese military to carry on the war—would succeed where American troops could not. This was the notion of Vietnamization with victory. The third stage, which led to the Paris Peace Agreements, was the acceptance that the Saigon forces might not win—Vietnamization with the possibility of defeat.

In June 2005, without fanfare, the U.S. entered an analogous third stage in Iraq. In a report on the downscaling of U.S. expectations in Iraq (“U.S. Generals Now See Virtues of a Smaller Troop Presence in Iraq,” October 1, 2005), the Los Angeles Times quoted General George Casey, the U.S. military commander in Iraq, who said the reduction of the number of U.S. troops would “take away one of the elements that fuels the insurgency, that of the coalition forces as an occupying force.”<sup>30</sup> The article also reminded us that there was a preview of this new attitude as

early as June 2005, when Rumsfeld said, ‘If [the insurgency] does go on for four, eight, 10, 12, 15 years, whatever ... it is going to be a problem for the people of Iraq.’”<sup>31</sup>

A problem for the people of Iraq?

Someone once explained to me why the term “no problem” is prevalent in so many cultures. It means,” he said, I don’t have a problem - *you* have a problem.” This seems to be the implication of Rumsfeld’s comment. During the war in Vietnam, the idea of a U.S. exit in which a face-saving interval would elapse before the South’s defeat seems to have originally been formulated by one of LBJs wise men,” Truman’s Secretary of State, Dean Acheson. Acheson later wrote “I took it that the purpose of [American] efforts was to enable the GVN [government of Vietnam] to survive and to be able to stand alone at least for a period of time [emphasis in original], with only a fraction of the foreign support it had now. If this could be accomplished at all or only after a very protracted period with the best that present numbers could do, it seemed to me that the situation was hopeless and that a method of disengagement should be considered.”<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps it is still premature to call forth the ghosts of Vietnam. But the parallel between the intelligent but arrogant Robert McNamara, who proudly accepted the responsibility for “McNamaras War,” and the similarly overbearing Donald Rumsfeld, is hard to ignore, as anyone who has read Dereliction of Duty H.R. McMaster’s indictment of McNamara’s flawed judgments imposed on a compliant military leadership—will readily appreciate. This book became something of a rallying point for the Vietnam-era officers who vowed it would never happen again. It left a strong impression on officers like General Eric Shinseki, who sacrificed his military career to tell truth to power—that the planned forces for Iraq would be inadequate.

Is it irony or destiny that McMaster was at ground zero of the counterinsurgency struggle in Iraq? The Los Angeles Times article reports that “the U.S. commander of the Tall Afar operation, Army Col. H.R. McMaster, said Sept. 13 [2005] that it would be some time before the town had enough trained Iraqi troops to keep insurgents from filtering back. ‘Is there enough force here right now to secure this area permanently?’“ McMaster was quoted as saying. “No. Are there opportunities for the enemy in other areas within our region? Yes.”

The underlying motive for a disguised exit in Iraq, as in Vietnam, is that the policy has failed, and delay in facing the consequences will only make things worse for all concerned. But let us be clear about the consequences: Colin Powell’s “pottery barn” rule (you break it, you own it) does not apply to situations like Iraq and Vietnam. As the Vietnamese did before them, the Iraqis will pay the bill for America’s misguided intervention.

There are also voices within the Administration that warn against premature withdrawal. The most startling prediction of chaos and civil war came from US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad who, in trying to maintain support for a more extended US presence made the following remarkable admission: “The top U.S. envoy to Iraq said Monday that the 2003 toppling of

Saddam Hussein's regime had opened a "Pandora's box" of volatile ethnic and sectarian tensions that could engulf the region in all-out war if America pulled out of the country too soon."<sup>33</sup>

This stark prediction is reminiscent of the Nixon talk of a "blood bath" in the event of a too hasty US withdrawal but, in contrast to Vietnam, it has a frightening plausibility. But if the US troops merely fuel the insurgency and divert the Iraqis from finding their own mutual accommodation, and if the political support in the US for prolonged involvement in Iraq is slipping, what is the alternative? In the end, the rationale boils down to what it was in the latter years of the Vietnam War: we have to stay there because we are there. One lesson of Vietnam is that this rationale wears thin when the electorate deems that costs are excessive. The more sophisticated version of this is the credibility argument - that a messy withdrawal would damage America's reputation and influence in the world. But that, of course, is what the "decent interval" is designed to mitigate by placing the blame elsewhere. Moreover, the credibility argument is also heavily dependent on public belief in a plausible plan for success. If "stay the course" only succeeds in ratcheting up the stakes for the US with ever greater peril of failure, it will be a hard sell.

This is the concern that underlies President Bush's decision in late 2005 to apply a lesson of Vietnam to Iraq. The conventional wisdom view is that public support for the Vietnam War (and all conflicts) slipped when the casualties rose to a level that demoralized the American public. Duke University political scientist Peter Feaver and his co-author Chris Gelpi impressed the Bush administration with a study "of poll results from the first two years of the war, Dr. Gelpi, Dr. Feaver and Jason Reifler, then a Duke graduate student, took issue with what they described as the conventional wisdom since the Vietnam War - that Americans will support military operations only if American casualties are few. They found that public tolerance for the human cost of combat depended on two factors: a belief that the war was a worthy cause, and even more important, a belief that the war was likely to be successful."<sup>34</sup> What followed was a concerted PR attempt to convince the American public that the Bush administration did, in fact, have a plan and a victory strategy.

This resulted in a slick brochure titled "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq" in November 2005, but did not stem the rising tide of public unease with the prospects in Iraq. Robin Wright of the Washington Post wrote that, "President Bush's "strategy for victory" catalogues progress in Iraq over the past 32 months, but also omits or glosses over complications, problems and uncertainties in the most ambitious U.S. military intervention since Vietnam. Analysts agreed with Bush that a politically motivated withdrawal could embolden extremists to believe the United States will 'cut and run in the face of adversity'-- and risk the implosion of a strategic oil-rich country. But they disagreed with key assessments made by the administration on Iraq's military, on how important the U.S. mission in Iraq is to promoting democracy in the broader Middle East, and how much of Iraq has been rebuilt. Little is new in the 35-page document, titled 'National Strategy for Victory in Iraq,' which covers three broad fronts: security, political development and economic issues. The interpretation it yields depends heavily on viewing the

glass half-full rather than half-empty --and doing so in defiance of daily suicide bombings, abductions or deaths. Unspoken is the critical element of the timing of the strategy's release."<sup>35</sup>

Like President Nixon's purported "plan" for winning the Vietnam War, touted in the 1968, and the belated change in military strategy, the current attempt to repackage Iraq, is probably too little, too late. In war as in politics, timing is everything. "There's a lot that the administration's critics won't disagree with, but it's late," said Robert Malley, director of the International Crisis Group Middle East program. 'I don't think the president has the luxury of time to implement a sound policy, both because of the stress on the military but also because of the problem of the trust of the American public and political elite.' On security, Bush said more than 120 Army and police battalions are in the field -- about a third 'in the lead' -- in a huge leap from 18 months ago, when the Pentagon junked its initial approach to training and started over. But the rising numbers mask lingering Iraqi weaknesses and have not curbed insurgent attacks. 'There's been an increase in the number of Iraqis in training, but more Americans are dying and violence is increasing,' said Lawrence Korb, a Reagan administration Pentagon official now at the Center for American Progress. Bush noted that Iraqis are now in charge of tough areas in Baghdad -- but failed to mention that the capital is still far from safe, with many major streets vulnerable to attack. He praised the Iraqis' combat performance in the recent Tall Afar offensive -- but left out that Iraqi logistics were in shambles and that each platoon of 20 was led by a U.S. Special Forces officer. Bush yesterday described his strategy as "clear, hold and build." But in practice, the military has come under fire for too much emphasis on chasing insurgents around the country and not enough on securing areas that have been cleared of enemy fighters. U.S. and Iraqi troops have often had to return to fight in towns where they had fought before. Military commanders have acknowledged lacking sufficient forces to hold some towns previously ...On the political front, the new strategy document says staying the course in Iraq is the key to the fate of the greater Middle East. If the United States left before the mission was finished, it said, 'Middle East reformers would never again fully trust American assurances of support for democracy and pluralism in the region -- a historic opportunity. . . forever lost.' But a new public opinion poll to be released tomorrow finds that 77 percent of those surveyed in six countries -- Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, all U.S. allies -- say Iraqis are worse off than before the war began in 2003. On democracy, 58 percent believe the U.S. intervention has produced less democracy in the region, said Shibley Telhami, author of the annual survey, a joint effort by the University of Maryland's Anwar Sadat chair for peace and development, and Zogby International. Almost 70 percent said they do not believe democracy was the real U.S. goal in toppling Saddam Hussein. 'So the consequences of the war are all negative from their point of view,' Telhami said. Bush's emphasis on military strategy also 'violates' the first rule of counterinsurgency, which is politics first, said Brookings Institution analyst Michael O'Hanlon. 'I didn't see much effort to improve the constitution, where things like equitable oil revenues are critical and are not yet in the constitution or assured. . . . The president seems to dwell on the technical military training issue, which is important but is not enough to constitute the core of a strategy.'<sup>36</sup> Whatever the future holds, the future of Iraq will probably not be scripted by the Bush "plan."

Are there any significant lessons to be learned from the Iraq conflict that might be reinforced or validated by the experience of Vietnam? Perhaps the first is that we should carefully consider the ageless wisdom of the maxim of Xun Zi in the Art of War: Know your enemy, know yourself. To this Maxwell Taylor, once Kennedy's chief military advisor on Vietnam and then ambassador in 1964-65 added "First, we didn't know ourselves. We thought we were going into another Korean War, but this was a different country. Secondly, we didn't know our South Vietnamese allies. We never understood them, ... and we knew even less about North Vietnam .... So, until we know the enemy and know our allies and know ourselves, we'd better keep out of this dirty kind of business."<sup>37</sup>

With regard to the prospects for Iraqification, we might ask who our local allies are, what interests they share with us, and how probable it is that these shared interests will lead to a desirable outcome for the US. Interviews conducted by the Rand Corporation with top South Vietnamese military officers and civilian officials after the war revealed a widespread contempt for the South Vietnamese leaders by those who served them, and the paralyzing impact of the American embrace on the nationalist credentials of those who did not want a Hanoi dominated future.<sup>38</sup>

But perhaps the most important parallel is the lesson about the limitations of American power as an instrument of global transformation. It is remarkable how quickly America's humbling defeat in Vietnam was eclipsed by the triumphalism that followed the end of the Cold War and, more recently, reshaped into an imagined victory.

The idea that history can be shaped to conform with American ideals and interests has deep roots - in manifest destiny and in Wilsonianism, among other things.<sup>39</sup> Neal Sheehan memorably linked the confidence and World War II triumphalism with America's misadventures in Vietnam in his book "A Bright and Shining Lie." More recently a number of commentators have observed the characteristic confidence and optimism of President Bush that replaced the humility that he had advocated in 2000. Ron Suskind's 2004 New York Times profile of Bush titled "Without a Doubt" noted that "George W. Bush, clearly, is one of history's great confidence men. That is not meant in the huckster's sense, though many critics claim that on the war in Iraq, the economy and a few other matters he has engaged in some manner of bait-and-switch. No, I mean it in the sense that he's a believer in the power of confidence. At a time when constituents are uneasy and enemies are probing for weaknesses, he clearly feels that unflinching confidence has an almost mystical power. It can all but create reality." And Suskind recounted the striking denigration of the "reality based community" by a top Bush associate. "The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act

again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."<sup>40</sup> This may have been the “arrogance of power” that Senator Fulbright detected in the Kennedy and Johnson administration, but the Nietzschean hubris far exceeds the Brahmin self-assurance of the Best and the Brightest, and their faith in rational analysis.

Eventually reality collided with the administration’s confident portrayal of its Iraq policy. The most striking indication of this was Ambassador Khalilzad’s admission that American intervention had opened a “Pandora’s box” of disastrous unintended consequences. In November 2005 congressional Republicans distanced themselves from the administration, and in December 2005 advisors convinced the President that faith and optimism was not enough, and that he would have to present something that had at least the appearance of a plan for success. But one of the lessons of Vietnam is that no plan, however brilliant, can survive the collapse of political support for it. Another is that the collapse of political support is usually the consequence of a combination of factors. In Vietnam it was the collapse of the initial stated rationale and the downgrading of Vietnam’s strategic importance to the US, which had a powerful impact on the costs Americans were willing to bear to see it through. Along with the collapse of the strategic rationale came the disillusionment with the leadership that had carried us into war. The credibility gap and loss of trust in America’s leaders was a sad legacy of the Vietnam war, and history seems to be repeating itself.

Despite the many parallels, there are fundamental differences between the two cases. The end of the Vietnam war did not topple dominos, but was followed by a period of spectacular growth in Asia and, ironically, the falling out of communist neighbors in Indochina and the containment of Vietnam by China. By contrast, the invasion of Iraq has stirred up forces that may destabilize the most volatile region in the world, and the area most essential to the functioning of the world’s industrial economies.

Robert Jervis long ago boiled down the experience of the Twentieth Century into two opposed lessons about conflict.<sup>41</sup> He termed World War I the spiral escalation model and World War II the deterrence model. Adam Gopnik in a recent article on the historiography of World War I describes it as follows: “The last century, through its great cataclysms, offers two clear, ringing, and, unfortunately, contradictory lessons. The First World War teaches that territorial compromise is better than full-scale war, that an ‘honor-bound’ allegiance of the great powers to small nations is a recipe for mass killing, and that it is crazy to let the blind mechanism of armies and alliances trump common sense. The Second teaches that searching for an accommodation with tyranny by selling out small nations only encourages the tyrant, that refusing to fight now leads to a worse fight later on, and that only the steadfast rejection of compromise can prevent the natural tendency to rush to a bad peace with worse men. The First teaches us never to rush into a fight, the Second never to back down from a bully.”<sup>42</sup>

The Vietnam War was launched by believers in the deterrence model of World War II, and the lessons of Munich but was transformed into an updated version of the lessons of World War I - about escalation spiraling out of control, and unintended consequences. The architects of the Iraq invasion were all passionate believers in the Munich lesson, who lived to prove that the “Vietnam syndrome” had been expunged from the American memory. But, like the Best and Brightest, their historical role will probably be to disinter the lesson they hoped to bury.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2004), p.37.

<sup>2</sup> “Iraq no quagmire for U.S.: Defense secretary says fighting likely will 'go on for some time,’” *The Associated Press and Reuters*, July 1, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Melvin Laird, “Learning the Lessons of Vietnam,” *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2005

<sup>4</sup> Robert Taylor review of Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War, Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam decisions of 1965*,” Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1992 in the *American Historical Review*, April 1993, pp.786-87.

<sup>5</sup> Warren Stroebel, *Bush Alters Plan to Stabilize Iraq: Administration makes sharp policy reversal*,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazzete*, May 1, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Fung Yu-lan (Dirk Bodde ed.), *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p.152

<sup>7</sup> Christine Hauser, “White House Disputes Iraq Is Sinking Into Civil War,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2006

<sup>8</sup> Jeet Heer, *Revisionists Argue that Counterinsurgency Won the Battle Against Guerrillas in Vietnam, but Lost the Larger War. Can it Do Better in Iraq?*” *Boston Globe*, January 4, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Donnelly and Gary Schmitt, *Counterinsurgency, Not Caution, Is the Answer in Iraq*, *Washington Post*, October 26, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Jeet Heer, “Counterpunch Revisionists Argue that Counterinsurgency Won the Battle Against Guerrillas in Vietnam, But Lost the Larger War. Can It Do Better in Iraq?” *Boston Globe*, January 4, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Gregory Vistica, *Military Split on How to Use Special Forces in Terror War*, *Washington Post*, January 5, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> James Risen and John Burns, “Account of Broad Shiite Revolt Contradicts White House Stand,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Kaplan, “Clear and Fold: Forgetting the lessons of Vietnam,” *The New Republic*, December 19, 2005

<sup>15</sup> Douglas Jehl and Thom Shanker, “For the First Time Since Vietnam, the Army Prints a Guide to Fighting Insurgents.” *The New York Times*, November 13, 2004

<sup>16</sup> Peter Maass, *Professor Nagl’s War*, *New York Times*, January 11, 2004

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

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- <sup>18</sup> See, for example, Jonathan Finer, “ In Iraqi Town, Trainees Are Also Suspects: U.S. Troops Wary After Incidents Suggest Betrayal,” *Washington Post*, April 29, 2006.
- <sup>19</sup> Matt Steinglass, “Vietnam and Victory,” *The Boston Globe*, December 18, 2005.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> David W.P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta 1930-1975*, (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), two vols.
- <sup>22</sup> Melvin Laird, “Learning the Lessons of Vietnam.”
- <sup>23</sup> Jonathan Weisman, *Projected Iraq War Costs Soar*,” *Washington Post* , April 27, 2006
- <sup>24</sup> Melvin Laird, “Learning the Lessons of Vietnam.”
- <sup>25</sup> Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1954-1990*,” (New York: 1991), p.135.
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- <sup>37</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, p. 19.
- <sup>38</sup> Stephen T. Hosmer, Brian M. Jenkins, and Konrad Kellen, *The Fall of South Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1980)
- <sup>39</sup> For a brilliant analysis of these and other historical traditions which have influenced US foreign policy see Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land Crusader State*, ( Houghton Mifflin Co: 1998)
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