

Vietnam and Iraq

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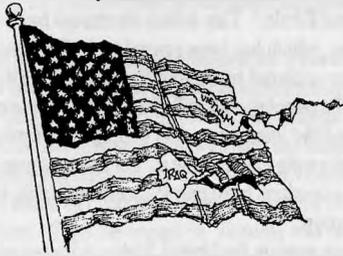
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IV

Vietnam and Iraq By Mike Nicholas '07



The entire body of human history is replete with similar events which echo each other through each generation. Yet in the present day no such parallel has been given more attention, scrutiny and examination than that which is purported to exist between the current war in Iraq and the Vietnam Conflict. Advocates arguing that such a commonality exists between the two are quick to display various points of similarity, complete with the familiar language of words and phrases such as quagmire, stalemate, and exit strategy. Their advocacy is not entirely without merit, for there are striking similarities between Iraq and Vietnam. Yet to label the two wars as parallel suggests only a cursory understanding of the complexly interwoven web of issues that was Vietnam and that has been Iraq. Despite some similarity, they are fundamentally and practically different conflicts, and as such are inherently dissimilar.

At the heart of the difference between the Iraq War and the Vietnam Conflict is the type of war being waged. Vietnam was, at its core, a war for national independence, a people's war characterized by a class based insurgency whose goal was to unite the country against a perceived privileged elite and their occupying allies.¹ This was evident immediately after World War I when Ho Chi Minh traveled to Paris to press for recognition of Vietnamese independence and a national, unified government. France refused to assent, maintaining its colonial control over the southern portion of Vietnam and continuing to tighten its grip over the whole of the country. Further, the Vietnamese had a long history of resisting invading forces dating back to the Qin Dynasty in China. At the time of major American involvement in the conflict, Ho Chi Minh was able to characterize the war not as a defense of communism or a defeat of the United States *per se*, but rather as a war for Vietnamese independence and the dislodging of imperial invaders and their allies. In this sense, the Vietnam War was being fought long before major U.S. involvement in the 1960s, since Ho Chi Minh was able to begin the armed struggle for independence immediately following World War II. Nationalism united

¹ Biddle, Steven. "Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon." Foreign Affairs, Mar/Apr 2006. Vol. 85. Iss. 2

Minh and his followers, as the desire for independence fueled their continued enthusiasm for action.

Iraq, in contrast, has devolved not into a people's war for independence, but a communal war with competing factions advancing different ideologies and agendas. The goal of each of these separate factions has been that of survival over the other, more so than national unity against an outside aggressor. The insurgents in Iraq have offered essentially two competing ideologies, one being a state of permanent jihad (as advocated by Al-Quida), and the other being that the minority Sunni Arabs deserve and are entitled to rule over the majority Shiites and Kurds.² This is best illustrated by the vast majority of insurgent violence (85%) in Iraq, which has been caused by indigenous Sunnis, and further most insurgent actions have occurred in the four Sunni dominated provinces, despite the fact that only 40% of the population live in this area.³ In Vietnam the clear and stated goal of Ho Chi Minh and the insurgency was national unification, as such outside occupation was considered ample cause for war. Yet in Iraq those provinces dominated by Shiite and Kurdish majorities have experienced negligible incidents of violence as a result of U.S. occupation.⁴

The nature of the insurgency against the United States in Iraq versus that faced in Vietnam extends further than the motivation of the enemy. The actual composition, tactics and execution of the war in Iraq has been markedly different than that of Vietnam. The North Vietnamese were known for their skill in fighting a guerilla war, avoiding direct confrontation with the United States in favor of evasive, precision strikes designed to hurt U.S. forces without suffering major losses. These guerilla tactics manifested themselves in the form of ambushes, raids, and various other "small" operations. Despite claims of similarity, such guerilla tactics have been rare in Iraq since 2004. Insurgents have recently operated in small groups of three or four, and have targeted not the bulk of U.S. troops but civilian population centers, Iraqi police forces and Iraqi troops.⁵

The very notion of guerilla warfare presupposes the use of military or paramilitary troops to inflict heavy casualties on the enemy using unconventional means. The enemy in Iraq, unlike the enemy in Vietnam, has proven incapable of accomplishing this task. This is evidenced by the rate of U.S. troop loss as a result of suicide bomb attacks and other confrontations. Instead of losing entire platoons, the U.S. has suffered casualties in groups of eight or nine at a time. Indeed it is considered a "significant loss" should more than a dozen troops die in combat, however in Vietnam the enemy inflicted that many number of casualties in a matter of minutes during any engagement.⁶

Underscoring the organization of the enemy are the political institutions of both countries. Where Vietnam contained a highly organized and established communist government in the north and a quasi-democratic society in the South, Iraq was under dictatorial rule until the end of major combat operations in 2003 when Saddam Hussein was removed by U.S. ground forces. Unlike Vietnam, the entire political structure of the country was placed directly under the U.S.-controlled Coalition Provisional Authority.

² Kagan, Frederick W. "Iraq is Not Vietnam." *Policy Review*. Dec. 2005/Jan. 2006. Iss. 134.

³ Biddle, Steven. "Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon." *Foreign Affairs*. Mar/Apr 2006. Vol. 85. Iss. 2

⁴ Biddle, Steven. "Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon." *Foreign Affairs*. Mar/Apr 2006. Vol. 85. Iss. 2

⁵ Kagan, Frederick W. "Iraq is Not Vietnam." *Policy Review*. Dec. 2005/Jan. 2006. Iss. 134.

⁶ Kagan, Frederick W. "Iraq is Not Vietnam." *Policy Review*. Dec. 2005/Jan. 2006. Iss. 134.

The United States, despite exercising influence over the government of Diem, was never able to wield the entire political structure of Vietnam, and thus was never able to implement its goals for the country as efficiently or with as much control over the distribution of resources as has been available in Iraq. This control allowed the U.S. to transfer sovereignty to Iraq and allow democratic elections to occur in 2005, elections which most Iraqis (particular Shi'a and Kurds) felt were legitimate.⁷ This is in stark contrast to the U.S. efforts to promote democratic reforms in Vietnam; America was never quite able to provide for a democratic government supported by a majority of the South Vietnamese.

The final relevant point of difference between the types of enemy faced during each of the two conflicts is the international support surrounding each opponent. The United States perceived Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese to have the support of China and the Soviet Union, and this perception formed the basis of the domino theory that would be used to justify American entry into Vietnam. Further, this support strongly influenced U.S. policy in terms of conducting the war, both in strategic decisions as well as international negotiations. Thus the enemy in Vietnam was not only the North Vietnamese; it was also the Soviet Union as America's competing superpower and China as the dominant communist Asian power in direct proximity to Vietnam.⁸

Iraq has lacked this dynamic. The United States stands as the world's sole superpower, has been engaged in a coalition action (albeit with the U.S. playing the vastly dominant role), and has faced an enemy that is almost entirely Iraqi (the notable exceptions being some Saudis and Iranians). America has not had to fear the same Cold War consequences when dealing with Iraqi insurgents as it had to consider when dealing with the North Vietnamese. As a result, despite some similarities in the war's conduct, the nature of not only the enemy but of the historical context is considerably different. Without the Cold War as a backdrop, the United States had considerably different goals set for the outcome of the Iraq War than when it sought a satisfactory resolution to the Vietnam conflict.⁹

What the goals of the United States exactly are in entering the Iraq War has remained in dispute between the Bush administration and its various detractors. What is not in dispute at the present time however is the goal of the military forces currently stationed in Iraq: to create an environment stable enough to allow Iraqis to build a working government as well as civilian and military infrastructure sufficient for self-rule.¹⁰ Superficially this can be viewed as a similar situation to Vietnam, where the United States' purported goal was to provide the same security so that South Vietnam could establish the same necessary infrastructure. Yet Vietnam played out differently than Iraq has so far in that as it became painfully clear that the South Vietnamese would not be able to successfully repel the North's advances, or provide security for themselves, General Westmoreland repeatedly requested additional troops. This escalation was allowed due to the Cold War mindset that convinced the Johnson administration into

⁷ Kagan, Frederick W. "Iraq is Not Vietnam." *Policy Review*. Dec. 2005/Jan. 2006. Iss. 134.

⁸ Kann, Peter R. "A Bad Analogy." *The Wall Street Journal*. 8 Sep. 2005. Pg. A18

⁹ Kann, Peter R. "A Bad Analogy." *The Wall Street Journal*. 8 Sep. 2005. Pg. A18

¹⁰ Leibstone, Marvin. "Comparing America's Vietnam and Iraq Episodes." *Military Technology*. 2005. Vol. 25. Iss. 12

believing that the fall of South Vietnam would mean the fall of the Asian continent to the specter of communism.¹¹

No such specter exists in the current situation in Iraq. While it remains to be seen whether or not additional troop commitment is necessary or if the Iraqis will ever be fully capable of providing for their own security, the key difference between the two conflicts is that there is no national or unified opponent to Iraqi self-governance. Rather, there are factions advancing ideologies that at times conflict. Unlike Vietnam, there is no primary aggressor force with enough strength to adequately challenge the United States, there are only various pockets of insurgency that inflict physical and psychological damage through small and specific actions, not military engagements. This situation alone represents a different dynamic in the execution of the Iraq conflict as opposed to that in Vietnam. It is impossible to tell at this moment whether or not this different dynamic will produce a different ending.

Running parallel to the comparison of the international context is the comparison of the major differences in reason as to why each conflict was entered by the United States. With Vietnam, the U.S. had sent military advisors to South Vietnam from the end of World War II all the way to the early 60s, but failed to formally commit military forces until an attack was made (presumably) against U.S. ships patrolling the Gulf of Tonkin. This action led to an eponymous resolution authorizing President Johnson to take all necessary measures to protect U.S. interests in Vietnam. The Iraq War, by contrast, was begun on the belief that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and that such action was necessary in the war on terrorism.¹² What is significant about each of these justifications is not the validity (or lack thereof) but the doctrine behind each. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was purported to be a response to an attack, a "second strike" as a result of the first blow being delivered by the Vietnamese. The authorizing resolution given to President Bush was known as pre-emptive warfare, entered into to prevent future aggression, even though no such aggression had manifested as a result of Iraq's actions.¹³

In essence, this doctrinal difference is significant in terms of answering the Vietnam-era question of "why are we here?" While the answers sounds similar (to stop communism / to stop terrorism) the basis for each answer is significantly different in that an attack was believed to have been made against the United States while in Iraq the United States made a preemptive strike.

Furthermore, the diversity of media outlets and coverage of the Iraq War has led to greater debate and division in the opposition to the Iraq War than in the Vietnam War. When Walter Cronkite declared the war lost after the Tet Offensive (despite the battle having actually been won by the United States) the vast majority of both the media and the psyche of the nation went with him. In that era, the news was covered primarily by the three major news outlets. In Iraq, cable news channels and a greater diversity of opinion has led to a more diverse opinion about the war in Iraq.¹⁴ While there was near unanimous opposition to the continued involvement of U.S. troops after 1970 in Vietnam,

¹¹ Leibstone, Marvin. "Comparing America's Vietnam and Iraq Episodes." Military Technology, 2005. Vol. 25. Iss. 12

¹² Cohen, Richard. "Vietnam It Isn't." The Washington Post, 30 October 2003. Pg. A23

¹³ Cohen, Richard. "Vietnam It Isn't." The Washington Post, 30 October 2003. Pg. A23

¹⁴ Krauthammer, Charles. "This is Hardly Vietnam." The Washington Post, 16 April 2004. Pg. A21

Iraq has yet to reach such critical mass, and the diversity in public opinion remains a key difference between the two conflicts.

Despite the significant differences in the political, social and military landscape in Iraq and Vietnam, the most striking and significant difference between the two conflicts lies in the level of U.S. troop commitment, and more importantly in U.S. casualties. As of March 2006, the total troop commitment of the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq combined has reached approximately 150,000, which pales in comparison to the approximately 530,000 U.S. service personnel that were in Vietnam at the height of U.S. involvement. Even more striking is the number of casualties incurred by the U.S. during this three-plus year conflict. To date [April 2006], the U.S. has suffered roughly 2,200 casualties after three years, compared to over 46,000 deaths due to combat actions in Vietnam over 10 years, not including over 10,000 additional deaths due to non-combat causes.¹⁵

The significantly less amount of casualties in Iraq can be attributed to the composition of the U.S. service personnel. Here lies another key difference between Iraq and Vietnam. In Vietnam, substantial portions of the armed services were comprised of draftees, with some 50,000 per month being inducted and sent to Vietnam at the height of the conflict. The forces occupying Iraq are constituted entirely by volunteers.¹⁶ This has led to a better-trained and more professional fighting force capable of adapting to the demands of desert warfare more efficiently than their Vietnam counterparts. Furthermore, President Bush made the decision to call up the reserves and send them to Iraq, something that President Johnson refused to do in the case of Vietnam. The result has maintained a constant flow of professional soldiers into the Iraq conflict, while draftees comprised the majority of new entrants into the Vietnam conflict.¹⁷

None of these illustrative differences serve to categorically deny that there are some stark similarities between Iraq and Vietnam. Similar problems and difficulties have been here presented, and it is true that the end goal of Iraq, like that of Vietnam, is not quite clear. Further, there is no evidence that the war in Iraq can be won quickly, easily, or even "won" at all (dependant on definition). Yet despite these similarities, and despite the same potential for quagmire and stalemate, it is in the reasons for entering the war, the composition of the enemy and their tactics, the political landscape, the international context, the media coverage and the casualty ratio that we find clear and distinct differences between the two conflicts. Iraq may echo Vietnam, but it is its own problem, its own war, and will ultimately contain its own solution. Despite some notion of parallel between the two, Iraq and Vietnam are inherently dissimilar wars.

¹⁵ Sorley, Lewis. "No More Vietnams." The American Enterprise, Mar. 2006. Vol. 17. Iss. 2.

¹⁶ Sorley, Lewis. "No More Vietnams." The American Enterprise, Mar. 2006. Vol. 17. Iss. 2.

¹⁷ Sorley, Lewis. "No More Vietnams." The American Enterprise, Mar. 2006. Vol. 17. Iss. 2.

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