The Uses of Vietnam in the Age of Terrorism

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During his historic trip to Vietnam in November 2000, President Bill Clinton proclaimed the end of an era. “Finally,” he asserted in a speech to Vietnamese students at Hanoi’s National University, “America is coming to see Vietnam as your people have asked for years – as a country, not a war.” Indeed, the United States had made bold efforts in the preceding few years to move beyond old animosities and to deal with Vietnam as it dealt with other Asian nations. In 1994, Washington lifted its 19-year-old trade embargo. A year later, the United States normalized diplomatic relations with Vietnam and opened an embassy. As the process went forward, the president and his congressional supporters contended that the time had come at last to embrace the country as a full participant in the globalizing economy. Clinton’s trip to Vietnam capped this period of economic and political, as well as perceptual and semantic, change. Over the years, “Vietnam” had become an adjective for most Americans, usually affixed to pejorative words like “war,” “debacle,” or “syndrome.” Clinton’s trip, in the words of famed journalist Stanley Karnow, helped “exorcize that ghost.” Vietnam could once again be just a place on the other side of the world.

For a time, it appeared as though “Vietnam” was indeed losing some of its radioactivity in American politics and culture. In the 1990s, the United States undertook limited military commitments in Bosnia and Kosovo despite the fact that these undertakings violated one of the allegedly iron-clad lessons of Vietnam: if Washington was going to go to war, it must do so with clear objectives, overwhelming force, and full public backing. Perhaps, it seemed, President George H.W. Bush had been right when he declared at the end of the First Gulf War that America’s success had “kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.” In politics, meanwhile, Americans embraced both the draft-evader Bill Clinton and the former POW John McCain. It appeared that the country – or at least much of it – might be letting go of the passions of the Vietnam era as it entered a new post-Cold War period with new national priorities.

In popular culture too, things seemed to be changing. Hollywood’s lone major foray into the Vietnam War around the turn of the millennium – Mel Gibson’s insipid “We Were Soldiers Once” – departed sharply from earlier Vietnam movies by trumpeting the manly exploits of American GI’s in a context barren of political meaning. The most powerful cautionary tale dealing with American foreign adventures, “Black Hawk Down,” dealt not with Vietnam but with the disastrous U.S. intervention in Somalia in 1992 and 1993. Meanwhile, Americans celebrated their victory in the Cold War by rediscovering the “Greatest Generation” and the “Founding Fathers,” heroes who helped

the country feel safely embedded within a long-term pattern of triumph and moral supremacy. Within this resurgent narrative of a victorious and righteous America, Vietnam seemed increasingly an anomalous blip on the historical radar screen, a lost battle in a war that ultimately resulted in a win for the forces of good. The September 11 attacks merely intensified the trend. With the nation under assault from abroad, old Vietnam-era divisions seemed irrelevant. Americans of all stripes banded together in a fight against terrorism seen as unquestionably necessary and just.

And then came the Iraq war. The first, so-called “combat” phase went well enough. Within a few weeks of crossing into Iraq, the U.S. military had captured Baghdad and toppled Saddam Hussein. On May 1, 2003, a triumphant George W. Bush swooped onto the flight deck of the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln and, in a now-infamous display of bravado, the Navy proclaimed “mission accomplished.” Nothing, of course, was further from the truth. There remained the huge tasks of rooting out lingering armed resistance, rebuilding the Iraqi economy, establishing a viable post-Baathist political order, managing a nightmarish array of ethnic and religious rivalries, and winning the hearts and minds of the local population – problems that were not susceptible to the prodigious firepower and mobility that had brought the United States success at first. Soon Americans confronted a rapidly deteriorating situation. Iraqi insurgents carried out bold and bloody attacks against U.S. troops, who had difficulty distinguishing friend from foe and struggled to cope with an alien landscape. Meanwhile, the only hope for the wobbly Iraqi leadership sponsored by the United States seemed to be an indefinite commitment of American forces to hold its enemies at bay.

Suddenly, “Vietnam” was back with a vengeance – not as the name of a faraway country but as shorthand for an American foreign adventure gone awry. In the halls of Congress, on the airwaves, and in the press, Americans noted the remarkable resemblance between the Iraq and Vietnam wars. The parallel became especially strong when coordinated attacks by Shiite militias in several southern Iraqi towns at the beginning of April 2004 seemed to resemble the 1968 Tet Offensive, the event that for many Americans signaled the bankruptcy of U.S. policy in Vietnam. “Surely I am not the only one who hears echoes of Vietnam,” asserted Senator Robert Byrd, the Democrat from West Virginia, in a speech on the Senate floor. Indeed, he was not alone. A Newsweek poll found that 64 percent of Americans were “very” or “somewhat” worried that Iraq could become another Vietnam, with the United States fighting for years without accomplishing its objectives.

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The parallel between Iraq and Vietnam is, of course, imperfect. The scale of the fighting in Iraq pales in comparison, as does the size of the U.S. military force. More

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important, the Iraqi insurgents lack much support from abroad; the trickle of foreign guerrillas is a far cry from the massive flood of assistance that the communist superpowers sent Hanoi during the Vietnam War. “Iraq” is not yet “Arabic for ‘Vietnam,’” as bumper-sticker wisdom might have it. Still, the connections between the two wars are undeniable – a comparison that the Bush administration has inadvertently invited by its choices of personnel to run the new U.S. embassy in Baghdad and to supervise a new nation-building operation. U.S. ambassador John Negroponte served as a political officer in Saigon during the early 1960s, while the embassy’s second-ranking official, James F. Jeffrey was an Army platoon leader in the early 1970s. Two others – the chief of political-military affairs and the head of the Iraqi Reconstruction Management Office – are also Vietnam veterans. All in all, as the Washington Post put it, “it’s almost become Saigon on the Tigris.”

For the most part, though, the comparison rests on striking parallels in the ways the United States entered the two wars and in the difficulties it has encountered since it became engaged. In both cases, the White House took the country to war on the basis of faulty information. With respect to Vietnam, recently declassified evidence indicates that President Lyndon Johnson secured congressional support for military action against North Vietnam on the basis of intelligence about attacks on U.S. warships that he and his aides knew to be questionable at best. So eager was the president for a pretext to justify a more confrontational policy in Indochina that, it seems, he had little interest in closely examining the intelligence. Nearly forty years later, the Bush administration, equally eager for justification to attack Iraq, similarly manipulated intelligence information, excluding or ignoring evidence contradicting his view that Saddam Hussein possessed a formidable arsenal of weapons of mass destruction and maintained links to the Al Qaeda terrorist network. Congress dutifully passed a join resolution in October 2002 authorizing the use of forces against Iraq, just as it passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964, opening the way for escalation in Vietnam the following year.

Another parallel lies in the relentlessly upbeat attitudes that U.S. officials maintained during both wars despite obvious setbacks, outright failures, and premonitions of danger. During the Vietnam War, American leaders acknowledged frequently that the country faced a difficult chore in Southeast Asia, but they admitted few mistakes and consistently assured an anxious nation that the United States was steadily achieving its goals. Most infamously, General William Westmoreland, commander of American forces in Vietnam, told a joint session of Congress in November 1967 – a few weeks before the Tet Offensive – that he detected “an attitude of confidence and growing optimism” among the Vietnamese people and that the United States would soon be able to “accelerate the rate of progress” toward victory. The Bush administration’s claims

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about Iraq have been even rosier. Before the war began, Vice President Dick Cheney brashly predicted that Iraqis would greet invading American troops as “liberators.” The president exuded similar confidence during his carefully choreographed appearance on the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln a few weeks later, declaring the “combat phase” of the Iraq operation to be finished. As the Iraqi insurgency intensified in spring 2004, administration officials clung to the notion that the violence was merely the work of extremists, thugs, and foreign provocateurs. Suddenly, a Vietnam-era phrase – “credibility gap” – was back in fashion.\(^\text{10}\) Just as Americans came to distrust the Johnson administration, so they seemed to lose confidence in the Bush White House. According to a June 2004 poll, 60 percent of Americans believed the president had not been entirely candid about Iraq, while a mere 15 percent believed the administration was telling the whole truth about the Abu Ghraib prisoner-abuse scandal.\(^\text{11}\)

And then there is the most striking parallel of all: the problems the United States has had in winning the support – the “hearts and minds” – of the Iraqi populace for a political solution crafted in Washington. In Vietnam, the United States never succeeded in conferring legitimacy on the Ngo Dinh Diem regime or any of the juntas that followed it as Washington struggled to find a political leadership that would rally support behind the Saigon government – arguably the central flaw of the entire American undertaking in Vietnam. It is too early to say whether U.S. efforts will meet with the same result in Iraq, but early indications are not promising. The “free” Iraqi regime established at the end of June 2004 will clearly rely on U.S. forces into the indefinite future to assure its survival. That dependency suggests the potential for the same sort of vicious cycle that afflicted the American endeavor in Vietnam. The more the new Baghdad government depends on the United States, the less genuine support it will garner from ordinary Iraqis, leading it into further dependency on Washington.

The difficulty of establishing a legitimate and viable political order has exposed U.S. troops to the frustrations of ordinary Iraqis who, much as they may have liked the idea of ending Saddam Hussein’s reign of terror, seem to regard U.S. forces more as occupiers than liberators. Herein lies yet another parallel to Vietnam. U.S. officials in Iraq, just as in Vietnam, surely recognize the problem and are attempting to emphasize nation-building tasks that presumably help to establish bonds between American authorities and the local population. Those efforts have been hampered, however, by inadequate planning as well as surging violence that has kept U.S. forces focused on military tasks. Frustrated and fearing for their lives, U.S. troops in Iraq may be having the same counterproductive impact as in Vietnam. Rather than winning ordinary Vietnamese to support the Saigon regime, they often alienated the population through excessive violence, over-reliance on technology, and insensitivity to local customs. Once again, the United States seems to be making as many enemies as friends.

What have Americans made of these similarities? With “Vietnam” back in the public lexicon and the United States mired in a new commitment to another distant, impoverished nation, Americans possess a golden opportunity to revisit the Vietnam War and ask what it taught us that might be still relevant in the post-Cold War world. Sadly, nothing of the sort has taken place. To be sure, Errol Morris’ much-heralded “The Fog of War,” the documentary exploring the life and times of Robert McNamara, stoked some serious discussion of the Vietnam-Iraq parallel and the continuing relevance of the lessons of Vietnam. But the film’s success in this regard was merely inadvertent. The film was shot before the Iraq war began and makes no explicit reference to recent events. McNamara’s “eleven lessons” come across as mere abstractions.

Instead of an impetus for thoughtful, sustained debate, the Vietnam-Iraq analogy has become mainly a tool for partisan political sniping in the run-up to the 2004 elections. Candidates for office have attempted to spin the comparison for their electoral purposes, while media pundits have defended or attacked the analogy mainly as a way to defend or attack Bush administration policies. All of this has, as the cliché goes, shed more heat than light. Discussion of the analogy has mainly tapped into old, bitter, and insoluble feuds over who is blame for the American defeat in Vietnam in order to suggest analogous answers about the Iraq war.

It is surely no surprise that those most determined to unseat George W. Bush in the 2004 presidential race have invoked the Iraq-Vietnam analogy most assertively. “Iraq is George Bush’s Vietnam,” Ted Kennedy, the Democratic senator from Massachusetts and close ally of Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, declared on April 5, a comment that loosed a torrent of similar comments from Democratic circles in the days that followed. What surer way to tarnish the president’s alleged prowess in defending the nation in the wake of September 11 than to suggest that he had failed to learn the lessons of Vietnam and was leading the country into another hopeless quagmire? For his part, Kerry, a combat veteran of the Vietnam War, cautioned that Iraq was not Vietnam “yet” but left no doubt of his view that the situation was headed in that direction due to the same fundamental flaw that brought disaster in Indochina in the 1960s and 1970s. “Since I fought in Vietnam,” Kerry told a radio interviewer, “I have not seen an arrogance in our foreign policy like this.”

Conservatives showed uncertainty whether to play it safe by denying the validity of the analogy or to embrace it for their own purposes, a somewhat riskier approach but also one with the potential payoff of mobilizing old resentments against Vietnam-era dissenters for current-day purposes. Questioned at a news conference on April 13, Bush declared the analogy “false” but then hastened to indulge in some analogizing of his own by resurrecting the hawks’ critique of the doves from the 1960s and 1970s. “I also happen to think that analogy sends the wrong message to our troops and sends the wrong

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message to the enemy,” Bush asserted. Other conservatives made explicit the Iraq-Vietnam connection that the president had merely implied. *National Review* editor Rich Lowry lashed out at “hyperventilating” liberals for undermining the war effort in Iraq by exaggerating the power of the insurgency just as they overstated the strength of the Vietcong and demanded withdrawal from Vietnam just as victory was coming into view after the Tet Offensive. Liberal victims of the “Vietnam Syndrome” were, Lowry charged, “very skilled at disparaging a U.S. war effort” and must not be permitted to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory in Iraq as they had in Vietnam.

The worst news of all is that there is little prospect of improvement any time soon in the level of public discourse about Vietnam. The September 11 terrorist attacks created a new political environment in which candidates must display unflinching toughness in order to be viable contenders for office. The Second World War has largely passed as the conflict to which politicians point to demonstrate their heroism. Now, with the arrival of a younger generation of office-seekers, it is Vietnam. During the peaceful Clinton years, service in the war – or lack thereof – held no decisive importance as a political issue. Now, in a country obsessed with macho images of firefighters, policemen, and M-16-toting GI’s, any serious aspirant to power must discover his or her inner soldier. In this context, any discussion of the need to acknowledge the limits of American power or the necessity of understanding local grievances in the developing world will be muted at best. During the presidential campaign, the candidates entirely ignored such themes in favor of recriminations over their service records. John Kerry’s action-packed days as a “swift boat” skipper in Vietnam and George Bush’s (at best) undistinguished service in the Air National Guard quickly became central motifs in the Democratic presidential campaign. Meanwhile, Kerry’s opposition to the Vietnam War following his return to the United States in 1971 became a useful theme for the Republicans. For both, “Vietnam” could obviously be put to valuable use – not as a metaphor with important lessons for the future but as a term that taps into old resentments and new anxieties. Both parties seemed keenly aware that the one that most successfully manipulated its meaning would prevail on election day.

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The lesson of the Vietnam War that Americans seem to have learned best, then, is how to recover the political explosiveness that seemed to be waning just a few years before. One has the sense that no amount of scholarly research, no quantity of new documentation or testimony, will alter the disappointing discussion that has begun. The debate will go on precisely as it has in the past partly because it long ago ceased to be closely connected to the actual history of the war. Rather, the clash over Vietnam reflects the profound cultural cleavage in the United States that opened in the 1960s and has widened ever since. It is a discouraging state of affairs, not least because the Vietnam War continues to hold valuable lessons – powerfully reaffirmed by the Iraq experience –

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for the conduct of American foreign affairs in the geopolitical era that has unfolded since the end of the Cold War. Three stand out above all.

First, the Vietnam and Iraq adventures both make plain the importance of listening to allies and operating multilaterally. In both cases, the United States encountered strong skepticism from the international community, including key allies, when it called for military action against alleged threats. And in both cases, Washington defied that skepticism and struggled to cobble together paltry coalitions of secondary powers, some of which appear to have been motivated more by the desire for political or economic rewards from the United States than genuine enthusiasm for the mission. There were multiple costs to acting in this manner. Washington ignored wise advice that might have saved it from serious errors, diminished its reputation internationally, and, most important, lost potentially valuable partners in helping to manage complex political problems. U.S. behavior during the Vietnam War did relatively little long-term damage in this regard. The multilateral framework for containing the Soviet bloc remained intact. American unilateralism in Iraq might produce a much worse outcome. Coupled with U.S. defiance of numerous international conventions and treaties, it might diminish transnational cooperation at precisely the moment when multilateralism is becoming essential in order to combat major transnational threats including terrorism.

Second, the Vietnam and Iraq wars drive home the necessity of vigorous internal debate before and during any such endeavor. During the Vietnam War, as numerous historians have noted, the Johnson and Nixon administrations marginalized dissenters within policymaking ranks when they did not exclude them altogether. In the Bush administration, a strong emphasis on loyalty and unity seems to have similarly kept skeptics from the highest policymaking circles. Indeed, Bush appears to have gone a step further than Johnson or Nixon by rearranging the intelligence-processing apparatus in order to get the results it wanted.16 Perhaps the similarity owes something to the leadership of similarly anti-intellectual presidents prone to simplistic flattening of complicated geopolitical situations. In any case, the recognition of complexity surely leads to more effective policy, not necessarily at the expense of decisiveness.

Third, the two wars suggest the importance of taking account of the motives and grievances of ordinary people in the countries where the United States chooses to intervene. To be sure, Washington devoted meticulous care to studying the Vietnamese people before and during the Vietnam War, and probably it has at least attempted to do the same with Iraq. But careful study and collection of information is not the same as making policy with that information in mind. In Vietnam, geostrategic and political considerations constantly drove American leaders to set aside perceptive judgments about the local situation and what types of policies were likely to succeed. The result was an increasingly wide divergence between what the Vietnamese wanted and what Washington was offering them. Then as now, the long-term success of American policy in any area depends on aligning the United States with the forces of sociopolitical change operating within that part of the world. No illusion is more dangerous than the belief that the United States can define what is desirable for other societies. There are, as the

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Vietnam War taught with painful clarity, limits on American power to reshape the world. Given what passes for public debate in the United States today, one would never know it.