

The Psychology of War

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) | April 7, 2004

President Bush effectively declared the war in Iraq to be “over” last May, but the photos told a different story—one the administration has tried to suppress in the consciousness of the U.S. public. Emblazoned on the front pages of the April 7 editions of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, the photos showed U.S. soldiers carrying body bags of comrades killed in the latest upsurge in violence in Iraq.

Two days earlier, in a Washington, DC speech, Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) had articulated the question contained in the sad, silent images in the pictures: will Iraq be George Bush’s Vietnam?

Kennedy’s address came after one of the bloodiest weekends in Iraq—at least 61 U.S., Salvadoran, and Iraqis killed in clashes between occupation forces and Moqtada al-Sadr’s “Mahdi Army.”

quite different from Vietnam. South Vietnam was not a defeated country but an ally of the United States. It had a “functioning” army that operated against insurgents being aided and directed by the communist regime in North Vietnam. Numbers of foreign troops and indigenous security forces, grouped into rough equivalences by the type of units, give the following:

Force Title	Vietnam ¹	Iraq (March-April '04)
U.S. and Coalition/Allied forces	204,000 (200,000 U.S.) ²	159,000 (134,000 U.S.)
National Army	275,000	3,000
Police and Border Police/Civilian Irregular Defense Corps ³	15,000 (1962)	85,300
Regional Force ⁴ /Independent Militias	137,000	60,000-70,000
Popular Force/Facilities Protection Service ⁵	185,000	70,000
Civil Defense Corps		31,000
TOTAL	812,000	409,300-419,300

More was to come—in Ramadi, Fallujah, Baghdad, Karbala, Amara, Nasiriyah, Kut, Mosul, and Kirkut. By April 7, 22 more U.S. and two coalition personnel had been killed, at least 50 others wounded, and unknown numbers of Iraqis killed and wounded. Ominously, one report noted that even children were setting up roadblocks, raising the specter of an intifada-like resistance taking hold.

Last November, when 82 U.S. soldiers died, the same “Iraq equals Vietnam” question was raised. At first glance, then as now, the hard facts and the numbers of “boots on the ground” suggest that Iraq is

Avowed indigenous opposition forces in Vietnam had been estimated at 30,000 in November 1963 (the month South Vietnamese President Diem was assassinated). By July 1965, this number had mushroomed to 212,000 with an estimated 1,000 North Vietnamese infiltrating every month. In Iraq, in summer 2003, estimates of the insurgents ranged from 5,000 to a “few thousand” Baathists plus—depending on the source—1,000-2,000 (Pentagon) or a few hundred (U.S. unit commanders on Iraq’s borders) foreign fighters.



But there are some disquieting similarities.

The Blank Check Authorization. Both the Tonkin Gulf Resolution for Vietnam and the “Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002” allowed the president to “take all necessary measures” or to employ the armed forces as he deemed “necessary and appropriate” to protect national security. Congress in both instances effectively abrogated its constitutional prerogative to declare war.

Training and Equipment. In Vietnam, approximately half of the total nominal military strength was in the Territorial forces. Yet in terms of training, equipment, and professional leadership, these organizations were poorly served.

In Iraq, the coalition has provided training for all indigenous services, but many—including the trainees themselves—assert that the instruction has been rushed and is inadequate. For example, army training has been cut from eight to six weeks.

And, in a February 20, 2004 status report, the Pentagon conceded that only about 4,000 police had been fully trained while 47,000 had received no training at all, raising serious questions about the legitimacy of the numbers claimed. Moreover, both the police and the Civil Defense Corps are woefully short of basic equipment such as communications, vehicles, firearms, and—given their high-profile roles—essential protective gear. More than 600 police have been killed in the past 11 months.

U.S. Force Planning. In Vietnam in 1962, even as the U.S. advisory effort was growing, long-range plans under development assumed that the Viet Cong would be defeated by 1964. This assumption in turn allowed planners to project a cut of 1,000 U.S. personnel in-country, leaving a 3,000 strong military advisory group.

In Iraq, the current rotation envisions a net cut of 14,000 troops by the end of June, at which time U.S. forces will number 110,000. Yet Central Command headquarters is now working on contingency plans to

increase, not decrease, total forces in Iraq, in part as a result of the Shiite unrest of the last week.

Reliability of Indigenous Forces. In Vietnam, desertion rates consistently plagued all government security forces. Significant drops in “for duty” personnel in the South Vietnamese Army and Regional Forces occurred in 1959-60, in the Popular Forces in 1967, and again in the Army in 1971-72.

In Iraq, approximately half of the first battalion trained for the New Iraq Army quit or failed to return from graduation leave. Police are being driven from their stations, and some reportedly have joined in demonstrations against occupation forces.

Loyalty to the Central Authority (another dimension of reliability). In South Vietnam, most governmental “changes” were the result of military coups d’etat in which units loyal to an individual or a junta would seize control of key facilities in Saigon and the Capital Zone.

The violence in Iraq this week may well be contained by U.S. and coalition forces. But the question is “at what price?”

In Iraq, there is the potential for one or more of the highly nationalistic militias to confront the “national” security services or coalition forces. The U.S. has declared that all militias are to disband, a point affirmed in the Transitional Law that will serve as an interim constitution. However, the same document gives the Kurdish regional government control of police and internal security in the Kurdish zone, effectively prolonging the existence of the 50,000 strong *pesh merga*.

Next in size behind the Kurdish militias is the Badr Brigade affiliated with the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. Boasting as many as 10,000 fighters, it is active in the Shi’ite south. The Pentagon suspects that the militia retains ties to its former mentors in Iran and may have been responsible for some clashes with coalition troops.

Smaller militia and “body guards” have evolved in reaction to the uncertain security situation in Iraq. Most prominent is the Jaish al-Mahdi army of Moqtada al-Sadr, estimated at between 3,000-10,000.

When the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), against the advice of the U.S.-appointed Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), closed al-Sadr's weekly newspaper and arrested one of his aides, the cleric encouraged his followers to resist the "occupiers."

Win-Lose Psychology. The U.S. saw Vietnam as part of the zero-sum contest between the superpowers of democracy and communism, with Vietnam as the first "domino." Although today the U.S. has no rival superpower, the same mentality is at play—witness President Bush's declaration that "you are either with us or against us."

Unfortunately, in an occupied Iraq, there is a third option at work, one which the U.S. failed to recognize in Vietnam. This option is rooted in the psychology of a deeply held nationalism that rebels against foreign military forces. It is a psychology that grew from decades of colonial subjugation, both in Vietnam and Iraq. Moreover, this nationalism finds reinforcement in the opposition of religious leaders to the indigenous ruling authority that is regarded as the puppet of the foreign forces. In Vietnam, Buddhist monks and nuns burned themselves to death. In Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has withheld support for the IGC and the Transitional Law. Other key clerics such as Abdul Aziz Hakim, whose political party controls the Badr Brigade, have directed pointed remarks at the occupation authorities that killing and wounding innocent people cannot be justified. And both clerics and ordinary Iraqis interviewed by journalists warn against attempts by coalition forces to arrest religious figures or to violate mosques and other religious sites.

The administration vows it will not "cut and run." And the numbers would seem to be all in its favor. In Vietnam, the nominal ratio of "friendly to enemy" was roughly 3.5 to 1. In Iraq, if the CPA and Pentagon numbers are taken as the most accurate, the ratio is an astronomical 58 to 1. Even adding in al-Sadr's 10,000 gives a "friendly to enemy" ratio of 24 to 1.

Obviously, there is something amiss.

The violence in Iraq this week may well be contained by U.S. and coalition forces. But the question is "at what price?" In Vietnam, the 1968 Tet offensive

was a comprehensive battlefield defeat for the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces. But it was a psychological and ultimately strategic defeat for the U.S. public and the Johnson Administration.

Battles may be won or lost by armies, but wars are decided by mind and will of those directly involved or even peripherally affected. Some Iraqis seem to have decided; many more may be at the "tipping point." For a U.S. public with many doubts about the Bush Administration's conduct of the "war on terror" in general and the war in Iraq in particular, this week may prove to be psychologically pivotal as well.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The source of Vietnam statistics is the U.S. Army Center for Military History's publication, "The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army 1950-1972," by Brigadier General James Lawton Collins, Jr. All statistics are for 1965 unless otherwise indicated, and Vietnamese statistics are authorizations.
- ² Figures are for December 1965. Peak U.S. military strength was 543,000 in May 1969.
- ³ The Civilian Irregular Defense Group consisted of Montagnards and other minorities living in the Central Highlands of Vietnam and in Laos. A major mission was collecting information on Viet Cong and North Vietnamese activities in the border areas. After Tet, 1968 this force was phased out.
- ⁴ Regional Forces, originally called the Civil Guard, were province-based "voluntary" formations organized as companies (rifle, riverine, support). In 1972 they totaled approximately 300,000.
- ⁵ Popular Forces, originally called the Self-Defense Force and also "voluntary," were to protect the population residing in villages and hamlets. They were organized into platoons and squads. The Facilities Protection Service is designed to secure static facilities such as government buildings, power generation and transmission sites, dams, etc. In 1972 they totaled approximately 250,000.

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