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Both critics and supporters of the current conflict in Iraq use the Vietnam War to support their arguments. Most directly, retired four-star Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni, former commander of Central Command and special envoy to Israel and the Palestinian Authority early in the current Administration, said, "I have seen this movie. It was called Vietnam."[1] Anti-Iraq war critics like Zinni use the Vietnam analogy to suggest that the current war is another quagmire that simply devours resources with no positive outcome in sight. On the other side, some Administration supporters suggest that both Vietnam and Iraq were not only necessary but winnable if the American people didn't "cut and run." Naturally, both sides use the past selectively. Since that tactic is facilitated by our fading collective memory of the Vietnam conflict, one of my objectives is to highlight some aspects of the earlier conflict and to work through possible similarities and differences. My hope is that by the end of this essay it will be evident where the "Iraq is Vietnam" analogy provides beneficial insights and where it obscures important differences.

Getting In

I would argue that we got into both conflicts for ideological or idealistic reasons rather than because of some specific provocation as in World War II or Korea. The prime impetus for Vietnam was the Truman Doctrine: the belief that the spread of communism anywhere threatens the success and survival of democracy. As we all remember, war with Iraq was promoted by pointing to the much more concrete threat posed by Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). While fear of WMD clearly played a role, it has become increasingly clear that many within the current Administration were driven by a much broader vision of bringing democracy to the countries of the Middle East. Saddam had to be toppled as a first step, so the issue of whether he had destroyed his WMD was really beside the point.

While the decision-making process in both wars was strongly shaped by ideology, the process was very different. Our involvement in Vietnam evolved gradually from monetary help for the French in the early 1950s to aid and advisers in the late 1950s to "advisers" who were "training under combat conditions" in the early 1960s, and finally

to full use of the American military. Each escalation was approved reluctantly with the goal of doing "just enough" while avoiding deeper involvement. No one planned on eventually deploying more than 500,000 American soldiers in Vietnam, but it always seemed necessary to send a few more men since what we had done wasn't working. Presidents made the decisions, with little debate or authorization from the legislative branch. Congress' most significant vote on the war was the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. This measure, which gave President Lyndon Johnson the open-ended authority to "deter further aggression," was passed amid misleading intelligence from the White House on the events precipitating the request. This deception certainly eased Johnson's path, but given the intensity of Cold War attitudes in 1964, the question wasn't really whether we should act, but rather how forcefully. Any American political leader who failed to try to save South Vietnam from communism at that point would have been severely criticized.

In contrast to the slow, hesitant slide into Vietnam, there was a clear decision to invade Iraq, which was made by an inner circle who then sold the idea to the public. While Congress had more of a role with Iraq than with Vietnam, we never quite got to the clear declaration of war stipulated in the Constitution. In October 2002, Congress authorized the president to use American forces against Iraq and encouraged him to help enforce relevant UN resolutions. Since the resolution expressed support for efforts to obtain "prompt and decisive action by the Security Council," those involved could argue that they were simply strengthening the hand of the president as he worked to create a collective response.[2] When the UN declined to act, we went ahead with the invasion on our own. Images of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and links to al Qaida served like the "domino theory" of communist expansion during the Cold War to encourage Congressional and public support for the invasion. As we now know, those claims were based on mistaken or distorted evidence.

Relations with the Client Government

In both conflicts, we soon found ourselves in an ambiguous relationship with the client government. We insisted that the Republic of South Vietnam (Saigon) was a sovereign nation, and that we were simply providing assistance against external aggression from North Vietnam. We, however, provided massive economic aid, put American advisers in every ministry, and supported a coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963 because we thought we couldn't prevail with him in power. From then on it was clear that the leaders in Saigon held power only with the approval of the U.S. government.

In Iraq, we played up the emergence of an Iraqi government following parliamentary elections in December 2005. Although the coalition under Nouri al-Maliki was technically in charge, many of the laws promulgated by Coalition Provisional Authority, including those exempting Coalition civilians from prosecution under Iraqi law, remained in place. More importantly, since al-Maliki's government obviously depends on the U.S. military for security, it isn't truly sovereign. At the same time, however, we can't force al-Maliki to do our bidding. For example, he has refused to transfer the police out of the Ministry of Interior or to crack down on Shiite extremists. Furthermore, al-Maliki, as with the Saigon government, has been unable to reduce the massive corruption within his government. In both cases, the client governments needed the U.S. to survive, but that very dependency undermined their credibility and capacity to win the support of their people.

Who is the Enemy?

What about the nature of the opposition? In the Vietnam War, the official position was that our ally, the sovereign government of South Vietnam was fending off an invasion by North Vietnam, which was encouraged and supported as part of a global conquest by the Soviet Union and China. Critics of this position insisted that the conflict was a civil war rather than an invasion. In this interpretation, the National Liberation Front was largely a southern indigenous force that had turned to the North Vietnamese for help as the U.S. increased its aid to the government in Saigon. Despite this debate, it became quite clear as the war evolved that the National Liberation Front and the North Vietnamese generally shared the same goals and had an increasingly coordinated command structure.

Iraq is a very different story. Once Saddam Hussein had been overthrown, our official position was that we were simply trying to clean up the remnants of his Baathist supporters. That was then amended to include local and foreign fighters associated in some way with al Qaida in Iraq. As the story has evolved, things have gotten more complex. Obviously, we are not only fighting former Baathists and Islamic extremists, but also Sunni nationalists and Shiites. Furthermore, we have to deal with common criminals who have created a substantial kidnapping industry, and as we saw in Najaf in 2007, even armed millennial cults are challenging us.

Those who have looked more deeply find even greater complexity. While American media generally talk about Shiites as a single group, Rory Stewart, a young British diplomat in charge of a Southern Shiite province under the Coalition Provisional Authority, noted with some surprise that there were more than 50 antagonistic Shia

parties in his area.³ With some oversimplification, most Shia fit into one of three major groups: the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (until May 2007 named the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq), the Sadrists, and Dawa. Their histories are intertwined, but there are deep divisions and much mistrust. Perhaps most importantly, the first two have powerful militias (respectively the Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army) who have fought each other as well as us. Now it appears that al-Sadr has lost control of some of his forces, and the Mahdi Army has splintered into factions that are attacking each other.

Slicing it a different way, on top of the most obvious Sunni–Shiite Arab division, there are also conflicts between Arabs and Kurds (and Turkomen and others) in some areas. We tend to think of the Kurds as one unit, but as recently as the mid-1990s, the two major Kurdish parties were at war with each other and one made a deal to get assistance from Saddam. And if that weren't enough, there is the overlay of tribal loyalties. Experts estimate that there are 150 major tribes in Iraq, plus 2,000 smaller ones. Membership often spans the various religious/ethnic divisions, and the tribal affiliation takes precedence.

Iraq, in short, should be classified as a free-for-all, rather than a civil war. This mosaic obviously has made the creation of a viable government difficult, and certainly threatens future stability. Finally, since there is no single opponent, if we did want to negotiate an exit as we did in Vietnam, it is hard to see who we would sit down with.

Iraq is also different in that the enemy isn't the client of a major state the way that the North Vietnamese were linked to the Soviet Union and China. The Bush Administration has argued that the enemy in Iraq has received help from Iran, but even if that is the case, the level of assistance pales in comparison to the aid our Cold War rivals poured into Vietnam. That assistance enabled the North Vietnamese to blunt our escalation, and certainly increased the cost in American lives. At the same time, however, the Nixon's diplomatic overtures to the Chinese and Soviets paid dividends in 1973 when they encouraged the Vietnamese to give in on portions of the peace agreement. In contrast, even if we successfully opened diplomatic doors to Iran, the Iranian influence would be less significant since it would be limited to the more pro-Iranian Shia groups.

Fighting a Guerrilla War

Iraq and Vietnam are similar in that the enemy has relied on the tactics of guerrilla warfare. In the classic model, the guerrillas counter the superior military power of their opponents by remaining largely undetected while staging hit-and-run attacks. They

live among and off the local populace, strike at times of their choosing, and then disappear back into the civilian population. Iraq certainly fits this model, with the enemy's overwhelming reliance on improvised explosive devices and sniper fire. Although there were some conventional battles in Vietnam, especially later in the war, that conflict also generally followed the guerrilla model.

In most conflicts that contain an element of guerrilla warfare, there are deeply committed people on both sides, be they rebellious colonists and Tories in our Revolutionary War, or the Vietcong and supporters of the Saigon government in Vietnam. At the same time, however, somewhere between 40% and 60% of the population are typically not ready to fight and die unless they get pushed in some direction. These are people who generally don't care a whole lot about who is in power so long as they have peace, an opportunity to raise their children, and a chance for a decent life. (If this strikes you as strange, keep in mind that only about half of the eligible voters in this country care enough about who rules to bother to go to the polls, and that doesn't entail any risk!)

Obviously, to win in a guerrilla war, you have to get support from that big group in the middle. There are two keys to doing that. First, you can't do anything that will drive them to the other side. Second, you need to offer them something they want. And what is that? It isn't freedom, or communism, or an Islamic state, or anything else having to do with how the society is ordered. If they had wanted one of those things badly, they would already be aligned. Instead, what they want is security and a chance for a better life.

Vietnam

To what extent did our practice in Vietnam follow this model? Our two primary military tactics in Vietnam were bombing, and search-and-destroy operations on the ground. We dropped more tons of bombs on Vietnam than were used in World War II, often delivered by high-flying B-52's. Our search-and-destroy efforts most often meant American troops sweeping an area for bad guys, and in the process destroying crops and supplies that the enemy could use in the future. Even worse, we frequently made the assumption that a given area was under enemy control and that anyone remaining was therefore to be killed. Both bombing and search-and-destroy missions struck at the enemy, but they also meant killing and/or displacing millions of Vietnamese peasants in the uncommitted group. Getting bombed, shot at, or having your house burned understandably made them more willing to assist the enemy or take up arms against the Americans. In short, our basic approach to the war in Vietnam violated the first principle of fighting in a guerrilla war.

Our approach also violated the second principle in two ways. First, in most cases we didn't provide security for those who might have been inclined to support us. We preferred attacking the enemy to defending potential allies, so as soon as we moved out of an area, the enemy returned to demand supplies, recruits, and of course to kill anyone who had collaborated with the Americans. In short, for the undecided, supporting the Americans didn't seem to open the door to a more secure life.

We also violated the second principle with what we did offer. The underlying premise of the democracy and capitalism that we promoted is a focus on individual desires, which was at odds with the values of the traditional, non-Westernized segment of Vietnamese society. In the world of many of the people we were trying to reach, the primary responsibility was not to individual desires, but to family, both living and departed. Young people were to farm ancestral lands and pay proper attention to ancestral graves rather than pursing individual economic gain. Similarly, voting your own interest had no resonance in a culture where local elders and more distant rulers were to be obeyed as long as they had the mandate of heaven, which was evident through peace and stability. In this world, fighting and dying for freedom, democracy, individualism, or economic opportunity didn't make much sense.

Iraq

So what about Iraq? How have we done there in adhering to the two key principles for winning guerrilla wars?

On the positive side, since neither bombing nor search-and-destroy missions have been central to our approach in Iraq, we have avoided a policy that almost by definition insures attacks on non-combatants. We have, however, employed parallel strategies on a smaller scale that drive the undecided into opposition. Let me list a few examples.

First, when we stormed Fallujah (and other places that have come under opposition control), we largely destroyed the city in an effort to root out the enemy. The population was thus displaced, and left to return to shattered lives.

Second, in some areas of Iraq, local American commanders made a practice of rounding up large numbers for the apparent crime of being male and of military age. When these people are imprisoned for weeks or months with no opportunity to prove their innocence, some decide that they might as well join those resisting Coalition forces.

Third, it has also been standard practice for American units to raid homes in the middle of the night searching for suspected insurgents. Since our intelligence is anything but foolproof, this means smashing down doors, invading the sanctuary of the home, and arresting lots of people who had not aligned themselves with anyone. As Thomas Ricks has argued in *Fiasco*, this practice assaulted the core of Iraqi manhood by violating the space he was supposed to protect, and proving his powerlessness in front of his family. According to one officer cited by Ricks, many Iraqis fired on Americans in 2003 not because they were committed insurgents, but as a way of trying to restore their sense of personal honor.[4]

Fourth, until General David Petraeus began stationing small American units in neighborhoods, our troops typically were visible to most Iraqis only as they swept through in heavily armored convoys. The U.S. military called this presence patrolling; it was intended to show our power and willingness to take on bad guys. Proud Iraqis saw the patrols as occupiers flaunting their domination and the impotence of the natives.

Finally, both American military personnel and various private contractors have responded to insurgent attacks on convoys with a "shoot first" attitude: any Iraqi who got too close or who was seen in any way as a potential threat was fired upon. The point I am trying to make is that in a number of areas, choices we made in terms of how to prosecute the war undercut the first premise of guerrilla warfare by doing things that drove the undecided into active opposition.

What about the second premise for successful counter-insurgency: providing the undecided something they want, such as security or hope for a better future. Obviously, we have failed on the security side, particularly as sectarian killings escalated in 2005–2006. These killings, as well as the rampant kidnappings, have driven out much of the Iraqi professional class, so many of those who might support our goals and help build the country are now exiles. Even for those Iraqis living in relative safety in ethnically homogeneous areas, the lack of electricity and jobs send the message that the American approach hasn't moved the nation toward a better future.

And what about the attraction of the democracy that we have proclaimed as part of a better future for the Middle East? Certainly this matters for some Iraqis, particularly the Western educated elites, but what about the masses? Traditional Iraqi society is structured around family and clan/kinship ties; the idea of voting independently for your own individual interests is an awkward fit. Furthermore, the practice of democratic government requires tolerance and some certainty that being on the losing side doesn't mean death or oppression. Iraqis have not had the opportunity to develop those traditions. Their experience suggests that those in power oppress and, as we

have seen with the various sectarian battles, many Shia and Sunni share a fundamental distrust. My point, then, is that to say that we are bringing "freedom" to these people is not particularly effective. Just as in Vietnam, we are asking the mass of Iraqis to join us, fight, and die for something that is pretty alien to their experience.

Fighting and Dying

One of the biggest differences between the wars in Vietnam and Iraq is the number of Americans killed. While I certainly do not want to minimize the pain for each family that has lost someone in Iraq, the current war has been relatively "cheap" compared to Vietnam. After five years of war, slightly more than 4,000 American troops have been killed. In Vietnam, the final total over eight years was approximately 58,000, with yearly totals of 5,000 in 1966, 9,000 in 1967, 14,000 in 1968, 9,000 in 1969, and 4,000 in 1970.

As the death totals might suggest, the two conflicts are also different in terms of the size of the U.S. force. We had about 200,000 troops in the region during the March 2003 invasion, but only 148,000 in Iraq. Since then, the total force has fluctuated, with lows around 130,000, and peaks of 160,000 prior to the 2005 parliamentary elections and again in 2007 with the so-called "surge." In contrast, our troop strength in Vietnam rose from 184,000 in 1965 to a peak of 545,000 in 1969 before dropping to 156,000 in 1971.

One reason why we were able to sustain such a large force in Vietnam was that the U.S. military was much larger. In the Vietnam era we had approximately 3.5 million on active duty (including National Guard and Reserves); the comparable figure now is 1.5 million. The larger force in the Vietnam era meant that those who saw combat typically served a single one-year tour. To compensate for our smaller military now, some units are on their third and fourth rotation in Iraq, and to create the "surge" we had to extend tours well beyond a year. The smaller size of the military has also meant an increased reliance on private contractors. Most estimates suggest that there are approximately 60,000 civilians working for the U.S. in Iraq, with a quarter to a third of them doing some kind of armed security work.

What about who does the fighting and dying? In both wars, those from less educated, less advantaged backgrounds have been overrepresented in the military. Beyond that similarity, however, there are striking differences between the two wars. In Vietnam, our force consisted almost entirely of young men in the regular military. Only a few Reserve and National Guard units were deployed, and the average age of those serving in Vietnam was 19. Some were true volunteers, but many were draftees or

people who had enlisted in order to reduce their chance of combat by choosing a "safe" service. In contrast, everyone in uniform today has in some way volunteered, and the structure of the force is very different. Women constitute at least 15% of the military and carry out roles unthinkable forty years ago. Reserve and National Guard units are deployed alongside the regular military; for a while in late 2005, they constituted almost half of all U.S. troops in Iraq. The average age for active duty troops is 27, with National Guard soldiers at 33.[5]

These differences in who serves have several important implications. First, most in the Defense Department argue that today's force is much better motivated and trained. Second, the professionalization of the military, the inclusion of women, and the use of Reserve/Guard units means that more of our soldiers are also spouses and parents, with the attendant impact on children and families. Third, the use of the Reserve and National Guard means that specific communities are affected by call-ups in disproportionate ways, and businesses and careers of people who signed up for limited duty are disrupted. Fourth, the volunteer nature of today's military exempts everyone else. In the Vietnam era, most young men had a personal stake in understanding the war and related issues; today those who wish to can largely ignore the debate on Iraq.

Allies' Reaction

The two wars are quite similar in terms of their impact on our standing in the world. We entered Vietnam in part to prove our willingness to support those on our side in the Cold War. As the conflict escalated after 1965, however, many of our friends came to see our commitment as obsession. Even the usually reliable British criticized us publicly, while only Australia and South Korea sent troops. With Iraq, there was more world disapproval from the beginning. The Administration claimed the support of a "coalition of the willing" that included 44 nations. Britain, Spain, Italy, and Poland contributed troops, but most of the rest offered only small medical or training teams. As a result, we supplied 85% of the troops. (In contrast, during the first Gulf war, using similar ways of counting, we had a coalition of over 100 countries, with others providing 45% of the troops and paying 88% of the monetary cost.) Since the invasion, many in the "coalition of the willing" have withdrawn or reduced their troop commitments, while other allies continue to lament our folly. The high levels of support we had around the world after the 9/11 attacks have vanished, as public opinion polls show negative attitudes toward the U.S. even among old allies and those in moderate Muslim states.

Responding to Public Opinion

One of the most striking similarities between the Vietnam and Iraq wars lies in the trajectory of domestic support. In August 1965, soon after the first regular U.S. combat units went to Vietnam, 61% approved, while only a quarter thought we were making a mistake. Similarly, as much as 75% of the public approved of the Iraq invasion in March 2003. In both cases, the public gradually tired of the war. With Iraq, the lack of progress and the strain on the military from multiple deployments appears to have been the key factors in convincing 60% or more by early 2007 that we had made a mistake. In Vietnam, it took almost three years, close to 20,000 combat deaths, and the apparent lack of progress revealed in the February 1968 Tet offensive before a plurality regretted our engagement.

Vietnam War protestors line the road during Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey's visit to Saint John's University for the Alcuin Library dedication, May 7, 1966. (Photo #251 of the Brother Linus Ascheman Heritage Photo Collection)

The response of the Johnson, Nixon, and Bush administrations to the waning of public support has generally followed the same course. Efforts were made to insist that we really were making progress, that media coverage was presenting a biased, defeatist vision, and that the cost of withdrawal would be catastrophic. These rhetorical responses were accompanied by efforts to turn our supposed allies in the country into a viable military force. In the earlier war, we talked of "Vietnamization," which

meant building up a South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) that was ineffective, rife with political intrigue, and racked by high rates of desertion, so that American troops could be withdrawn. Nixon did cut U.S. troop strength from 545,000 in 1969 to 156,000 at the end of 1971 and 24,000 the next year. Although cause and effect are difficult to sort out, it seems that American withdrawals were not dependent on ARVN proving its competence. We continued to withdraw despite moments like ARVN's disastrous incursion into Laos in 1971.

On the other hand, ARVN's performance in the spring of 1972 was generally improved, although American air power is generally given a key role blunting the communist offensive. Vietnamization then was a success in that we withdrew our troops and built up ARVN. On the other hand, there were at least two problems with our approach. First, we created an army that fought as we did and therefore suffered the same vulnerabilities without our immense resources. More importantly, creating a more efficient military did not solve the underlying political problem of winning support from the majority of Vietnamese. For these reasons and others, the South Vietnamese Army collapsed quickly when confronted with a North Vietnamese offensive in April 1975. Obviously, we are again seeking to turn an ill-equipped, inefficient, and sectarian force into a military that can take over for us in Iraq. We have yet to see whether the result will parallel Vietnam or follow some other course.

While administrations responded to declining public support with rhetoric and by shifting the burden to our local allies, domestic opponents of both wars turned to Congress as a means to reverse executive branch policies. After Nixon expanded the war into Cambodia in May 1970, popular outrage encouraged the Senate to pass the Cooper–Church Resolution, which cut off funding for operations in Cambodia. Although a significant symbolic step, this measure had little practical impact since American troops were leaving Cambodia as the measure cleared the Senate, and the House didn't concur until later. Soon afterwards, in January 1971, Congress repealed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which President Johnson had pointed to as legitimizing his actions. Nixon, however, insisted that his power as Commander in Chief enabled him to continue the war without Congressional authorization. Since Congress wasn't willing to take the drastic step of cutting off all funding, Nixon's ability to prosecute the war was unaffected. In our current situation, many anti-war activists believed that the Democratic capture of Congress in the 2006 elections would force a change in the Administration's policies. The Vietnam experience suggests that this isn't likely.

Aside from the structural factors that make it difficult for the legislative branch to rein in the executive's ability to conduct a war, there is another critical factor: those who see the war as a mistake are generally not willing to accept defeat and its conse-

quences as the cost of getting out. Just as in the Vietnam era, those who don't like the current situation in Iraq demand an end to our participation, but generally want a "solution" that avoids all the worst case scenarios. If the Vietnam experience is any guide, our extrication from Iraq will come only when leaders find a face-saving agreement, and when the public is so frustrated that they are willing to ignore the probability of defeat in order to be done.

Our exit from Vietnam was accomplished through the Paris Accords of 1973. Since the agreement left North Vietnamese troops in place in the south while the U.S. withdrew, it is hard to imagine it leading to anything other than the eventual communist victory. A tri-partite commission was supposed to move the country toward elections, but actions on all sides made it clear that the situation would be resolved by force. Despite this, the Accords were acceptable to the American people for at least two reasons. First, we got our POWs back. Second, the agreement, and the delivery of massive military supplies to the South, permitted the illusion that we were simply completing the process of Vietnamization by handing off the war to a newly empowered ally. (Although we didn't know it at the time, this was reinforced by Nixon's secret promise to launch massive air attacks if the enemy violated the cease fire.) By 1973, many Americans didn't care whether the Accords gave the Saigon government a real opportunity to survive. They had decided that continuing the war wasn't worth the cost, even if it meant that the North would win.

Consequences

As Nixon and others had warned, the communist victory in 1975 did have a number of negative repercussions. Thousands of Vietnamese fled as the Saigon government collapsed, while others who had sided with us were killed or sent to "re-education" camps. Later, many more died as they tried to flee in small boats. Beyond the personal tragedy, the unified communist Vietnam did prove to be expansionist, invading Cambodia in 1978. Its purpose, however, was not the ideological conquest Americans had been taught to fear in the Cold War, but rather to deal with problems created by Cambodia's Pol Pot regime. The 1975 defeat also capped the trend toward a more cautious American foreign policy that had been building through the last years of the war. That caution, combined with a new Soviet aggressiveness, led to an expansion of Soviet influence in parts of Africa in the late 1970s.

In a larger sense, however, the cost of our defeat in Vietnam was less than many had feared. Our international prestige was so damaged by the war itself that the impact of the communist victory could hardly be measured. More specifically, the domino

theory proved to be false; our departure did not mean that Sino–Soviet proxies would spread communism throughout Southeast Asia. The Vietnamese and Chinese confounded that vision with a brief border skirmish in 1979, and the Vietnamese eventually pulled out of Cambodia. Eventually, twenty-five years later, the world had turned to the point where an American president could travel to Vietnam as we established full diplomatic relations with our former enemy.

What about the consequences if we pull out of Iraq? Early in the war, Administration figures argued that victory would mean the creation of a stable, unified, pro-western Iraqi democracy that could trigger the transformation of the Middle East. Since that definition of success has been revealed as absurdly optimistic, proponents of an ongoing American commitment now most frequently define our goals as creating stability, insuring that Iraq doesn't become a terrorist haven, and maintaining our credibility by proving that "these colors don't run." There is in these arguments an implicit assumption that without the American military presence and diplomatic pressure, the current coalition government in Iraq would collapse.
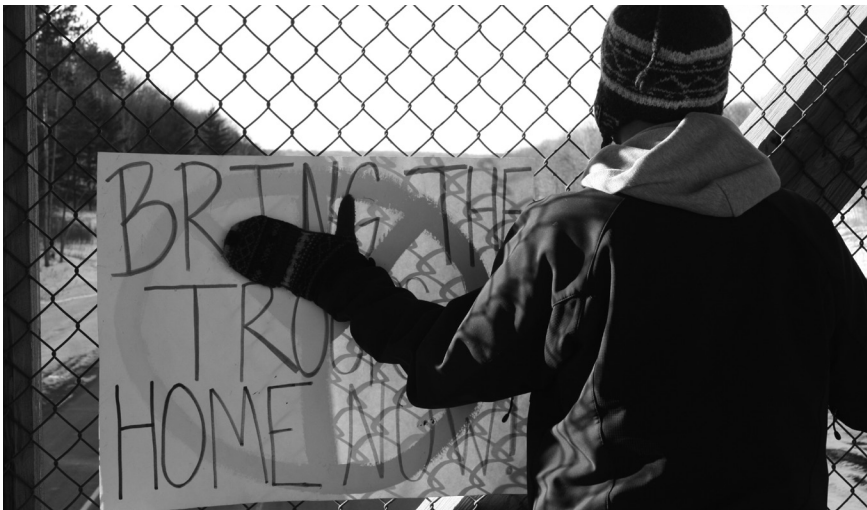
"Bring the Troops Home Now!" Iraq war protestor on the I-94 footbridge adjacent to the Saint John's University campus, February 27, 2008. (Photo by Masaaki Genka, *The Record*)

Our estimation of what would happen if we did withdraw is obviously a critical variable as we argue about staying the course or terminating our role, so let me work through some of the possibilities. First, as the Administration suggests, Iraq could become a failed state and thus a staging ground for terrorists. This is certainly a possibility, but since there are already numerous places in the world open to terrorists, it seems

to me that that threat will continue regardless of the situation in Iraq. Given the way that things have evolved so far, a more likely result of a U.S. withdrawal is a division of Iraq into separate Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish states. This, too, has lots of potentially disastrous results. If the separate states fight over territory, oil revenues, or treatment of minority populations, they might call for support from Iran or some of the Sunni states and so provoke a wider war. Or, a Kurdish state could generate war with Turkey and/or Iran by trying to bring the Kurdish areas of those countries under its control. In either case, a regional war would be enormously destabilizing, and would have a dramatic impact on world oil prices.

Another, somewhat less disastrous possible outcome of a divided Iraq is that the Iraqi Shia would lean more heavily on Iran. If our current tensions with Iran continue, such an alliance could threaten oil supplies as well as our Sunni allies in the region. On the other hand, Iranian–U.S. hostility is not guaranteed. Their leadership is complex and shifting, and they have worked with us when it suited them, such as in the removal of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The most optimistic possibility is that Iraq could divide into three separate, relatively stable states. Obviously, this vision rests on the huge assumption that they can settle the issues noted above. Even if this huge barrier can be overcome, this outcome would still be detrimental to our interests; a divided Iraq can't provide a counterweight to Iran in the region, and our prestige would suffer by falling so short of our stated goals at the onset of the war. While it is anyone's guess as to which of these scenarios will emerge, it seems highly likely that the consequences of an American withdrawal from Iraq will be much more threatening to our interests than was the case with Vietnam.

Lessons from History?

Wise historians prefer to have a century's perspective before they write about the past. They also know that every human experience is unique, so any effort to draw lessons from past events risks a misleading obscuring of differences in the search for guidance. I, however, am going to continue to go out on a limb and end by offering some general observations or lessons that I think can be drawn from our recent experiences in Vietnam and Iraq. Those of you who are going to take on leadership roles in our country, please take notes!

The first is that we need to understand that there will always be threats to our security; the key to living in the world as an individual or nation is figuring out the proper balance between the danger and the cost of trying to remove it. During the Cold War, we lived for forty years with Soviet nuclear warheads aimed at us but didn't

try to remove their weapons of mass destruction because the effort might have led to a catastrophic World War III. More recently, the Bush administration has avoided acting against North Korea, which I see as the most threatening country in the world at this point, because the dangers of doing so are too great. Or to put it on another level, almost 20,000 Americans are killed in alcohol-related car accidents every year, yet we have refused to respond as other countries have with life-time driving bans for DUI's and/or devices that keep inebriated people from starting cars. We have decided that we value our freedom and mobility so much that we are willing to put up with the carnage. My point is that when we see a threat like communism or weapons of mass destruction or terrorists, before we act, we need to make some calculation of the trade-off between the threat and cost of trying to remove it.

Second, we should remember that it is always a lot easier to start a conflict than it is to end it. Getting in to a war requires only a unilateral decision, often made by a small group of people, to use military force; ending a war always requires a broad political agreement between contending parties, even if it is only acknowledgement by the enemy that they will no longer resist. Getting to that political solution is always difficult and involves a lot more than simply killing people.

Third, before we act, we need to make some calculations about the people in the target country that go deeper than "they will welcome us because our motives are pure." Even if people don't like their current condition or leaders, many will resist outsiders, and the anger will grow as the outsiders assume control and/or kill innocent civilians, which is an inevitable part of war. It may not be fair, but the outsider is going to get blamed. We need to remember this, and ask ourselves if we can overcome this problem sufficiently to create a political solution. We also need to think more deeply about those who invite our intervention in their country. Do they really share our values? Is their cause worth dying for? Who do they represent? We need to understand that it is always possible to find people in a foreign country who will welcome us, and must keep in mind that they are promoting their own interests and have no monopoly on what is good for their country. To listen to them tell us what they know we want to hear is to be a fool.

Fourth, we have to acknowledge that the worst-case scenario may be the one that will occur. American policy makers never thought that Vietnam would require over half a million troops and almost 60,000 American deaths. When people like George Ball suggested that it might, he was ridiculed. My guess is that George Bush really believed that we were going to waltz into Iraq and get out quickly, even though people in and out of government said otherwise. We all want to assume that our decisions will turn out well, but it seems to me that as a policy maker, you shouldn't take the

first step unless you decide that the goal is so important that it is worth pursuing even if the worst case scenario is correct.

Fifth, policy makers need to root their decision making in the worst-case scenario not only because of the potential cost in lives, but because all wars have a domestic political front. Support will wane as the conflict continues, especially if there is no clear evidence of progress and the definition of victory is uncertain or shifting. Presidents can wage war despite this criticism, but in a democracy eventually the erosion of public support will affect their ability to sustain the military effort. This is especially true when the available military force depends on volunteers.

My last point reaches all the way back to the Greeks: we must beware of hubris, the sin of overweening pride. We are quite rightly proud of our nation, its values and its power. That does not, however, mean that we are always right; we all can be and are blinded by our assumptions. We need to understand that not everyone shares our values or sees our intervention as beneficial. We also need to understand that while we are clearly the most powerful military nation in the world, that doesn't mean we are omnipotent. Some problems are simply not amenable to military force, and even with our vast power, we can't occupy and police nations where a substantial portion of the population is determined to resist.

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Notes

1. April, 2004. As quoted in Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco*, Penguin Books, 2007, p. 362.

2. Congressional Research Service, *Report for Congress: Iraq War? Current Situation and Issues for Congress*, Library of Congress, January 29, 2003, p. 10.

3. Rory Stewart, *Prince of the Marshes*, Harcourt, 2006, p. 230.

4. Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco*, Penguin Books, 2007, p. 252.

5. Evidence on age from official sources is difficult to find. These numbers were used in a speech by U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar during the debate on the Defense Authorization bill on July 11, 2007.

Editor's Note

An earlier version of this article was presented as an interactive conversation at a Friday Forum on February 9, 2007. I wish to express my appreciation to Sesquicentennial Coordinator **Mary Ann Haws** and Archivist **Peggy Roske** for their assistance in acquiring Vietnam-era photographs and researching the history of antiwar protest at CSB/SJU. Roske has begun archiving the historical record online in **Vivarium**, the online digital collections of Saint John's University and the College of Saint Benedict, accessible at http://www.hmml.org/vivarium/sjuarchives.htm.