

Reflections on Vietnam and the Iraq War

By Daniel Ellsberg | June 3, 2005

Editor's Note: The following essay is adapted from remarks made at a Capital Hill briefing on Iraq: The Logic of Withdrawal sponsored by the Institute for Policy Studies and Foreign Policy In Focus. The event was held two days before the 30th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War.

I'm often asked whether there aren't big differences between the Iraq War and Vietnam. And I'm always quick to say, of course, there are differences. In Iraq, it's a dry heat. And the language that none of our troops or diplomats speak is Arabic rather than Vietnamese.

But the language we choose for "democratic" representation in the country is the same for Chalabi or Allawi or any of those people. Miraculously their leaders speak fluent English, as in Vietnam.

In Vietnam, the top people spoke English, but the middle people, in general, spoke French. And that gave me a very big advantage because I spoke French. I could speak to the district people, the province chiefs, and a lot of the army commanders, in French. Of course I didn't speak Vietnamese like my colleagues. None of us really noticed what the implications of that were. The people we were dealing with were, to a man—and they were all men—collaborators with the French regime. They were so perceived and recognized by the Vietnamese.

It didn't occur to us that someone who spoke English qualified himself for political, electoral leadership in Vietnam. The Vietnamese, left to themselves, wouldn't have made that a requirement, probably any more than they would have made it a requirement that the leader, like Diem, be Christian. And in Iraq, again, speaking English wouldn't be the natural requirement for a leader there.

What we find very hard to perceive now as then, is that we are seen correctly by Iraqis as foreign occupiers. Americans just can't see themselves in such terms. We're good neighbors, wherever we are. We're visitors, we're helpers, we're supporting liberation and democracy. From beginning to end in Vietnam, almost no civilian or military person was ever able to perceive his relations with the people there as the relation between a foreign occupier and either a collaborator or a reluctant tolerator.

The reality of that meant that we never had any better chance to eliminate our opposition, the resistance, to win the war as we proclaimed, than the French did, or the Japanese before them, or the Chinese over 1,000 years ago. And we never had the right or the prospect to pacify or achieve victory. I believe that is true in Iraq right now.

The elections failed in their most practical objective. If we really wanted a country that is democratic and representative, we should not have failed to bring the Sunni into the process.

American soldiers and diplomats, if they can be called that, will be dying and killing in Iraq as long as they are there. Now, how long will that be?

Another similarity with Vietnam is that staying in Iraq is being sustained by a lie and a charge.

The lie, in the case of Nixon, and earlier Lyndon Johnson, was that our presence in Vietnam was seen by our own leaders as temporary; as aimed at an eventual victory that would lead to an eventual end of American presence there. Actually, that was never, ever the prediction put forward by the intelligence agencies or the civilian advisers, of whom I was one in 1964 and 1965.

Nixon kept the American people with him, not only through a first term but into a second term, by a continuous hoax that he was in the process of leaving Vietnam. It was never, ever his intention that there not be American bases in Vietnam. He foresaw initially large deployments of U.S. troops, at least 40,000 or so, indefinitely. He was only forced to give that up through public pressure from Congress, and of course the pressure of casualties and the draft. He



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never gave up the objective of continuous airpower from carriers from Guam and Thailand that would sustain our collaborator government in Saigon indefinitely. The notion he had in mind was that after a decent interval the communists would take over. It didn't happen the way he foresaw. We did actually leave on April 30, 1975.

The pictures of the helicopters pulling people from rooftops were not something that Nixon ever had in mind. He was forced into that by a combination of things, including the American public and Congress cutting off the funds. It was of course after Nixon was out of office. Without that happening, I am certain the war would have gone on another year or two and possibly many more years under American airpower.

In other words, it was very hard to exit Vietnam, to end the American war in Vietnam. And there was no guarantee that it would end in 10 years from 1965, as it did. It was likely to have gone on much longer, and would have without a combination of Congressional pressure, pushed by public pressure, and luck of various kinds, including the revelations of Watergate.

I believe it will be much harder and longer to get out of Iraq. There was no oil in Vietnam. Our need for bases in that area was not what we perceive our need for bases in the Middle East to be. Vietnam was not next to a highly influential ally of the United States, like Israel, with great influence on our policy that demands our continued presence in that area.

I do not foresee that we will be getting out of Iraq immediately, soon, or for a very long time. In fact, it is hard for me to see when that will be. When we will leave the oil of the Middle East and the oil of Iraq to the control of people who are not our collaborators, people who are not determined to be friendly to Israel and unfriendly to Iran, another Shi'a state. When do we leave it to those people? It will be a long time, frankly, under Democrats or Republicans.

That does not mean it is too soon for us to be talking about why we should be out; why it is a good policy for us to be out. That's why I am so happy with Rep. Lynn Woolsey's (D-CA) bill proposing a withdrawal strategy. She's made a whole succession of

excellent moves under this administration. That bill is very, very important.

We ought to be realistic here because it's not going to get a majority in Congress any time soon or even in the foreseeable future. Yet I believe it's essential if we are ever to get out and to avoid other wars in Iran and elsewhere, to be seeing clearly now that it is false to say that it is better for the United States and better for Iraqis for us to be there than to be out. That's the basic point that's being made.

"We must stay the course." That's what we heard year after year in Vietnam. It is inevitable that people who support the Woolsey bill will say it is right for us to be out and it is better for Iraqis for us to be out, not because the future is clear when we get out or that the future is peaceful when we get out or there will be no problems. In Vietnam we heard about a bloodbath of Catholics that would follow. That didn't happen, fortunately, but they didn't have a happy democratic future either. The point is that if we stay, the people we choose to run Iraq as collaborators will be subject to terrorism just as is happening now. *We* are the problem that unifies resistance forces.

The unity of resistance forces right now is on *one* thing and that is American occupation. That doesn't make for a peaceful Iraq, ever. In fact, it precludes the possibility of a peaceful Iraq.

Our administration says our duty is to stay there, that we owe them our presence, which is false. We owe them a lot in the way of money and reconstructions but not our presence. It only oppresses them, really.

People who call for getting out now will be called defeatists, appeasers, losers, weaklings, or cowards. They won't be called pro-communist now, but they will be called pro-terrorism, pro-Osama bin Laden, which is ironic because as was foreseen by such administration experts as Richard Clarke, in the government, the occupation of Iraq day by day strengthens the forces of al-Qaida; it's the opposite of what's being said now.

To get out, they'll say you're for terrorism, you're for defeat.

I want to say this as an analogy toward Vietnam. We can't move toward what we should do, which is getting out as soon as we can. You can't move in that direction, without being willing to be charged with calling for defeat and failure and weakness and cowardice. And that just rules it out for most people.

I would say that many, I could say thousands, but it's really hundreds of thousands, and when we include the Vietnamese, millions, have died in the last century because American politicians were unwilling to be called names. They were unwilling to face, however invalid, however ridiculous, the charge that they were weak, unmanly, cowardly, defeatist, losers, and whatnot.

I have no greater hero in this country than the representative—almost my representative—Barbara Lee from Oakland (D-CA), one woman in Congress who faced those charges in 2001 when she voted against going to war in Afghanistan without hearings.

The next year she led the battle against going to war in Iraq, where 132 others joined her opposing a similar resolution, a Tonkin Gulf resolution drawing us into war.

She wasn't saying we shouldn't go into Afghanistan but that we should not sign away the constitutional right to decide that issue without hearings, debate, and reflection. That was obviously right.

We were lied into Iraq the same way we were lied into Vietnam, even though the war initially, the blitzkrieg phase, looked very different. The war is now looking very similar. Kennedy and Byrd, two Senators who were still there who had voted for the Tonkin Gulf resolution, pleading with their fellow senators both said "I am ashamed of what I did almost 40 years ago. Don't live with that for the rest of your lives." Most of them will have to live with that for the rest of their lives.

That is the kind of courage that is needed. The courage to say that we need to get out. The courage to speak the truth. That will save us and the Iraqis from the occupation.

Daniel Ellsberg is a former official of the Department of Defense and the State Department during the Vietnam era. Since the end of the Vietnam War he has been a lecturer, writer, and activist on the dangers of the nuclear era and unlawful interventions. Most recently he is the author of Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers.

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