

# Sorry, Mr. President, but Iraq looks a lot like Vietnam

By Ronald Bruce St John | April 26, 2004

At the end of the Persian Gulf War, President George H. W. Bush, flanked by then Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell, proudly proclaimed we'd finally licked the "Vietnam syndrome." Is it any wonder then that President George W. Bush, surrounded by the same advisors, refuses to recognize that Iraq increasingly resembles that traumatic Asian conflict? In mid-April 2004, President Bush flatly declared: "The analogy [between Iraq and Vietnam] is false."

I served a tour of duty in Vietnam in 1970-71 and returned in the late 1980s for the first of several prolonged visits. Based on my experience, Iraq today looks more and more like the Vietnam I knew firsthand as an army intelligence officer more than three decades ago.

## Strategy and Tactics

First, there are the obvious strategic and tactical similarities. American troops are fighting a guerrilla war in Iraq. The terrain is difficult, and the insurgents know it better than we do. The enemy attacks at a time and place of its own choosing, avoiding troop concentrations where U.S. firepower can be brought to bear. Urban warfare has become the norm with insurgents staying close to U.S. troops, often engaging civilians to support or shield their operations. As a result, the uncertain battleground of Iraq poses enormous challenges for American soldiers, seeking to separate combatants from civilians without alienating most Iraqis. We face in Iraq, like we did in Vietnam, an enemy who refuses to play by our rules and is clearly willing to die for his beliefs.

Before we finished in Vietnam, we had dropped more bombs on Indochina than had been dropped on the remainder of the world in all the wars to that time. The U.S. military continues to believe in the might of firepower. But it also wrestles with the difficult task of establishing the appropriate balance between winning hearts and minds with aid and reconstruction and using force to root out insurgents. In Iraq, we have moved from "shock and awe" to

building schools and hosting soccer games. We're now back to block-to-block searches of cordoned cities.

In the process, the U.S. military has generally refused to account for civilian casualties in Iraq, in part because they are frequently huge. As in Vietnam, 600 dead or dying Iraqis too often appear as 600 "insurgents" in army press accounts. The refusal to acknowledge civilian casualties, while meticulously accounting for our own, has another downside. It suggests to Iraqis that American lives are more important than those of the people we supposedly came to liberate.

Throughout the Vietnam War, especially in the early years, American officials deliberately misrepresented the enemy. Vietnamese nationalists were ignored with all opposition labeled Communist or with the delightfully pejorative phrase "Viet Cong." In Iraq, the Bush administration has once again written nationalists out of the script. Insurgents are variously labeled "dead-enders," "fanatics," "thugs," "militants," "terrorists," or "outsiders," despite growing evidence that a large percentage of the Iraqi people are opposed to the U.S. occupation. Recent intelligence reports suggest that support for the insurgents is widespread and growing. In some areas, Sunni and Shiite groups are joining forces, at least temporarily, in a common cause – killing Americans.

There is also a failure in Iraq to understand and empathize with local mores and culture or the role of Islam in Arab society. The military has too few Arab language specialists and those experts in government

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with good knowledge of Iraq's history and culture were marginalized from the Pentagon's planning of the war and the peace, just as we failed to comprehend the Buddhist culture of Vietnam. The bombing of a mosque in Fallujah in April 2004 is a recent case in point. Suicide bombers in the Middle East, like Buddhist self-immolations in Vietnam, are incomprehensible to the average American, nestled in a comfortable suburb with a good paying job. Plunging into a maelstrom of political and religious rivalries, we have too often depended in Iraq on the counsel of a few self-serving Iraqi exiles and Arab intellectuals experienced in manipulating Western arrogance and ignorance.

There was no real plan for victory in Vietnam, and there appears to be none for Iraq. The June 30 date for the transfer of sovereignty back to the Iraqi people, in particular, makes no sense except in the context of President Bush's desire to be rid of Iraq before the U.S. elections in November. When asked why it is so important to pretend to return sovereignty to the Iraqis on June 30, no one in the administration seems to have an answer. What is clear is that no viable political body has been created or identified in Iraq in the last year with the domestic political support necessary to take charge and run the country after the turnover. Unless the White House adds credibility to the June 30th transfer, it is also clear that the other dates detailed by the president in his April 2004 press conference, dates leading to a permanent Iraqi government by December 2005, have no meaning whatsoever.

### Iraq's Tet Offensive?

In this regard, the April 2004 insurrection in Iraq could well have a political impact on the Bush administration similar to the impact of the 1968 Tet offensive on the Johnson administration. The Tet offensive exposed the consistently positive U.S. message in Vietnam to be a lie. In turn, the savage attacks of Iraqi insurgents almost 40 years later dealt a heavy blow to the credibility of the Bush administration. In both cases, events on the ground suggested that the U.S. government, not only was not in control, but didn't have a plan.

A parallel can also be drawn to the now discredited domino theory, which suggested that the fall of Vietnam would lead to a Communist takeover of all of Asia. President Bush promised a similar domino effect in the Middle East in which the overthrow of Saddam Hussein would lead to a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and the flowering of democracy throughout the region. The failure to install democracy in Iraq will likely lead to a long winter of autocracy in the Middle East before other states even attempt meaningful democratic reforms.

### Wars of Choice

Vietnam and Iraq were both wars of choice. And they are also similar in that deceit and misrepresentation was employed by the U.S. government, first to engage U.S. forces and then to keep them there. President Bush took us to war on the grounds that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and had ties to al Qaeda. No weapons of mass destruction have been found and no ties to al Qaeda have been discovered. We were also told our troops would be greeted with open arms and flowers, which didn't last long, and that Iraqi oil would pay for most of the reconstruction. Now told we're in Iraq to nurture democratic self-government, political reconstruction is also going badly.

In retrospect, it is clear we had no idea what we were getting into when we marched into Vietnam, and the same appears true in Iraq. In reference to Vietnam, President Johnson pledged in April 1965: "We will not withdraw, either openly or under the cloak of a meaningless agreement." Four decades later, President Bush pledged: "We've got to stay the course and we will stay the course" in Iraq.

The American people—and the Iraqi people—deserve better than this. They are entitled to a well-thought-out, credible plan, detailing how the administration expects to achieve its objectives in Iraq. A realistic plan is also a prerequisite to engaging fully the international community in reconstruction efforts, a necessity the Bush administration has only belatedly come to recognize. Reviewing what went right—and wrong—in Vietnam might be a good place to start when creating such a plan.

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*Ronald Bruce St John, an analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus, has published widely on Middle Eastern issues. His latest book on the region is Libya and the United States: Two Centuries of Strife (Penn Press, 2002).*

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