



Comparing Iraq and Vietnam: What and when is victory?

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WITH THE United States said to be heading towards ‘another Vietnam’ in Iraq, are there any parallels between these conflicts that might be usefully remembered and highlighted?

Some similarities

Spurious pretext: While Iraq had its controversial (and ultimately fruitless) search for Weapons of Mass Destruction, the ramping up of American commitment in Vietnam was precipitated by the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, in which two US destroyers, the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*, were supposed to have come under unprovoked North Vietnamese attack. This led to the US Congress passing the Tonkin Gulf Resolution granting the President (Lyndon B Johnson) powers to “take all necessary measures” to “repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression”. In 1954, when the French withdrew, the US presence comprised a 342-man Military Assistance Advisory Group. By 1969, US forces ‘in-country’ had reached their Vietnam peak of 543,000.

The search for legitimacy: Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, the Philippines and Thailand all sent military personnel to South Vietnam in an attempt to confer legitimacy on the war effort by internationalizing it. While the Iraqi coalition is larger, the search for legitimacy has been no less difficult. This has been compounded by the failure to locate WMD and the difficulty in managing the coalition, amid decreasing coalition participation.

Asymmetry: Iraq and Afghanistan are not the first or only ‘asymmetric wars’, where a comparatively low-tech enemy can successfully tie down a large high-tech opponent through a cocktail of audacity, suicidal bravery, and terrorism of the civilian population. Ho Chi Minh said to the French as the colonists attempted to reassert control at the end of the Second World War: “You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours, but even at those odds you will lose and I will win.”

Changing tactics: Acting on the advice of his military commanders, President Bush is attempting to create security in Iraq by employing a ‘surge’ of additional troops. Such surges were tried – and failed – in Vietnam.

Domestic appetite: The Vietnam War was ultimately lost within the US where a faltering domestic appetite for further casualties led to the January 1973 Paris peace agreement and US troop withdrawal. The March 2007 Congressional vote imposing a deadline for a US pullout from Iraq is both an indication of the growing unpopularity of a conflict with no end in sight, and the extent of the politicization of foreign policy in the run-up to the 2008 presidential

election. Either way, the Iraqi war has become a divisive domestic political issue as did Vietnam.

Haemorrhaging skills: The war in Vietnam created seven million refugees. Nearly a million Vietnamese, many of them professionals, fled the country immediately before and after the collapse of the South. There have been 297 Iraqi academics killed since 2003. Before the war approximately 500,000 Iraqis lived abroad; today the figure is four times that amount. The trickle is turning into a flood.

Regional influences: The military support given by the Soviet Union and China to Ho Chi Minh and his generals was crucial, as was their use of neighbouring Laos and Cambodia as staging points. Syria and especially Iran have been thorns in the side of those attempting to bring democratic stability to Iraq.

What of the differences?

Scale and Losses: The scale of US involvement in Vietnam was much greater than anything that has been seen in Iraq. A total of 3.1 million American armed forces personnel served in Vietnam. 3689 fixed-wing and 4857 helicopters were lost, and 15 million tones of ammunition expended, more than was dropped on all of Europe and Asia during World War II. Little over 1.4 million US troops have served in Iraq. Fourteen fixed-wing and 94 coalition helicopters have been lost to accidents and ground-fire.

The scale of human losses, too, was much greater in Vietnam. While an estimated three million Vietnamese (around seven per cent of the then population) perished and 58,183 US troops died in the Vietnam War; by April 2007, Iraqi casualties include 3,244 US military dead (and 24,314 wounded) and an estimated 150,000 local civilians. The latter figure is the subject of some controversy and may be higher if excess (rather than insurgent and coalition) deaths due to increased lawlessness, degraded infrastructure, healthcare, security, etc, are factored in.

Costs: US costs in prosecuting the Vietnam War was US\$770 billion in current terms, and another trillion dollars including veteran and interest payments. In Iraq they are nearing US\$415 billion, or US\$500 billion if one includes Afghanistan, and another estimated US\$350+ billion if future benefits and care to veterans are included. Currently the US is spending more per month in Iraq than Vietnam (US\$5.6 to US\$5.1 billion), but a much smaller percentage of America's GDP (one percent compared to as much as 14 percent for Vietnam, nine percent for the Korean War, or a whopping 40 percent in World War II).

Declaring Victory: On 1 May 2003 on the deck of *USS Abraham Lincoln*, President George W Bush gave his infamous 'Mission Accomplished' speech, declaring conventional combat operations over in Iraq. It could be argued that victory in Vietnam was also prematurely declared in April 1975 with the fall of Saigon. Did America's regional military umbrella not at least partly enable the East Asian economic miracle both by checking communist expansionism in Vietnam and ensuring that the region's ASEAN member-countries did not have to wastefully divert more expenditure to their militaries? While Vietnam was reunited and nationalist urges satisfied, the country's severe economic difficulties experienced until the economic reforms of the mid-1980s hardly constituted the revolution and victory socialism (and the Vietnamese) sought. Ironically, this is today being won through the adoption of the very system – capitalism – that Hanoi fought against.

Context and ambition: The US and its coalition are in Iraq, WMD apart, to get rid of a

dictator (Saddam Hussein) and permit the Iraqis democratic choice. In spite of the lack of direct connection between Al-Qaeda and Saddam's regime, this objective was undoubtedly inspired by events of 9/11 and the fear of a terrorist group getting its hands on WMD. The option of regime change was also partly a choice forced by the crumbling of the containment exercise which had kept Saddam's ambitions in check since the 1991 Gulf War. In South Vietnam, Washington was fighting to prevent the 'fall' of the South to the communist north, a Cold War fear of toppling dominoes. Of course this misread Hanoi's aims, but this has to be understood in terms of what the world was like in the 1960s, with the Soviets and Americans – East and West – fighting each other by proxy across the globe.

Key in understanding the relevance of the parallels, however, rests in deciphering the motivation of the local protagonists.

Notably, it is in what Hanoi fought for – reunification – and Iraq's numerous militia and insurgent groupings currently apparently against, that the greatest difference lies. Ho Chi Minh declared in the face of increasing American involvement in the South that "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom". He and his compatriots were fighting for unification, for one Vietnam. Iraqis appear to be at each other's throats for disintegration along sectarian and ethnic lines. And as today's activity on the Hai Phong to Hanoi artery vividly illustrates, in Vietnam, the North had the nationalist formula to win the war; together with the capitalist-inclined South they have reinvented themselves to win the peace.

Ho Chi Minh had another piece of wisdom. A decade before the US withdrawal he said of the Americans: "We will spread a red carpet for you to leave Vietnam. And when the war is over, you are welcome to come back because you have technology and we will need your help." If Iraqis could stop for a moment tearing their country apart, they would do well to heed this advice.

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