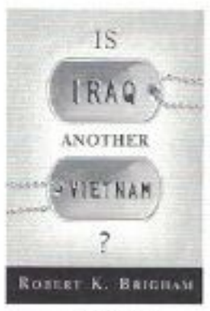
The Shadow of Vietnam

Three historians illuminate the parallels between the Vietnam and Iraq wars



Robert K. Brigham: ***Is Iraq Another Vietnam?*** (Public Affairs).

John Feffer | In Iraq, the United States has vainly tried to escape its shadow—the shadow of Vietnam. No matter how strenuously the Bush administration has tried to outrun the legacy of the Vietnam War—the ignominious defeat, the stains on the US reputation, the subsequent constraints on the exercise of US power—it has discovered that this shadow exerts as much influence as any other fact on the ground. Vietnam simply refuses to go away.

The Bush administration is not the first to try to revise history. George W. Bush's father famously declared after the first Gulf War of 1990 that the United States had buried the "specter" of Vietnam "forever in the desert sands of the Arabian peninsula." The elder Bush was perhaps echoing the famous opening lines of the Communist Manifesto that spoke of communism as a "specter haunting Europe." Having presided over the collapse of communism, Bush set his sights on another specter, this one haunting US foreign policy.

But the specter of Vietnam did not stay buried. By finishing the march to Baghdad that had been suspended in the first Gulf War, George W. Bush acknowledged indirectly that his father's grave-digging techniques were inadequate. The fear of a prolonged ground war and heavy US casualties—the so-called Vietnam syndrome—had stayed the elder Bush's hand. The shock-and-awe attack of Gulf War II of 2003 was designed to bury Vietnam and keep it buried. At first, the media collaborated in the junior Bush's oedipal one-upmanship. American journalists abandoned neutrality to cheer the fall of Saddam Hussein and the seemingly easy military victory. In an August 2003 editorial, the *Christian Science Monitor* proclaimed definitively that "Iraq is not like Vietnam." In those first months of the war, aided by the media, the Bush administration struggled to define Iraq in the public mind as a mission accomplished.

But like father, like son. Whether as shadow, specter, or syndrome, Vietnam is once again haunting the

United States. It has returned as the go-to analogy for pundits and journalists as the Bush administration's attempts to extricate itself from what Senate majority leader Harry Reid has called the greatest foreign policy blunder of US history.

Analogies are by their nature imprecise. Fingerprints, snowflakes, and wars are all different. And indeed, Iraq in many ways does not look like Vietnam. As Robert Brigham points out in his concise and tightly argued new book, *Is Iraq Another Vietnam?*, the scale of the two conflicts is very different. "The total number of allied troops and insurgents fighting in Iraq today equals no more than five percent of those who annually fought in Vietnam," he writes. Also, the Vietnam War began as an insurgency and then grew into a conventional war, while the Iraq War has gone in the opposite direction. There is no superpower confrontation in Iraq. A nationalist consensus in Vietnam served as a centripetal force; confessional divisions in Iraq are tearing the country apart.

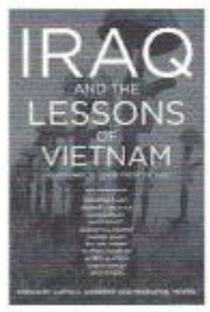
So, Iraq and Vietnam are two different countries. But the United States, tragically, has remained the same, at least in its hubris, hypocrisies, and stunning inability to understand what motivates people in distant lands. As such, the comparison of Iraq and Vietnam illuminates a structural logic in US foreign policy that has endured despite generational shifts and political upheavals at home and profound geopolitical transformations abroad.

The Bush administration has struggled to compare Iraq to other countries, most notably the US counter-insurgency campaigns in El Salvador and Washington's stabilizing commitment to South Korea. But, as a single, elegant example in the July/August 2007 issue of *Foreign Policy* magazine demonstrates, the Vietnam analogy remains more apropos. By simply changing a few words in a 1967 CIA memo—substituting Iraq for Vietnam, insurgents for communists, Iran for the Soviet Union—Kurt Campbell and Shawn Brimley revealed that the United States, contra Heraclitus, could indeed step in the same river twice.

Robert Brigham's book expands on this point, as does a superb collection of essays edited by Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young entitled *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam*. These three history professors have all written on Vietnam before. Their books succeed admirably in demonstrating that the Vietnam analogy applies not just to the current stage of the Iraq War but to the very origins of the debacle.

In both cases, for instance, the US intelligence community warned its respective administrations that the central justifications for the conflict were inaccurate. In an essay in the Gardner and Young book, independent scholar Gareth Porter recalls that the 1961 National Intelligence Estimate saw no prospect of "falling dominos" in Southeast Asia as a result of Vietnam going communist. Forty years later, the CIA saw no link between Iraq and Al Qaeda. In both cases, the administrations appealed to greater fears—communism, terrorism—when the fate of the particular countries did not sufficiently galvanize elite or public support for intervention.

This politicization of intelligence in building the case for war failed in both cases to convince allies. During



Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young: ***Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam*** (New Press).

the Vietnam War, Europe was particularly unenthusiastic. Robert Brigham recounts that Lyndon Johnson "once begged British Prime Minister Harold Wilson to send at least one 'British cook to Vietnam' so that the United States could claim its allies supported its Vietnam policy." In the Gardner and Young book, managing director of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies, Wilfried Mausbach, writes of Johnson's failure to persuade the Germans, whom he held in contempt. The Germans, by and large, returned the favor. They subsequently viewed the arrival of George W. Bush on the political scene as just another Ugly American with a Texas swagger. Even in the countries of "New Europe" that joined the "coalition of the willing," citizens (in contrast to their governments) came out in force to demonstrate against the Iraq War. Europe's low tolerance for bloodletting, a distaste for global ideological campaigns, and rejection of torture techniques that had a whiff of the Gestapo all contributed to widening a transatlantic rift that had almost—but not quite—healed from the Vietnam era.

One of the most disturbing parallels between the two wars is at the tactical level. As Marilyn Young writes, the Bush administration seems to have borrowed counter-insurgency techniques from the past. The "pacification" techniques of targeting insurgents and creating "strategic hamlets" during the Vietnam era have found their parallel in the "clear and hold" tactics of the Iraq War. There is also the same attempt to train an indigenous force to take over the fight—to "Iraqize" as once the United States had "Vietnamized." More disturbing still, the US programs of torture and assassination, which were supposed to have been banished from US practice after the post-Vietnam revelations of the Phoenix program and its ilk, are again a central part of US operations in Iraq. In the post-September 11 environment, when TV viewers sympathize with the torturers of the show "24," the administration has been unapologetic about much of its dirty war. And, as in Vietnam, the tactics are as ineffectual as they are inhuman. Historian Alfred W. McCoy cites to great effect the statements of former CIA agent Ralph McGehee—that the CIA's programs in Vietnam never netted a single Viet Cong agent—and of unnamed military intelligence officers of the coalition that 70 to 90 percent of Iraqi detainees were arrested "by mistake."

The larger aims of the two wars, too, have been a failure, for example state-building. Forty years ago, the United States tried to hold up South Vietnam as legitimate and sovereign. But, as Robert Brigham points out, America's client state in Southeast Asia failed to meet the needs of its people and soon collapsed when the United States withdrew in 1975. Although much experience in state-building has accumulated in the interim, the Bush administration went into Iraq with a group of administrators singularly ill-equipped to help Iraqis build their own nation. The major problem: a refusal to take the particularities of the Iraq situation into account, a reluctance to listen to Iraqis, and an insistence on pursuing certain programs such as de-Baathification regardless of the consequences.

Pro-war enthusiasts at home are not waiting for US helicopters to evacuate the last US personnel from the top of the American embassy in Baghdad before repeating the distortions of their Vietnam-era counterparts. As long as Congress does not tie the military's hands, their argument runs, the Bush administration can still win the Iraq War. Melvin Laird, secretary of defense in the Nixon administration, has tried to salvage his own reputation and that of the United States by arguing that US military strategy in fact worked in Vietnam and it was only the "cut and runners" who undermined US resolve.

Laird, who is effectively rebutted in both books, forgets that the United States is a democracy. The American public turned decisively against the Vietnam War by the end of the 1960s, and Congress respected its wishes by finally drawing down US commitments. South Vietnam might have lasted a little longer with more US aid, but its collapse was just a matter of time. Understanding this dynamic, the Nixon administration was angling in those final months for a "decent interval" between US pullout and communist takeover.

The American public has turned against war once again, and no doubt Bush administration officials are now working out their own version of a "decent interval." Since the Bush administration ignored the lessons of Vietnam when it embarked on war, it will likely pass up the wisdom of the likes of Brigham, Gardiner, and Young. The Iraq War is lost. The question remains: How long a shadow will the Iraq War now cast over America's future?

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