

What can the Vietnam War tell us about the Current War with Iraq?

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ANDY JONES, DEC 22 2007

The Vietnam War represents the nadir in American military history, its legacy forever 'scar[ring] the American psyche.' [1] Thus, the Iraq War has been fought in the midst of apocalyptic references to 'another Vietnam,' [2] as the rejectionists, the Saddamists, and the terrorists [3] continue to derail the American strategy for victory in Iraq. The Vietnam War has fundamentally changed the overall mindset of American leaders and the American public; the result is a different type of war, aimed at minimising casualties and reducing the length of war in a bid to capture 'hearts and minds.' In seeking to understand American behaviour in Iraq, there is an implicit assumption that lessons have been learned from Vietnam, but have they?

When George H.W. Bush proclaimed at the conclusion of the Gulf War that he had exorcised the 'Vietnam syndrome,' [4] the suggestion was that the Vietnam chapter in American history had ended, and it was time to move on. Critics however, claim that George W. Bush is currently 'making the same strategic mistakes as we made in Vietnam.' [5] This essay will seek to evaluate this statement, first giving a brief overview of the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the Iraq War. It will then move on to a critical assessment of the defining features of each war, looking specifically at 'exit strategies,' the role of the media and the effect of public opinion. The essay will argue that 'Iraq is not Vietnam,' [6] but that significant characteristics of Vietnam have and will continue to illuminate the United States' military strategy in Iraq.

This essay claims that while the Iraq War is a fundamentally different war to the Gulf War, fought for different reasons and with different objectives, it can be seen as a natural continuation of the 1991 conflict, and as such should be discussed together. Thus, the Gulf War will be considered alongside the 2003 Iraq War as a base for critical analysis. The essay will now move on to a thorough analysis of the wars' key features, proving that the Vietnam War can tell us a great deal about the current war with Iraq, while also asking the question, have Vietnam's lessons been learned?

The United States' large-scale unilateral military involvement in Vietnam was sealed with the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, a blank cheque, or as Lyndon Johnson described it, 'like Grandma's nightshirt, it covered everything.' [7] This open-ended commitment was sealed in the first six months of 1965, when a sustained air offensive against North Vietnam meant that by July 1965, 'the United States was engaged in a major war on the Asian mainland.' [8] By 1968, the war of containment had become a major war, 'the draft' was in full flow, and Johnson was already looking for a way out. The United States' inadequate planning, premised on the assumption that 'a mere application of its vast military power would be sufficient,' [9] contributed to the malaise. Public opposition back home was assured with the 1968 Tet Offensive, unique in the sense that the North Vietnamese were savaged, but in reaching the American embassy and briefly taking Saigon, they had secured 'an overwhelming psychological and hence political victory.' [10] The United States' tactics of carpet-bombing annihilation did not sit well with an increasingly apathetic public. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's assertion that 'Ho Chi Minh is a tough old S.O.B. and he won't quit no matter how much bombing we do,' [11] reinforced the perception that Vietnam was an unwinnable war. From 1969, President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger set about a 'Vietnamisation' process as a prelude to American withdrawal in 1973. By then, with 58,000 casualties, the United States had managed to alienate its people, kill 2,000,000 Vietnamese, and had itself dropped more bombs than all the bombs dropped during the Second World War. [12] Defeat was cemented in 1975, when Congress withdrew funding to the South Vietnamese, and thus a rapid

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collapse, with accompanying bloodbath, ensued.

The 1991 Gulf War, saw a broad-based United Nations-backed coalition, invade Kuwait in order to extract occupying Iraqi forces. Operation Desert Storm, a massive air campaign involving between 2,000-3,000 sorties per day, [13] precipitated an unprecedented ground invasion involving over 600,000 allied troops. The Iraqis, decimated by the sustained bombing campaign collapsed just one hundred hours into the ground assault, and barely one hundred United States troops were killed in action. This was the result of the Powell Doctrine, which exhorted overwhelming military superiority to reduce casualties and war length. [14] However, success was tempered by an equally rapid withdrawal of coalition troops. Secretary of State James Baker had asserted that the real objective was to remove Iraq from Kuwait 'in a manner that would destroy Saddam's offensive military capabilities and make his fall from power likely.' [15] This did not happen, and barely twelve years later the cease-fire expired as President George W. Bush declared war once again on Iraq.

The circumstances surrounding the 2003 Iraq War were vastly different; the Iraqis had not invaded, but Bush saw Iraq as the next stage on his war on terror, and Iraq was a member of the 'axis of evil.' [16] However, claims of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) did not convince a sceptical international community, and the United States along with the United Kingdom, took to battle in a cobbled coalition which included 'such powerhouses as Macedonia, Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Palau, and Tonga.' [17] This was window-dressing in an attempt to forge credibility and legitimacy. Once again vast military superiority ensured a swift conclusion, and Bush declared 'mission accomplished' [18] in only six weeks. Saddam was soon captured, but WMD have still failed to materialise. The war had though, only just begun, the insurgency still remains and United States troops still remain Iraq, evoking inevitable comparisons with the Vietnam War.

One of the most important reasons for the failure of the Vietnam War was its lack of a defining mission or purpose further than containing the alleged spread of communism. It was for this reason that Congress approved the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, permitting the President to 'take all necessary measures' [19] to secure 'peace and security in southeast Asia.' [20] If this was the 'noble cause' [21] that Ronald Reagan spoke of several years later, then the American public didn't seem to understand it. In a Gallup Poll, 48% of people felt they did not know 'what we are fighting for' in Vietnam, compared to only 18% by the end of the Gulf War and currently 33% in the Iraq War. [22] Thus there has been a concerted effort by Presidents George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush to spell out a clear mission statement. For example, Bush Senior laid out just four Gulf War military objectives, of which the two most important were 'to effect the immediate, complete and unconditional withdrawal of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait' and 'to restore Kuwait's legitimate government.' [23]

However, this is not to say that clear military objectives guarantee a well-planned war. The Vietnam War highlighted the dire need for a military 'exit strategy.' For example, President Nixon admitted soon after entering office that 'I've come to the conclusion that there's no way to win the war. But we can't say that of course.' [24] This lack of forward planning clearly contributed to what Henry Kissinger called the 'morass' [25] of Vietnam. Critics have consequently savaged the Bush administration for its inexplicable lack of post-Iraq War planning, contending that 'instead of planning for the worst, Pentagon planners assumed that Iraqis would joyously welcome U.S. and international troops as liberators.' [26] The Vietnam experience is slightly different as there wasn't a 'post-war' scenario, but there was a post-invasion sequence, which suggested that when planning fails, and peace and stability is not secured, war becomes infinitely less winnable as indigenous support wanes. James Dobbins argues that as a result of 'initial miscalculations, misdirected planning, and inadequate preparation, Washington has lost the Iraqi people's confidence and consent, and it is unlikely to win them back.' [27] This naivety is best embodied by General Jay Garner, who the Pentagon initially chose to lead the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance for Iraq. Garner's beginnings were inauspicious, proclaiming that 'we ought to look in a mirror and get proud, and stick out our chests and suck in our bellies and say, 'Damn we're Americans!'' [28] Ultimately though, bravado and bluster is no substitute for solid policy. The removal of Saddam Hussein and the Baathist regime left a 'security vacuum,' [29] resulted in 25% unemployment and led to a decrease in electricity and oil production. [30] The Bush administration simply had no policy in place to stop these factors, in effect creating an 'instant failed state,' [31] thereby boosting the ensuing insurgency, a lesson that should have been learned from Vietnam.

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Frederick W. Kagan has argued that the Vietnam insurgency differs so greatly from the Gulf and Iraq Wars, that to compare them requires 'an article of faith.' [32] Certainly, in size, organisation and training, the Viet Cong was on a level far removed from the insurgents of the Gulf and Iraq Wars. Kagan also points out that the Vietnamese insurgency had been active for over twenty years before Johnson sent troops over in 1965, and had the advantage of equipment and supplies given by the North Vietnamese and the Soviet Union. [33] However, the Iraqi insurgents during the Gulf War had also gained significant experience during the Iran-Iraq war, and had benefited from a large supply of American finances, although again their threat level was far smaller than in Vietnam. [34] This situation has been replicated in the 2003 Iraq War, where the Iraqi army were compared to 'Flintstones,' [35] the insurgents lack leadership, a common theology, strategy or vision, [36] and fight in tiny groups. This is not to say that defeating the insurgents will be easy. George W. Bush admits that a large chunk of the Saddamists and none of the terrorists will ever be willing to support the new Iraqi regime, [37] but the right tactics must be employed.

It is in this context that the Vietnam insurgency is useful in developing policies that deal with the Iraqi insurgents. In particular, when to withdraw American forces was a key concern of the Vietnam War, as well as the Gulf War, and is beginning to become a key feature of the Iraq War, as the Bush administration continues to defer the setting of even a loose timetable for withdrawal. This is perhaps an indirect response to the Vietnam War's effect on the Gulf War. In 1991 coalition forces deliberately left quickly in a cautious attempt to avoid any sort of quagmire, no formal surrender ever took place, and Saddam Hussein was able to claim victory in 'demolishing the aura of the United States, the empire of evil.' [38] George H.W. Bush admitted in his private diary on victory night that 'there is no battleship Missouri surrender. This is what's missing to make this akin to WWII, to separate Kuwait from Korea and Vietnam.' [39]

John Mueller claims that the key to successful withdrawal is 'Iraqisation,' or the installation of a viable local government, police and military to take over after the coalition leaves, [40] coinciding with the 'oil spot' strategy, where popular insurgent support is cut off by the emergence of security and opportunity. [41] This would develop the 'Vietnamisation' strategy that ultimately failed to avoid a bloodbath that enveloped post-war South Vietnam, as tens of thousands were executed or sent to re-education camps, [42] and post-Gulf War Iraq, when Shi'ite and Kurdish uprisings, lacking coalition support, were brutally repressed, [43] and 30,000-60,000 Shi'ites and 30,000 Kurds were brutally murdered. [44]

The Vietnam War has had a profound effect on the role of the media in wartime. A major factor in the eventual implausibility of Vietnam was the 'nightly scenes of war on television and the mounting lists of casualties,' [45] which the American public could not ultimately stomach. Melvin R. Laird argues that the United States made a mistake in allowing journalists to 'roam the country almost at will' [46] in Vietnam, claiming that the media portrayal of the 1968 Tet Offensive turned defeat into victory for the 'devastated' [47] North Vietnamese. This has led to a much tighter media restrictions in both the Gulf and Iraq Wars, as leaders recognise that the propaganda war is a vital strategic interest, and the phrase 'winning hearts and minds' has become almost cliché. For instance, in the days before the Iraq War, Saddam Hussein continually relayed images of American support personnel desperately jumping into helicopters from the roof of the American Embassy in Saigon as the North Vietnamese closed in. [48] Public relations is everything, an effect of twenty-four news channels, images are beamed real-time into living rooms everywhere, and control of the media is thus more important now than ever.

The Gulf War saw major restrictions on media coverage, as journalists were herded into 'press pools', so that in the main the media could see and report only on what the military desired. A policy was also initiated in which the media were prohibited from airing footage of flag-draped coffins as they returned to United States air bases. [49] Media mishaps did occur though, for example with the bombing of a baby milk production factory, which lost the United States support in Iraq and in the United States. [50] Perhaps the biggest scandal of the Vietnam War was the massacres at My Lai, in which more than two hundred civilians were brutally murdered by soldiers under the command of Lieutenant William Calley. [51] In Iraq, much care has been taken to avoid civilian casualties, and the administration was quick to involve Iraqis in the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad, an image that was soon beamed worldwide. There have been bumps in the road however, most notably the Abu Ghraib prison scandal which so decimated American support in Iraq and led to a far-reaching investigation into claims of American torture. So has the United States learned from Vietnam that the media is crucial to success? To a certain extent, yes they

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have, but as a senior army commander in the Iraq War summed up, '[I] don't think we will put much energy into the old saying, 'win the hearts and mind.' I don't look at it as one of the metrics of success.' [52] For support at home, and for support in Iraq, nothing could be further from the truth.

The anti-Vietnam War movement was a cultural phenomenon in the United States, threatening to rip apart American society. Scenes such as the 1970 Kent State Riots, in which guardsmen fired a total of sixty-one shots, killing four students and injuring nine, [53] have so far yet to be replicated in the Gulf or Iraq Wars. It is particularly interesting that anti-war sentiment, although currently strong, has not manifested itself more prominently considering the American public were essentially duped into going to war on the basis that the presence of WMD in Iraq was a 'slam dunk' [54] case. Only 33% of Americans supported military action without United Nations-backing, [55] but while the war is perceived as going well, the American public will generally be supportive. This has led many critics to claim that public opinion is 'casualty-phobic.' [56] This is perhaps borne out by Gulf War polls which showed that 63% supported the war, but this fell to 44% if one thousand troops were killed, and 35% if ten thousand troops perished, [57] perhaps as a result of the Vietnam War legacy.

However, Laird disagrees, stating that the American public 'will tolerate loss of life, if the conflict has worthy, achievable goals,' [58] or in other words, a plan for victory. George W. Bush's recent speech, entitled 'Plan For Victory,' would seem to support this hypothesis. During the speech Bush used the word 'victory' fifteen times, [59] while 'victory' and 'strategy' are both used five times in the headings for the Bush administration's new document 'National Strategy for Victory in Iraq.' The conduct of war can also partially be seen as an attempt to win the 'hearts and minds' of both the American and Iraqi public. The reliance on targeted air attacks decreases civilian casualties on the ground, and minimises American troop deaths. This is in contrast to Vietnam, when 'countless innocent civilians were killed in the indiscriminate hunt for Vietcong among the South Vietnamese peasantry.' [60] In part this can be attributed to more highly trained American soldiers, but it is also a reflection of the need to win 'hearts and minds,' an acknowledgement of Vietnam mistakes and their likely consequences. Vietnam-era street chants such as 'Hey, Hey , LBJ, How Many Kids Did You Kill Today,' [61] have not yet been heard, but the Bush administration would best be served by staying humble.

In conclusion, the Vietnam War is most certainly a very different war from either the Gulf or Iraq Wars, but comparisons can still prove useful in the formulation of war strategies. It has been argued that there were 'no obvious similarities...in political cause, geographic conditions, historical context, and military circumstances.' [62] Whilst agreeing with this summation, this essay asserts that a valid comparison can be made, and that Vietnam lessons have been put into practice. On occasions when lessons have not been learned, the same fate has oft befallen, specifically with regard to post-war planning. General Jay Garner's chilling tale that 'they told us to bring two suits...we thought we would be walking into functioning ministries...and get the trains running again in a couple of months' [63] is a case in point. Iraq is not Vietnam, but as Kagan highlights, 'much of what has gone right in Iraq is the result of reactions of one sort or another to the experience of Vietnam,' [64] and thus most of what has gone wrong is an illustration of warnings gone unheeded. Iraq may have been described as a 'cakewalk,' [65] Vietnam a 'quagmire,' [66] but then Henry Kissinger once described Vietnam as a 'little fourth-rate power.' [67] References to Vietnam are not 'oblique,' [68] rather they remain pertinent, constructive and continue to illuminate.

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