

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

IS IRAQ ANOTHER VIETNAM?

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ABSTRACT

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Vietnam, our nation's longest war, and only major military defeat left many strategic leaders to adopt the slogan "never again" with respect to U.S. strategy and politics during the Vietnam conflict. Many are comparing the protracted, insurgent, and proxy nature of the current conflict in Iraq with Vietnam. Are comparisons between the two conflicts relevant and politically applicable? Are there still valuable lessons learned from Vietnam that are applicable to Iraq? This project focuses on comparing the two conflicts across insurgent, globalization lines of operation, civilian military relations, cost (national treasure), strategy, and U.S. forces in terms of effects. This strategic research project reveals the two conflicts are comparable and have more in common than not. We can learn, and in many instances, re-learn strategic lessons from Vietnam which apply to the current fight in Iraq and future conflicts.

IS IRAQ ANOTHER VIETNAM?

“Bush accepts Iraq-Vietnam Comparison”—served as a headline for ABC news on 18 October 2005.¹ President Bush, when asked if he agreed with columnist Tom Friedman, who had claimed in *New York Times* that the situation in Iraq may be equivalent to the Tet offensive in Vietnam almost 40 years ago, responded by saying “he could be right.” Prior to the headline, the Bush administration consistently denied any worthwhile comparison between the two conflicts. It is understandable why the Bush administration resisted comparisons: no party, especially the Commander and Chief wants to associate themselves with our nation’s only lost war. Nonetheless, the ghosts of Vietnam impact our national security strategy to this day.

Why Compare the Two Conflicts?

There are many articles and several books that consider comparisons between the Vietnam War and the current conflict in Iraq. Some argue for and others argue against the legitimacy of comparing the two conflicts. Some neglect the salient points and are politically motivated. Others dwell extensively on insignificant comparisons of geography, duration, location and the size of the two conflicts. Other works are more meaningful such as Jeffery Record and W. Andrew Terrill’s *“Iraq and Vietnam: Differences Similarities and Insights”* (which is somewhat dated) and Robert K. Brickman’s *“Is Iraq Another Vietnam”* which are excellent works; however they are only the works of a few writers.

Many argue we are losing the war in Iraq. The worsening situation in Iraq, specifically the lack of progress, increased insurgent attacks against coalition and Iraqi security forces, coupled with extreme sectarian violence could lead to a second major defeat for the U.S. Is our strategy flawed in Iraq? Can we apply lessons from Vietnam in order to succeed in Iraq? We must compare the two conflicts to garner salient lessons learned that may be applicable to Iraq and future strategies. We must compare the two conflicts to prevent our current force from the military decay after the Vietnam War. Over 65,000 U.S. service personnel deserted military units during the Vietnam War. By the end of the war, as many as 80% of the force was using illegal drugs; 30% were using heroine.² We cannot afford a similar deterioration of our military during or after the war in Iraq. Our experiences in Vietnam led many to adopt the slogan “never again” and helped craft the Powell Doctrine.³ The lessons learned from Vietnam served our military and civilian leaders well during the Cold War and Operation Desert Storm, during which the U.S. applied decisive military force to achieve decisive victory. We must compare Vietnam and Iraq to identify systemic challenges in our civilian-military relations to best craft winning strategy for Iraq and future conflicts.

Know the Type of War You Are In

Clausewitz wrote, “The first, the supreme, the most far reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.”⁴ Was Vietnam a guerrilla war, a war of attrition, protracted in nature, an insurgent war, an asymmetric war, a conventional war, a civil war, a limited war, a proxy war, or some combination of the above? The same reasoning applies to the conflict in Iraq. For this paper, to ensure consistency of discourse and analysis, Vietnam started as an insurgent war (following the Maoist theory), transitioned to conventional war and was essentially a civil war between North and South Vietnam—which Robert McNamara discovered many years later.⁵ Iraq started as a conventional war (initial ground attack), transitioned to an insurgency is now on the verge of a civil war and is, to some degree, a proxy war.

Mao’s Recipe for Defeating Superpowers

It is relevant to discuss the Maoist Theory of war before comparing the insurgent nature of the two conflicts. Mao’s strategy of a protracted popular people’s war, especially the guerrilla phases I and II, are a deadly blueprint for defeating superpowers. History is replete with examples of successful guerrilla wars waged by weaker, less equipped, less resourced and poorly trained forces defeating superpowers. Napoleon’s forces suffered tremendous losses at the hands of guerrilla forces in Spain over a four year period.⁶ Mao’s theory describes three phases of the people’s war—the strategic defensive, the strategic stalemate, and the strategic offensive. During the strategic defensive phase, insurgent forces focus on survival and keeping the insurgency alive. This phase is characterized by low level violence such as ambushes, laying mines, and sniper attacks. To succeed, guerrillas must gain the people’s support during this phase. Mao popularized this concept with his famous quote, “The guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea.” People provide the insurgency with an all-important safe haven. Without the sea (people), the fish (guerrillas) will die like fish out of water.

Phase II, the strategic stalemate, is characterized by active guerrilla warfare and involves escalating attacks against the enemy, while avoiding a decisive engagement against superior firepower. This stage, if successful, sets the conditions for the strategic offensive, which involves transitioning from guerrilla warfare to conventional offensive warfare. The people’s protracted warfare model allows for transition between phases from the strategic offensive back to the strategic defensive or any other phase depending on the enemy. Mao’s theory is event, not time, driven.

Comparing the insurgent nature of war between the Vietnam War and the conflict in Iraq reveals more similarities than differences. In Iraq, Fedayeen forces, Saddam loyalists and foreign fighters survived a conventional ground attack by the U.S. They set the conditions for transition to the strategic stalemate phase by developing insurgent infrastructure, repositioning arms and ammunition, recruiting, implementing a propaganda apparatus, and swimming among the people. Insurgent forces in Iraq avoid decisive engagements with U.S. military forces and employ hit and run tactics such as Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), rocket propelled grenade attacks, and sniper attacks. They seek to de-legitimize the government by creating chaos and disorder through suicide bombers and attacking infrastructure. They have the support of the people in some areas, and garner support in areas less sympathetic or supportive to their cause through intimidation.⁷

Ho Chi Minh's insurgent forces, the National Front for the Liberation of Vietnam (NLF) or Viet Cong proved effective using the people to swim and leveraging time as an asset. This force differed from the conventional military of North Vietnam. The insurgency in Vietnam started off differently than the insurgency in Iraq. The insurgency was already in place prior to U.S. forces entering the war. The insurgency then quickly transitioned to phase II (strategic stalemate) or true guerrilla warfare for the better part of a decade. In both conflicts, insurgent forces used hit and run tactics, mostly avoiding decisive engagement with U.S. forces. They used intimidation to gain support of the people and focused efforts to de-legitimize the government of South Vietnam. The two insurgencies differ along two salient points. The insurgency in Vietnam attempted to transition to phase III (the strategic offensive) by taking on U.S. forces at fire bases and during the TET offensive, without military success. Interestingly, the TET offensive, July 1968, marked the end of major insurgent efforts by North Vietnam forces in the south. Historians will forever debate if the U.S. and Army Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces destroyed the Viet Cong insurgency or if the North correctly read the U.S. domestic situation and anticipated a withdrawal of U.S. forces and focused resources for a major conventional attack against the south.

Was the insurgency in Vietnam comparable to the insurgency in Iraq? The answer is "No." However, a better question is: are the effects of the two insurgencies comparable? The answer is "Yes." The protracted nature of insurgent warfare plays to a critical U.S. vulnerability, "the will of the American People," who understandably dislike quagmires and watching the sensational reality of war on television year after year with no end in sight. Lack of U.S. domestic support for the Vietnam War drove our withdrawal; the same appears true for Iraq. The key lesson learned from both conflicts with respect to insurgent nature of the two wars is the negative effect

of the protracted nature of insurgent warfare on the will of the American people. In short, the U.S. should avoid protracted wars. U.S. strategy for future wars should address the use of decisive military force until conditions allow for transition to a host nation that is favorable to U.S. interests. Many critics argue the war in Iraq was not a revolution in military affairs but rather war on the cheap with disastrous consequences.

Global Lines of Operation

Comparing the two conflicts along global lines of operations with respect to domestic and international legitimacy, global constraints, and host nation governments reveals striking similarities between the two conflicts.

International and Domestic Legitimacy

With respect to international legitimacy, both conflicts started on puny terms. Both conflicts lacked United Nations and NATO support and the legitimacy that comes with International Government Organizations such as the U.N. or NATO. Both were weak “coalitions of the willing”—a far cry from conflicts such as Desert Storm, U.S. participation in the Balkans and WW I/II. Domestically, both Vietnam and Iraq were total failures with respect to legitimacy. President Lyndon B. Johnson secretly escalated the war into Laos and Cambodia as a strategy to counter the “domino theory” – if Vietnam falls to communism, the surrounding countries in Indochina would also fall to communism. “In 1965, a majority of Americans supported U.S. policies in Vietnam; by the fall of 1967, only 35 percent did so. 1967 marked the first time more people thought U.S. intervention in Vietnam had been a mistake than did not.”⁸

In early 1971, the “Pentagon Papers” (a top secret DoD study of the growth of United States military involvement in Vietnam) were leaked by a government official to *The New York Times* and were published on 13 June the same year.⁹ Leaking of the Pentagon Papers further weakened domestic legitimacy for the Vietnam War. The recent U.S. invasion into Iraq follows the same pattern as Vietnam only slightly worse. The fall of 2002 marked a high point for the Bush administration as the U.S. Senate voted 77-23 to authorize President Bush to attack Iraq if Saddam Hussein refused to give up weapons of mass destruction as required by U.N. resolutions.¹⁰ January 12, 2005, almost two years after the start of the ground war in Iraq, the U.S. ended its search for weapons of mass destruction in the country.¹¹ Shortly after ending the search of weapons of mass destruction, a Gallup Poll, July 2005, revealed nearly six in ten Americans say the United States should withdraw some or all of its troops from Iraq, the most downbeat view of the war since it began in 2003.¹² Ronald Spector, a military historian at

George Washington University commented that “the pattern of public opinion in Iraq, which started out strong for the first two years is reminiscent of the Korean and Vietnam conflicts.”¹³

On the domestic front, the Bush administration lost the will of the American people, largely due to a perceived lack of legitimacy—no weapons of mass destruction. An overwhelming majority of Americans oppose the protracted war in Iraq, characterized by roadside bombs, suicide bombers and sectarian violence. On the global front, the Bush administration alienated most of Europe, with the exception of the United Kingdom, and managed to draw world condemnation against U.S. efforts in Iraq. The will of the American people proved the enemy center of gravity in Vietnam and in Iraq. Loss of American will caused our withdrawal from Vietnam and may also drive the same result in Iraq. The two conflicts are similar with respect to the effects of lack of legitimacy. Our civilian and military leaders must successfully implement strategies to win the legitimacy battle, both domestically and internationally.

Global Constraints

U.S. strategy in Vietnam was more constrained than in Iraq, because the U.S. was forced to consider the reactions of Russia and China (two superpowers at the time) to U.S. actions in Vietnam, especially North Vietnam. China and Russia provided North Vietnam with tremendous support, especially military and economic aid to counter U.S. efforts in Vietnam. Prior to 1965, China provided the majority of aid and was the leading supporter of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). According to Soviet estimates, from 1955 to 1965 the People’s Republic of China provided North Vietnam with 511.8 million rubles in economic aid (roughly \$569 million).¹⁴ Chinese military units deployed between 60,000 to 100,000 workers to Northern provinces.¹⁵ China also served as a supply line of communications to Northern Vietnam.¹⁶ Moscow sent Vietnam (DRV) surface to air missiles, jet fighters, rockets, anti-aircraft guns and other hardware for air defense.¹⁷

The tremendous investments of China and Russia in North Vietnam typified the proxy nature of the Cold War between communist super powers and the U.S. This affected U.S. policy with constraints such as mining North Vietnamese harbors, bombing North Vietnam and expanding the war to Laos and Cambodia. U.S. strategy in Vietnam was constantly measured against Chinese and Russian reaction. The U.S. policy sought to avoid a situation similar to the Korean War, where Chinese troops became overtly involved in a conventional war against the U.S. This also prevented the U.S. from conducting major ground offensive operations into Northern Vietnam. Therefore, U.S. policy with respect to Vietnam was constantly a game of

calculating Russian and Chinese responses to U.S. action, especially in North Vietnam. U.S. strategy in Vietnam was definitely constrained in this respect.

U.S. policy in Iraq is also constrained. Iran is providing Iraqi insurgents, mostly Shiite insurgents, with improvised explosive devices, ammunition and other support.¹⁸ Syria's support for Sunni insurgents further contributes to destabilization of the Iraqi government and sectarian violence. Similar to Vietnam, the U.S. must measure its strategic efforts to reduce Iranian influence in Iraq without provoking another war. A similar situation exists in Syria: Foreign Fighters and terrorists transit between Iraq and Syria over a porous border between the two countries. Again, the U.S. must measure its response and, to a certain degree, respect the sovereignty of Iran and Syria while combating their influence in Iraq. U.S. strategy in Iraq is constrained, much as it was in Vietnam. However, threats facing the U.S. from Iran and Syria are significantly less than the U.S. faced against Russia and China during the Vietnam conflict, because Russia and China were both credible nuclear powers.

The war in Iraq is also a proxy war; the U.S. is fighting the global war on terror through Iraq. Indeed, former Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld stated that "Iraq is the central front of the global war on terror,"¹⁹ arguing that it is better to fight the war on terror in Iraq instead of U.S. soil. As the U.S. and Russia learned in Vietnam and Afghanistan, it is less costly to fund opponents of a superpower than it is to actually do the fighting yourself. Supporting an insurgency is not only cheaper than occupying a country and fighting against an insurgency, it has also proven more successful in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and so far in Iraq. Vietnam was a pawn in the Cold War, Iraq is a pawn in the war on terror.

U.S. Support of Weak and Corrupt Governments and Their Militaries

Rounding out the global comparison is U.S. support of weak and corrupt governments. The U.S. supported weak and corrupt governments in both Vietnam and Iraq. On 12 November 1966, the New York Times reported that "40 percent of U.S. economic aid sent to Saigon is stolen or winds ended up on the black market."²⁰ The U.S. backed Diem regime was plagued with nepotism, corruption, and was abusive towards Buddhists. Diem was killed during a successful coup in 1963. He was replaced by several failed regimes until Nguyen Van Thieu established himself as the leader of South Vietnam from 1965 to 1975. Thieu's regime was considered even more corrupt than Diem's.²¹

A similar situation exists in Iraq. The U.S. emplaced Lyad Allawi as the interim Prime Minister in June 2004. He was replaced by Ibrahim al-Jaafari and later by Nouri al-Maliki, a Shi'ah Muslim, who failed to restore order and security in Iraq, especially in Baghdad. Many

Sunnis in Iraq distrust Maliki and are fearful he will use the Shi'ah majority Iraqi army and police to take revenge against Sunnis in Iraq for years of domination under Saddam Hussein. Maliki is quoted as saying "I consider myself a friend of the U.S., but I'm not America's man in Iraq."²² Many in the international community see the government in Iraq as a puppet of the U.S., when in reality the governments in Iraq and Vietnam were often resistant to U.S. demands.

Unfortunately, the weak and corrupt governments of Vietnam and Iraq are indicative of their militaries where corruption and weak leadership are the norm. South Vietnamese military units, or the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), were plagued with corruption and desertion. A 1968 *Time Magazine* article best sums up the situation with respect to South Vietnamese ARVN forces. The article claimed "Good junior officers are lacking in the ARVN, which has been fighting for years and was virtually beaten in mid-1965 when the U.S. buildup began. Though a tough new law cut the desertion rate in half in 1967, it remained disappointingly high, more than one in ten ARVN soldiers go permanently AWOL, accounting for 70% of the ARVN's personnel losses. Draft dodging remains a national sport; even if caught, an affluent youth can buy his way out for \$750 or less."²³

Today, corruption and weak leadership plague the Iraqi military. Many Iraqi commanders inflate their personnel rolls, keeping "ghost" soldiers on the books and pocket the monthly wages of the "ghost" soldiers. Iraq's former finance minister alleged, in a U.S. television report aired Sunday, that up to \$800 million meant to equip the Iraqi army had been stolen from the government by former officials through fraudulent arms deals. The former minister Ali Allawi told CBS' "60 Minutes" that \$1.2 billion had been allocated from the Iraqi treasury to the defense ministry to buy new weapons. About \$400 million was spent on outdated equipment, while the rest of the money was simply stolen.²⁴ Defeating an insurgency is difficult business, which becomes even more difficult when supporting weak and corrupt governments to promote national interests. Weak and corrupt governments usually give rise to weak and corrupt military forces. In both Vietnam and Iraq, the U.S. supported weak and corrupt governments and their corresponding militaries. We must learn from Vietnam and develop and support the strong legitimate governments or sufficiently mitigate the effects of weak and corrupt governments and their militaries.

U.S. Strategy Comparisons

U.S. strategy in Vietnam transitioned from pacification, to Vietnamization and eventually to "clear and hold" under General Abrams. U.S. strategy in Iraq reveals a similar pattern. The initial strategy in Iraq, after major combat operations, focused on hunting and killing or capturing

insurgents while simultaneously building an Iraqi army. This strategy is strikingly similar to Vietnam and many characterize it as Iraqization.²⁵ The goal of the Bush administration's third track is the creation of an Iraqi national military and an Iraqi police force that can shoulder the burden of counterinsurgency on their own—a project many call "Iraqization," after its counterpart from Vietnam.²⁶

Under General Petraeus, the strategy in Iraq is transitioning from "Iraqization" to "clear and hold."²⁷ Search and destroy missions or hunting insurgents in Iraq is an important aspect of the kinetic part of a military strategy; however, it takes more than a kinetic approach to defeat an insurgency. Going back to Mao's theory of insurgent warfare, insurgents swim with the people; the best strategy to defeat an insurgency is to dry up the sea or dislocate the people from the insurgents.

The Cost of War, Lives and Dollars

Vietnam, our nation's longest war, was one of the most costly in terms of our National Treasure—the lives of our sons and daughters and money. The financial cost of the Vietnam War, compared with the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was approximately 9%. The cost of the war in Iraq is currently 2% of our nation's GDP. Comparing eleven major conflicts in U.S. history (see figure 1 below), Vietnam ranks as the sixth most costly conflict in U.S. history. However, Vietnam is magnitudes less costly than WW II as a percentage of our GDP. Iraq is the tenth most costly conflict in U.S. history in terms of GDP.

The cost effects of the wars in Vietnam or Iraq are not comparable to the financial collapse of the Soviet Union fighting the cold war and Afghanistan. Columbia University economist Joseph E. Stiglitz and Harvard lecturer Linda Bilmes estimate the cost of the Iraq war could approach \$2 trillion after factoring in long-term healthcare for soldiers and other unforeseen bills and economic losses.²⁸ Although only a fraction of the GDP, the U.S. is funding the war in Iraq with borrowed money, mostly from China and Japan. The effects of borrowing billions of dollars from our potential adversaries is troubling. Although the U.S. can easily afford the war in Iraq, the U.S. congress did not adjust the budget, (cut other projects by 2% to fund the war) which required the U.S. to borrow the money which is fueling the U.S. national debt which leads to fiscal instability and eventually loss of influence.

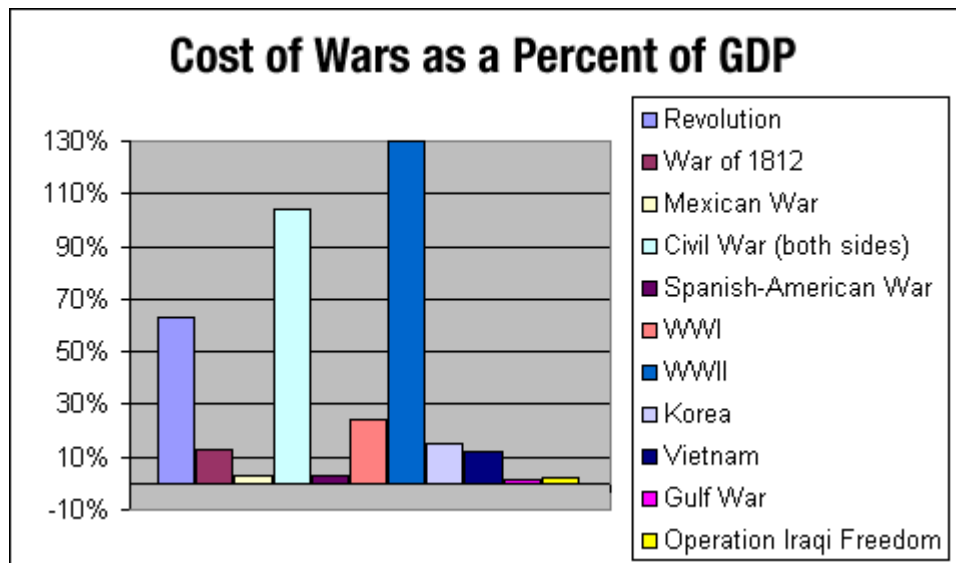


Figure 1 ²⁹

The Human Cost

During the Vietnam War 58,193 Americans were killed. Casualty rates peaked at 16,592 for a twelve month period in 1968.³⁰ American media brought the carnage of war into the living rooms of millions of Americans daily. Over an eight year period, the media served as the catalyst to spark erosion of public support for the war in Vietnam. The media, quite effectively, broadcast countless images of injured or killed civilians and soldiers, which turned public support against the war.

The U.S. experienced significantly higher casualties (140,414 for Union forces only), during the Civil War, which lasted approximately four years. During WW II the U.S. lost 291,557 over a five year period. The U.S. never experienced an erosion of public support for WW II. Vietnam and Iraq do not compare well with respect to total casualties. The casualties from one year of combat in Vietnam, 1968 for example, were 5.5 times higher than the worst year in Iraq. In Vietnam casualty rates averaged 3.7 percent of the total force. In Iraq, during the worst year, casualty rates never exceeded 0.4 percent of the force. Casualties, over a prolonged period of time, combined with a lack of progress and sensational media coverage drive public opinion. That is why the U.S. must avoid protracted wars, because media coverage impacts the American people. Over time, given the protracted nature of insurgent warfare, Americans will question the legitimacy of killing on foreign soil. During Vietnam, the media, for the first time in U.S. history, brought images of death and destruction to America's living rooms. Public support eroded for the Vietnam War, just as it is eroding for the war in Iraq. Therefore the two conflicts are nothing like the Civil or Korean wars, because America supported those wars without media

bias reporting death and destruction. However, Vietnam and Iraq are strikingly similar with respect to the effects of U.S. casualties on the will of the American people.

U.S. Forces Comparison

U.S. forces analysis: “We were not in Vietnam for ten years. Rather, we were in Vietnam for one year, ten times.”³¹ During World War II, soldiers fought for the duration of the conflict, with few exceptions. WW II represented a total commitment by the U.S., employing all elements of Clausewitz’s trinity—the people, the government, and the Army—until it achieved unconditional victory with sufficient occupying forces to ensure continued victory. During Vietnam, soldiers served twelve month tours of duty. The first nine months of a tour in Vietnam were usually productive, with the first few involving some type of acclimation. The last three months of a tour were usually preoccupied with surviving and going home. Twelve month troop rotations have a negative impact on soldier and unit performance. U.S. forces in Vietnam were a mixture of regular Army forces and conscripted soldiers, 25 percent of the total force in Vietnam were draftees, compared with 66 percent during World War II.³² The U.S. Army in Vietnam was the best educated, trained and disciplined Army in the history of the U.S. during the Vietnam War. Unfortunately, the protracted nature of the Vietnam War necessitated troop rotations which seriously detracted from ownership of the war for some soldiers. They did not have to stay until the mission was accomplished, resulting in some units engaging in “search and avoid” missions to survive.

Much of the anti-war movement in the U.S. during the Vietnam War is attributable to the draft. Those opposing the war in Vietnam were not only dealing with political opposition to the war, they were dealing with the real fear of being drafted into the very war in which they opposed. In fact, many draft eligible Americans opposed the war, not solely on political merit but because they did not want to get drafted. Much of the impetus for the antiwar protests came from college students. Objections to the military draft led some protesters to burn their draft cards and to refuse to obey induction notices. By 1967 the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) invoked the language of revolution in its denunciations of the war in Vietnam as an inevitable consequence of American imperialism.³³ Our military forces in Iraq are different than those in Vietnam.

The military in Iraq is an all volunteer force with no draftees in the ranks. Some may argue that stop loss and selective stop moves are a form of the draft, but technically they are not. The all volunteer force is more difficult to recruit than a largely conscript army and therefore we must pay attention to indicators that drive Soldiers away from entering and staying in the

Army. It is possible to “break” the all volunteer army through multiple deployments with limited “dwell” time between deployments. Many argue that the U.S. Army can not continue its current deployment schedule indefinitely, because we will not meet recruiting and retention requirements. Andrew Krepinevich, a retired Army officer, who wrote a report under a Pentagon contract, concluded that the Army cannot sustain the pace of troop deployments to Iraq long enough to break the back of the insurgency. He wrote that the Army is “in a race against time” to adjust to the demands of war “or risk ‘breaking’ the force in the form of a catastrophic decline in recruitment and re-enlistment.”³⁴

Comparing U.S. forces between the two conflicts reveals the following: the political consequences of a protracted war involving a conscript force are more costly than an all volunteer force for the same conflict. The draft creates fear in war, which can lead to rebellion and protest against the government and the military. An all volunteer force is less likely to protest against the war but is more fragile than a conscripted force if volunteers drop below a designated threshold. Both Vietnam and Iraq involved troop rotations of twelve months, which, to some degree detracted from ownership in the war. Troop rotations result in loss of continuity for operations requiring military to civilian contacts in foreign countries with different cultures, which creates lack of legitimacy through the eyes of the supported populace. If the people are the sea in which the insurgents swim, continuity with the people is a critical element for successful implementation of a strategy based on drying up the sea or winning support of the people.

Civilian-Military Relations

Clausewitz wrote “War is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.”³⁵ Lyndon B. Johnson once boasted that the military “couldn’t bomb a shithouse” without his own approval.³⁶ Long protracted wars often strain civilian-military relations more than decisive military operations. President Johnson exerted tremendous control over the U.S. military in Vietnam; specifically he limited strategic Air force targets and the Naval operations in North Vietnam, and with good reason. President Johnson could not risk another Macarthur type Korean incident bringing China or Russia overtly into the war.

President Johnson’s involvement in selecting strategic bombing targets, gave the perception that the President was personally approving all targets from Washington, DC for troops in contact in Vietnam, which was not completely true. The President gave considerable freedom to General Westmorland to develop his strategy of attrition. Unfortunately,

Westmorland's pacification strategy proved ineffective and the president, rightly so, replaced him with General Abrams who implemented his strategy of "clear and hold" which proved effective.³⁷ However, civilian-military relations during the Vietnam War were strained, due to an overbearing Secretary of Defense and his "Whiz Kids" who thought they could win the war through statistical analysis and mathematics, a theme that was repeated and intensified under Secretary Rumsfeld during his tenure.

Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld overly scrutinized and micromanaged troop levels for the initial ground war in Iraq. Former Army Secretary of the Army Tom White commented that former Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld "just ground General Franks down. If you grind away at the military guys long enough, they will finally say Screw it, I'll do the best I can with what I have." Rumsfeld insisted General Franks reduce initial troop requests for the attack in Iraq from 380,000 U.S. troops to 275,000 troops or less; he even made General Franks review a proposal to attack Baghdad with 50,000 troops.³⁸ Rumsfeld regarded the Time Phased Force Deployment List (TPFD) as a wasteful anachronism that took decision-making out of his hands.³⁹ He personally managed the troop list and the deployment process to ensure his vision of transformation was applied to the war in Iraq. Rumsfeld sought to apply his "transformation" principles of a smaller and faster, leaner force. Clausewitz also wrote, "War is nonetheless a serious means to a serious end. War is no pastime; it is no mere joy in daring and winning, no place for irresponsible enthusiasts."⁴⁰

Senior military leaders such as Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki were marginalized when expressing differing views from "neocons." The Johnson administration was equally guilty of group think and often marginalized those that provided different opinions with respect to the strategy in Vietnam. Instead of advice, McNamara and Johnson extracted acquiescence and silent support from the Joint Chiefs for decisions that they had already made. "Even as the chiefs were relegated to the margins, a façade of consultation was preserved to preclude them from opposing the administration policies openly or from behind the scenes."⁴¹ Remembering Clausewitz admission that war is an extension of politics, it easy to understand that the decision to wage war rests with our civilian leaders. However, senior military leaders, experts in their profession need a stronger voice with respect to resources to fight our civilian leader's wars.

Conclusion

In conclusion, U.S. conflicts in Vietnam and Iraq are worth comparing. Comparison reveals more similarities than differences with respect to the effects of the two conflicts. Yes, Vietnam was a much larger conflict than Iraq with respect to troop strength and losses. However

the effects of troop losses remain the same with respect to the will of the American people. There is a strategic difference between weak coalitions of the willing and true coalitions such as those in WW I, WW II, and Desert Storm. Legitimacy on the domestic front is just as critical as it is internationally. We must gain and maintain support for our military efforts through effective domestic communications plans that are grounded in legitimacy. Functional civilian-military relations are critical for success on the battlefield. During the Vietnam War, the U.S. Secretary of Defense disproportionately dominated all defense matters at the expense of CJCS and the service chiefs, to the detriment of our country. Iraq followed a similar pattern under the helm of Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. Hopefully, with a new Secretary of Defense, civilian-military relations will prove more effective for our remaining time in Iraq and after.

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