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## Iraq: Learning the Lessons of Vietnam

By Melvin R. Laird

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**Summary:** During Richard Nixon's first term, when I served as secretary of defense, we withdrew most U.S. forces from Vietnam while building up the South's ability to defend itself. The result was a success -- until Congress snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by cutting off funding for our ally in 1975. Washington should follow a similar strategy now, but this time finish the job properly.

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### SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

Richard Nixon was elected in 1968 on the assumption that he had a plan to end the Vietnam War. He didn't have any such plan, and my job as his first secretary of defense was to remedy that -- quickly. The only stated plan was wording I had suggested for the 1968 Republican platform, saying it was time to de-Americanize the war. Today, nearly 37 years after Nixon took office as president and I left Congress to join his cabinet, getting out of a war is still dicier than getting into one, as President George W. Bush can attest.

There were two things in my office that first day that gave my mission clarity. The first was a multivolume set of binders in my closet safe that contained a top-secret history of the creeping U.S. entry into the war that had occurred on the watch of my predecessor, Robert McNamara. The report didn't remain a secret for long; it was soon leaked to *The New York Times*, which nicknamed it "the Pentagon Papers." I always referred to the study as "the McNamara Papers," to give credit where credit belonged. I didn't read the full report when I moved into the office. I had already spent seven years on the Defense Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee listening to McNamara justify the escalation of the war. How we got into Vietnam was no longer my concern. (Although, in retrospect, those papers offered a textbook example of how not to commit American military might.)

The second item was another secret document, this one shorter and infinitely more troubling. It was a one-year-old request from General William Westmoreland to raise the U.S. troop commitment in Vietnam from 500,000 to 700,000. At the time he had made the request, Westmoreland was the commander of U.S. forces there. As soon as the idea had reached the ears of President Lyndon Johnson, Westmoreland's days in Saigon were numbered. Johnson bumped him upstairs to be army chief of staff, so that the Pentagon bureaucracy could dilute his more-is-better philosophy during the coming presidential campaign.

The memo had remained in limbo in the defense secretary's desk, neither approved nor rejected. As my symbolic first act in office, it gave me great satisfaction to turn down that request formally. It was the beginning of a four-year withdrawal from Vietnam that, in retrospect, became the textbook description of how the U.S. military should decamp.

Others who were not there may differ with this description. But they have been misinformed by more than 30 years of spin about the Vietnam War. The resulting legacy of that misinformation has left the United States timorous about war, deeply averse to intervening in even a just cause, and dubious of its ability to get out of a war once it is in one. All one need whisper is "another Vietnam," and palms begin to sweat. I have kept silent for those 30 years because I never believed that the old guard should meddle in the business of new administrations, especially during a time of war. But the renewed vilification of our role in Vietnam in light of the war in Iraq has prompted me to speak out.

Some who should know better have made our current intervention in Iraq the most recent in a string of bogeymen

peeking out from under the bed, spawned by the nightmares of Vietnam that still haunt us. The ranks of the misinformed include seasoned politicians, reporters, and even veterans who earned their stripes in Vietnam but who have since used that war as their bully pulpit to mold an isolationist American foreign policy. This camp of doomsayers includes Senator Edward Kennedy, who has called Iraq "George Bush's Vietnam." Those who wallow in such Vietnam angst would have us be not only reticent to help the rest of the world, but ashamed of our ability to do so and doubtful of the value of spreading democracy and of the superiority of freedom itself. They join their voices with those who claim that the current war is "all about oil," as though the loss of that oil were not enough of a global security threat to merit any U.S. military intervention and especially not "another Vietnam."

The Vietnam War that I saw, first from my seat in Congress and then as secretary of defense, cannot be wrapped in a tidy package and tagged "bad idea." It was far more complex than that: a mixture of good and evil from which there are many valuable lessons to be learned. Yet the only lesson that seems to have endured is the one that begins and ends with "Don't go there." The war in Iraq is not "another Vietnam." But it could become one if we continue to use Vietnam as a sound bite while ignoring its true lessons.

I acknowledge and respect the raw emotions of those who fought in Vietnam, those who lost loved ones, and those who protested, and I also respect the sacrifice of those who died following orders of people such as myself, half a world away. Those raw emotions are once again being felt as our young men and women die in Iraq and Afghanistan. I cannot speak for the dead or the angry. My voice is that of a policymaker, one who once decided which causes were worth fighting for, how long the fight should last, and when it was time to go home. The president, as our commander-in-chief, has the overall responsibility for making these life-or-death decisions, in consultation with Congress. The secretary of defense must be supportive of those decisions, or else he must leave.

It is time for a reasonable look at both Vietnam and Iraq -- and at what the former can teach us about the latter. My perspective comes from military service in the Pacific in World War II (I still carry shrapnel in my body from a kamikaze attack on my destroyer, the U.S.S. Maddox), nine terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, and four years as secretary of defense to Nixon.

Today, we deserve a view of history that is based on facts rather than emotional distortions and the party line of tired politicians who play on emotions. Mine is not a rosy view of the Vietnam War. I didn't miss the fact that it was an ugly, mismanaged, tragic episode in U.S. history, with devastating loss of life for all sides. But there are those in our nation who would prefer to pick at that scab rather than let it heal. They wait for opportunities to trot out the Vietnam demons whenever another armed intervention is threatened. For them, Vietnam is an insurance policy that pretends to guarantee peace at home as long as we never again venture abroad. Certain misconceptions about that conflict, therefore, need to be exposed and abandoned in order to restore confidence in the United States' nation-building ability.

## STAYING THE COURSE

The truth about Vietnam that revisionist historians conveniently forget is that the United States had not lost when we withdrew in 1973. In fact, we grabbed defeat from the jaws of victory two years later when Congress cut off the funding for South Vietnam that had allowed it to continue to fight on its own. Over the four years of Nixon's first term, I had cautiously engineered the withdrawal of the majority of our forces while building up South Vietnam's ability to defend itself. My colleague and friend Henry Kissinger, meanwhile, had negotiated a viable agreement between North and South Vietnam, which was signed in January 1973. It allowed for the United States to withdraw completely its few remaining troops and for the United States and the Soviet Union to continue funding their respective allies in the war at a specified level. Each superpower was permitted to pay for replacement arms and equipment. Documents released from North Vietnamese historical files in recent years have proved that the Soviets violated the treaty from the moment the ink was dry, continuing to send more than \$1 billion a year to Hanoi. The United States barely stuck to the allowed amount of military aid for two years, and that was a mere fraction of the Soviet contribution.

Yet during those two years, South Vietnam held its own courageously and respectably against a better-bankrolled enemy. Peace talks continued between the North and the South until the day in 1975 when Congress cut off U.S. funding. The Communists walked out of the talks and never returned. Without U.S. funding, South Vietnam was quickly overrun. We saved a mere \$297 million a year and in the process doomed South Vietnam, which had been ably fighting the war without our troops since 1973.

I believed then and still believe today that given enough outside resources, South Vietnam was capable of defending itself, just as I believe Iraq can do the same now. From the Tet offensive in 1968 up to the fall of Saigon in

1975, South Vietnam never lost a major battle. The Tet offensive itself was a victory for South Vietnam and devastated the North Vietnamese army, which lost 289,000 men in 1968 alone. Yet the overriding media portrayal of the Tet offensive and the war thereafter was that of defeat for the United States and the Saigon government. Just so, the overriding media portrayal of the Iraq war is one of failure and futility.

Vietnam gave the United States the reputation for not supporting its allies. The shame of Vietnam is not that we were there in the first place, but that we betrayed our ally in the end. It was Congress that turned its back on the promises of the Paris accord. The president, the secretary of state, and the secretary of defense must share the blame. In the end, they did not stand up for the commitments our nation had made to South Vietnam. Any president or cabinet officer who is turned down by Congress when he asks for funding for a matter of national security or defense simply has not tried hard enough. There is no excuse for that failure. In my four years at the Pentagon, when public support for the Vietnam War was at its nadir, Congress never turned down any requests for the war effort or Defense Department programs. These were tense moments, but I got the votes and the appropriations. A defense secretary's relationship with Congress is second only to his relationship with the men and women in uniform. Both must be able to trust him, and both must know that he respects them. If not, Congress will not fund, and the soldiers, sailors, and air personnel will not follow.

Donald Rumsfeld has been my friend for more than 40 years. Gerald Ford and I went to Evanston to support him in his first congressional race, and I urged President Bush to appoint him secretary of defense. But his overconfident and self-assured style on every issue, while initially endearing him to the media, did not play well with Congress during his first term. My friends in Congress tell me Rumsfeld has modified his style of late, wisely becoming more collegial. Several secretaries during my service on the Appropriations Committee, running all the way from the tenure of Charlie Wilson to that of Clark Clifford, made the mistake of thinking they must appear much smarter than the elected officials to whom they reported. It doesn't always work.

If Rumsfeld wants something from those who are elected to make decisions for the American people, then he must continue to show more deference to Congress. To do otherwise will endanger public support and the funding stream for the Iraq war and its future requirements. A sour relationship on Capitol Hill could doom the whole effort. The importance of this solidarity between Congress and the administration did not escape Saddam Hussein, nor has it escaped the insurgents. In the days leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, television stations there showed 1975 footage of U.S. embassy support personnel escaping to helicopters from the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon. It was Saddam's message to his people that the United States does not keep its commitments and that we are only as good as the word of our current president. We failed to deliver the logistical support to our allies in South Vietnam during the post-Watergate period because of a breakdown of leadership in Washington. The failure of one administration to keep the promises of another had a devastating effect on the North-South negotiations.

There are no guarantees of continuity in a partisan democracy. We are making commitments as to the future of Iraq on an almost daily basis. These commitments must be understood now so they can be honored later. Every skirmish on the home front that betrays a lack of solidarity on Iraq gives the insurgents more hope and ultimately endangers the men and women we have sent to Iraq to fight in this war for us. We are now committed to a favorable outcome in Iraq, but it must be understood that this will require long-term assistance or our efforts will be in vain.

#### VIETNAMIZATION AS THE MODEL

Along with our abandonment of our allies, another great tragedy of Vietnam was the Americanization of the war. This threatens to be the tragedy of Iraq also. John F. Kennedy committed a few hundred military advisers to Saigon. Johnson saw Southeast Asia as the place to stop the spread of communism, and he spared no expense or personnel. By the time Nixon and I inherited the war in 1969, there were more than half a million U.S. troops in South Vietnam and 1.2 million more U.S. soldiers, sailors, and air personnel supporting the war from aircraft carriers and military bases in surrounding nations and at sea. The war needed to be turned back to the people who cared about it, the Vietnamese. They needed U.S. money and training but not more American blood. I called our program "Vietnamization," and in spite of the naysayers, I have not ceased to believe that it worked.

Nixon was reelected in 1972 based in large part on our progress toward ending U.S. direct involvement in the war, ending the draft, and establishing the all-volunteer military service. His opponent that year, George McGovern, made the war the primary issue of the campaign, claiming that Democrats -- the party in power that had escalated the war to an intolerable level -- would be the best folks to get us out. McGovern lost because the American people didn't agree with him.

We need to put our resources and unwavering public support behind a program of "Iraqization" so that we can get

out of Iraq and leave the Iraqis in a position to protect themselves. The Iraq war should have been focused on Iraqization even before the first shot was fired. The focus is there now, and Americans should not lose heart.

We came belatedly to Vietnamization; nonetheless, there are certain principles we followed in Vietnam that would be helpful in Iraq. The most important is that the administration must adhere to a standard of competence for the Iraqi security forces, and when that standard is met, U.S. troops should be withdrawn in corresponding numbers. That is the way it worked in Vietnam, from the first withdrawal of 50,000 troops in 1969 to the last prisoner of war off the plane in January of 1973. Likewise, in Iraq, the United States should not let too many more weeks pass before it shows its confidence in the training of the Iraqi armed forces by withdrawing a few thousand U.S. troops from the country. We owe it to the restive people back home to let them know there is an exit strategy, and, more important, we owe it to the Iraqi people. The readiness of the Iraqi forces need not be 100 percent, nor must the new democracy be perfect before we begin our withdrawal. The immediate need is to show our confidence that Iraqis can take care of Iraq on their own terms. Our presence is what feeds the insurgency, and our gradual withdrawal would feed the confidence and the ability of average Iraqis to stand up to the insurgency.

I gave President Nixon the same advice about Vietnam from our first day in office. As secretary of defense, I took the initiative in the spring of 1969 to change our mission statement for Vietnam from one of applying maximum pressure against the enemy to one of giving maximum assistance to South Vietnam to fight its own battles. Then, the opponents of our withdrawal were the South Vietnamese government, which we had turned into a dependent, and some in our own military who harbored delusions of total victory in Southeast Asia using American might. Even if such a victory had been possible, it was wrong to Americanize the war from the beginning, and by that point the patience of the American people had run out.

Even with the tide of public opinion running against the war, withdrawal was not an easy sell inside the Nixon administration. Our first round of withdrawals was announced after a conference between Nixon and South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu on Midway Island in June 1969. I had already softened the blow for Thieu by visiting him in Saigon in March, at which point I told him the spigot was being turned off. He wanted more U.S. soldiers, as did almost everyone in the U.S. chain of command, from the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on down. For each round of troop withdrawals from Vietnam, the Joint Chiefs suggested a miserly number based on what they thought they still needed to win the war. I bumped those numbers up, always in counsel with General Creighton Abrams, then the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam. Even Nixon, who had promised to end the war, accepted each troop-withdrawal request from me grudgingly. It took four years to bring home half a million troops. At times, it seemed my only ally was General Abrams. He understood what the others did not: that the American people's patience for the war had worn thin.

Bush is not laboring under similar handicaps in his military. His commanders share his goal of letting Iraq take care of itself as soon as its fledgling democracy is ready. And for the moment, there is still patience at home for a commonsensical, phased drawdown. In fact, the voices expressing the most patience about a sensible withdrawal and the most support for the progress of Iraqi soldiers are coming from within the U.S. military. These people are also the most eager to see the mission succeed and the most willing to see it through to the end. It is they who are at high risk and who are the ones being asked to serve not one but multiple combat tours. They are dedicated and committed to a mission that ranges from the toughest combat to the most elementary chores of nation building. We should listen to them, and trust them.

In those four years of Vietnamization, I never once publicly promised a troop number for withdrawal that I couldn't deliver. President Bush should move ahead with the same certainty. I also did not announce what our quantitative standards for readiness among the South Vietnamese troops were, just as Bush should not make public his specific standards for determining when Iraqi troops are ready to go it alone. In a report to Congress in July 2005, the Pentagon hinted that those measurable standards are in place. However, it would be a mistake for the president to rely solely on the numbers. Instead, his top commander in the field should have the final say on how many U.S. troops can come home, commensurate with the readiness of Iraqi forces. If Bush does not trust his commander's judgment, as I trusted General Abrams, Bush should replace him with someone he does trust. That trust must be conveyed to the American people, too, if they are to be patient with an orderly withdrawal of our troops.

## THE PRETEXT FOR WAR

In this business of trust, President Bush got off to a bad start. Nixon had the same problem. Both the Vietnam War and the Iraq war were launched based on intelligence failures and possibly outright deception. The issue was much more egregious in the case of Vietnam, where the intelligence lapses were born of our failure to understand what motivated Ho Chi Minh in the 1950s. Had we understood the depth of his nationalism, we might have been able to

derail his communism early on.

The infamous pretext for leaping headlong into the Vietnam War was the Gulf of Tonkin incident. My old destroyer, the U.S.S. Maddox, was patrolling the Gulf of Tonkin 25 miles off the coast of North Vietnam on August 2, 1964, when it was attacked by three North Vietnamese torpedo boats. That solitary attack would have been written off as an aberration, but two days later the U.S.S. Maddox, joined then by the U.S.S. Turner Joy, reported that it was under attack again. From all I was able to determine when I read the dispatches five years later as secretary of defense, there was no second attack. There was confusion, hysteria, and miscommunication on a dark night. President Johnson and Defense Secretary McNamara either dissembled or misinterpreted the faulty intelligence, and McNamara hotfooted it over to Capitol Hill with a declaration that was short of war but that resulted in a war anyway. I, along with 501 colleagues in the House and Senate, voted for the Tonkin Gulf resolution, which was Johnson's ticket to escalate our role in Vietnam. Until then, the United States had been part bystander, part covert combatant, and part adviser.

In Iraq, the intelligence blunder concerned Saddam's nonexistent weapons of mass destruction, which in the end may or may not have been Bush's real motivation for going to war. My view is that it was better to find that Saddam had not progressed as far as we thought in his WMD development than to discover belatedly that he had. Whatever the truth about WMD in Iraq, it cannot be said that the United States slipped gradually, covertly, or carelessly into Iraq, as we did into Vietnam.

## MARKETING THE MISSION

The mistake on the question of WMD in Iraq has led many to complain that the United States was drawn into the war under false pretenses, that what began as self-defense has morphed into nation building. Welcome to the reality of war. It is neither predictable nor tidy. This generation of Americans was spoiled by the quick-and-clean Operation Desert Storm, in 1991, when the first President Bush adhered to the mission, freed Kuwait, and brought home the troops. How would Iraq look today if George H.W. Bush had changed that mission on the fly and ordered a march to Baghdad and the overthrow of Saddam? The truth is, wars are fluid things and missions change. This is more the rule than the exception. It was true in Vietnam, and it is true in Iraq today.

The early U.S. objective in Southeast Asia was to stop the spread of communism. With changes in the relationship between the Soviet Union and China and the 1965 suppression of the communist movement in Indonesia, the threat of a communist empire diminished. Unwilling to abandon South Vietnam, the United States changed its mission to self-determination for Vietnam.

The current President Bush was persuaded that we would find WMD in Iraq and did what he felt he had to do with the information he was given. When we did not find the smoking gun, it would have been unconscionable to pack up our tanks and go home. Thus, there is now a new mission, to transform Iraq, and it is not a bad plan. Bush sees Iraq as the frontline in the war on terror -- not because terrorists dominate there, but because of the opportunity to displace militant extremists' Islamist rule throughout the region. Bush's greatest strength is that terrorists believe he is in this fight to the end. I have no patience for those who can't see that big picture and who continue to view Iraq as a failed attempt to find WMD. Now, because Iraq has been set on a new course, Bush has an opportunity to reshape the region. "Nation building" is not an epithet or a slogan. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, it is our duty.

Unfortunately, Bush has done an uneven job of selling his message, particularly since he was relieved of the pressure of reelection. Nixon lost his leadership leverage because of Watergate and thus lost ground in the battle for public support. By contrast, I believe the American people would still want to follow Bush if they had a clear understanding of what was at stake. Recent polls showing a waning of support for the war are a sign to the president that he needs to level with the American people. When troops are dying, the commander-in-chief cannot be coy, vague, or secretive. We learned that in Vietnam, too.

Bush is losing the public relations war by making the same strategic mistakes we made in Vietnam. General Abrams frequently spoke to me about his frustration with the war that the U.S. media portrayed at home and how it contrasted with the war he was seeing up close. His sense of defeat in his own public relations war, with its 500-plus reporters based in Saigon, comes through in the hundreds of meetings held in his office in Saigon -- meetings that were taped for the record. (Transcripts of those tapes are ably assembled and analyzed by Lewis Sorley in his recent book, *Vietnam Chronicles: The Abrams Tapes, 1968-1972*.)

In Vietnam, correspondents roamed the country almost at will, and their work brought home to the United States the first televised war. Until that war, families back home worried about the welfare of their soldiers but could not

see the danger. Had the mothers and fathers of U.S. soldiers serving in World War II seen a real-time CNN report of D-day in the style of Saving Private Ryan, they might not have thought Europe was worth saving. Operation Desert Storm married 24-hour cable news and war for the first time. The embedding of journalists with combat units in Iraq 12 years later was a solid idea, but it has meant that casualties are captured on tape and then replayed on newscasts thousands of times. The deaths of ten civilians in a suicide bombing are replayed and analyzed and thus become the psychological equivalent of 10,000 deaths. The danger to one U.S. soldier captured on tape becomes a threat to everyone's son or father or daughter or mother.

I have made too many phone calls to grieving families to ever downplay the loss of even one life. But I have also been in combat, and it looks different from the inside, from the viewpoint of those who volunteered and trained to fight for just causes. For a soldier, ducking a sniper's bullet in downtown Baghdad is all in a day's work, no matter how alarming it looks on television. The soldier will shrug it off and walk the same streets the next day if he believes in his mission. The key for Bush is to communicate that same sense of mission to the people back home. His west Texas cowboy approach -- shoot first and answer questions later, or do the job first and let the results speak for themselves -- is not working. With his propensity to wrap up a package and present it as a fait accompli, Bush declared, "Mission accomplished!" at the end of the major combat phase of the Iraq war. That was a well-earned high-five for the military, but it soon became obvious that the mission had only just begun.

The president must articulate a simple message and mission. Just as the spread of communism was very real in the 1960s, so the spread of radical fundamentalist Islam is very real today. It was a creeping fear until September 11, 2001, when it showed itself capable of threatening us. Iraq was a logical place to fight back, with its secular government and modern infrastructure and a populace that was ready to overthrow its dictator. Our troops are not fighting there only to preserve the right of Iraqis to vote. They are fighting to preserve modern culture, Western democracy, the global economy, and all else that is threatened by the spread of barbarism in the name of religion. That is the message and the mission. It is not politically correct, nor is it comforting. But it is the truth, and sometimes the truth needs good marketing.

Condoleezza Rice is one person in the administration who understands and has consistently and clearly stated this message. When she was national security adviser, the media seemed determined to sideline her repeated theme, perhaps because she was perceived as a mere water bearer for the president. As secretary of state, she is in a better position to speak independently. The administration should do its best to keep the microphone in her hands.

#### BUILDING A LEGITIMATE GOVERNMENT

As was the case in Vietnam, the task in Iraq involves building a new society from the ground up. Two Vietnam experts, Jeffrey Record and W. Andrew Terrill, recently produced an exhaustive comparison of the Vietnam and Iraq wars for the Army War College. They note that in both wars, the United States sought to establish a legitimate indigenous government. In Iraq, the goal is a democratic government, whereas in Vietnam the United States would have settled for any regime that advanced our Cold War agenda.

Those who call the new Iraqi government Washington's "puppet" don't know what a real puppet government is. The Iraqis are as eager to be on their own as we are to have them succeed. In Vietnam, an American, Ambassador Philip Habib, wrote the constitution in 1967. Elections were choreographed by the United States to empower corrupt, selfish men who were no more than dictators in the garb of statesmen.

Little wonder that the passionate nationalists in the North came off as the group with something to offer. I do not personally believe the Saigon government was fated to fall apart someday through lack of integrity, and apparently the Soviet Union didn't think so either or it would not have pursued the war. But it is true that the U.S. administrations at the time severely underestimated the need for a legitimate government in South Vietnam and instead assumed that a shadow government and military force could win the day. In Iraq, a legitimate government, not window-dressing, must be the primary goal. The factious process of writing the Iraqi constitution has been painful to watch, and the varying factions must be kept on track. But the process is healthy and, more important, homegrown.

In hindsight, we can look at the Vietnam War as a success story -- albeit a costly one -- in nation building, even though the democracy we sought halfheartedly to build failed. Three decades ago, Asia really was threatened by the spread of communism. The Korean War was a fresh memory. In Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and even India, communist movements were gaining a foothold. They failed in large part because the United States drew a line at Vietnam that distracted and sucked resources away from its Cold War nemesis, the Soviet Union. Similarly, the effect of our stand in Iraq is already being felt around the Middle East. Opposition parties are

demanding to be heard. Veiled women are insisting on a voice. Syrian troops have left Lebanon. Egypt has held an election. Iran is being pressured by the United States and Europe alike on its development of nuclear weapons. The voices for change are building in Saudi Arabia. The movement even has a name: Kifaya -- "Enough!" The parasites who have made themselves fat by promoting ignorance, fear, and repression in the region are squirming. These are baby steps, but that is where running begins.

## INSURGENTS AS ENEMIES

Insurgents were and are the enemy in both wars, and insurgencies fail without outside funding. In Vietnam, the insurgents were heavily funded and well equipped by the Soviet Union. They followed a powerful and charismatic leader, Ho Chi Minh, who nurtured their passionate nationalist goals. In Iraq, the insurgency is fragmented, with no identifiable central leadership and no unifying theology, strategy, or vision other than to get the United States out of the region. If that goal were accomplished now, they would turn on each other, as they already have done in numerous skirmishes. Although they do rely on outside funding, their benefactors are fickle and without deep pockets.

There is no way of counting the precise number of insurgents in the Iraq war, but it appears to be in the thousands, which in comparative terms is paltry. Communist forces in Vietnam numbered well over 1 million in 1973. North Vietnam, over the course of the war, lost 1.1 million soldiers and 2 million civilians, and yet they were willing to fight on and we were not. Why? Record and Terrill say the key to understanding any war in which a weaker side prevails over a stronger one is the concept of the "asymmetry of stakes." Victory meant everything to North Vietnam and nothing to the average American. We had few economic interests in Vietnam. Our national security interest -- preventing the domino scenario, in which the entire world would fall under the sway of communism if we lost Southeast Asia -- didn't have enough currency to carry the day.

It is a very different story in Iraq, where the Bush administration hopes to implant democracy side by side with Islam. The stakes could not be higher for the continued existence of our own democracy and, yes, for the significant matter of oil. We are not the only nation dependent on Persian Gulf oil. We share that dependency with every industrialized nation on the planet. Picture those oil reserves in the hands of religious extremists whose idea of utopia is to knock the world economy and culture back more than a millennium to the dawn of Islam.

Bush's belief that he can replace repression with democracy is not some neoconservative fantasy. Our support of democracy dates from the founding of our nation. Democracies are simply better for the planet. Witness the courage of the Iraqi people who shocked the world and defied all the pessimists by showing up to vote in January 2005, even with guns pointed at their heads. The enemies of freedom in Iraq know what a powerful message that was to the rest of the Arab world, otherwise they would not have responded by escalating the violence.

Although Vietnam may have been a success story when it came to defeating an insurgency, the domestic insurgency -- conducted by the Vietcong -- was unfortunately only one front in the war, the larger front being the conventional military forces of North Vietnam. The Vietcong were largely suppressed by a combination of persuasion and force. A similar combination of deadly force against the Iraqi insurgency's leaders and incentives to co-opt their followers may work in Iraq, where the insurgency is the only enemy.

Vietnam, however, should be a cautionary tale when fighting guerrilla style, whether it be in the streets or in the jungle. Back then, frightened and untrained U.S. troops were ill equipped to govern their baser instincts and fears. Countless innocent civilians were killed in the indiscriminate hunt for Vietcong among the South Vietnamese peasantry. Some of the worst historical memories of the Vietnam War stem from those atrocities. Our volunteer troops in Iraq are better trained and supervised, yet the potential remains for a slaughter of innocents. Reports have already surfaced of skittish American soldiers shooting Iraqi civilians in acts that can only be attributed to poor training and discipline.

To stop abuses and mistakes by the rank and file, whether in the prisons or on the streets, heads must roll at much higher levels than they have thus far. I well remember the unexpected public support for Lieutenant William Calley, accused in the massacre of civilians in the village of My Lai. The massacre did not occur on my watch, but Calley's trial did, and Americans flooded the White House with letters of protest when it appeared that Calley would be the scapegoat while his superiors walked free. The best way to keep foot soldiers honest is to make sure their commanders know that they themselves will be held responsible for any breach of honor.

For me, the alleged prison scandals reported to have occurred in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and at Guantánamo Bay have been a disturbing reminder of the mistreatment of our own POWs by North Vietnam. The conditions in our

current prison camps are nowhere near as horrific as they were at the "Hanoi Hilton," but that is no reason to pat ourselves on the back. The minute we begin to deport prisoners to other nations where they can legally be tortured, when we hold people without charges or trial, when we move prisoners around to avoid the prying inspections of the Red Cross, when prisoners die inexplicably on our watch, we are on a slippery slope toward the inhumanity that we deplore. In Vietnam, I made sure we always took the high ground with regard to the treatment of enemy prisoners. I opened our prison camps wide to international inspectors, so that we could demand the same from Hanoi. In Iraq, there are no American POWs being held in camps by the insurgents. There are only murder victims whose decapitated bodies are left for us to find. But that does not give us license to be brutal in return.

## LIMITED WARFARE

Our commanders in Iraq have another advantage over those in Vietnam: President Bush seems unlikely to be whipsawed by public opinion, but will take the war to wherever the enemy rears its head. In Vietnam, we waged a ground war in the South and did not permit our troops to cross into North Vietnam. The air war over the North and in Laos and Cambodia was waged in fits and starts, in secret and in the open, covered by lies and subterfuge, manipulated more by opinion polls than by military exigencies. In the early years, the services squabbled with one another. Even the State Department was allowed to veto air strikes. President Johnson stayed up late calling the plays while generals were sidelined.

In all, 2.8 million Americans served in and around Vietnam during the war, yet less than ten percent of them were in-line infantry units, the men we think of as our Vietnam veterans. Men were drafted and given a few weeks of training before being attached to a unit of strangers. With few exceptions, our all-volunteer military in Iraq is motivated, well trained, well equipped, and in cohesive units. This is not to say that any of these troops want to be there. They don't. Yet they are far more motivated to fight this war than were the average conscripts in Vietnam.

They are also part of a much smarter military, thanks in large part to the lessons of Vietnam. In 1986, the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act, with input from some veterans of my team at the Pentagon, cleaned up many of the command problems that hindered us in Vietnam and for a decade thereafter. The old system encouraged the Joint Chiefs of Staff to be anything but joint. They protected their fiefdoms and withheld cooperation from one another. The Goldwater-Nichols act centralized authority in the chair of the Joint Chiefs as the primary adviser to the president and the secretary of defense. The separate services are now responsible for training their people for war, but the area commanders who run the wars control all the assets. Today's soldiers, sailors, and air personnel can also be more secure knowing that the people who make life-or-death decisions represent a better balance between military expertise and the will of the people as expressed through their elected officials.

Such confidence is critical to sustaining an all-volunteer military. As the secretary of defense who ended the draft in 1972, I see no need to return to conscription, even now that the prospect of combat has somewhat dampened the enthusiasm for military service. As long as servicepeople -- current and future -- know where their president is leading them, the enlistments will follow.

As it did in Vietnam, in Iraq the enemy has sought to weaken the United States' will by dragging out the hostilities. In Vietnam, that strategy was reflected in a bottomless well of men, sophisticated arms, and energy the enemy threw into the fight. Similarly in Iraq, the insurgents have pinpointed the weakness of the American public's will and hope to exploit it on a much smaller scale, with the weapon of choice being the improvised explosive device, strapped to one person, loaded into a car or hidden at a curb, and with the resulting carnage then played over and over again on the satellite feed. But one lesson learned from Vietnam that is not widely recognized is that fear of casualties is not the prime motivator of the American people during a war. American soldiers will step up to the plate, and the American public will tolerate loss of life, if the conflict has worthy, achievable goals that are clearly espoused by the administration and if their leadership deals honestly with them.

Such was not the case in Vietnam. When President Nixon ordered the secret bombing of Cambodia, I protested vigorously. I did not oppose the bombing itself, as I believed the United States should fight the war as it needed to be fought -- wherever the enemy was hiding -- or not fight it at all. What I opposed was the deception. Behind closed doors, my opinion was so well known that when the secret was exposed, as I knew it would be, I was immediately and wrongly pinpointed as being the leak. The president approved Kissinger's order to the FBI to tap my military assistant's home phone, hoping to catch the two of us in a plot to leak secrets. Americans will not be lied to, and they will not tolerate secrets nor be sidelined in a war debate. As with the Vietnam War, if necessary they will take to the streets to be heard.



## AT WHAT COST?

The greatest cost of war is human suffering. But every war has its monetary price tag, too, even if it is rarely felt in real time. As with Vietnam, the Iraq war is revealing chinks in our fiscal armor. Only after the Vietnam War ended did its drain on the U.S. economy become apparent. During the war, our military readiness to fight other conflicts was precarious. Billions of dollars were drained away from other missions to support the war. It became a juggling act to support our forces around the world. I reduced our contingent in Korea by 29,000 men, and I persuaded Japan to begin paying the bills for its post-World War II defense by our troops. In retrospect, those two steps were positive results from the financial drain that the Vietnam War caused. But there were plenty of other places where the belt-tightening suffocated good programs. The Army Reserve and National Guard units fell into disrepair. President Johnson chose to draft the unwilling, rather than use trained reservists and National Guard soldiers and air personnel. As unpopular as the draft was, it was still an easier sell for Johnson than deploying whole National Guard and Reserve units out of the communities in middle America. So the second-string troops stayed home and saw their budgets cannibalized. Their training was third-rate and their equipment secondhand. Now, in our post-Vietnam wisdom, we have embraced the "total force" concept. After two decades of retooling, most National Guard units and reservists were better prepared to respond when called up for Operation Desert Storm.

Yet, because of pandering to the butter-not-guns crowd, we still do not spend enough of our total budget on national defense. The annual U.S. GDP is in excess of \$11.5 trillion. The percentage of GDP going to the Defense Department amounts to 3.74 percent. In 1953, during the Korean War, it was 14 percent. In 1968, during the Vietnam War, it was nearly 10 percent -- an amount that sapped domestic programs and ended up demoralizing President Johnson because he could not maintain his Great Society social programs. Now our spending priorities have shifted to social programs, with 6.8 percent of GDP, for example, going to Social Security and Medicare. That is more than twice what it was during the Vietnam War.

It will not be easy or popular to reverse the downward trend in defense spending. But the realities of the global threat of terrorism and the outside possibility of conventional warfare with an enemy such as China or North Korea demand that we take off the blinders. To increase defense spending to 4 percent of GDP would be adequate, but it is especially important to increase the share of the pie spent on the U.S. Army. It now gets 24 percent of the total Defense Department budget, but given the new realities of modern warfare, it should receive at least 28 percent. The army is currently strung along through the budget year with special appropriations, and that is no way to run a military service.

Reserve and National Guard units are understaffed and have been abused by deployments that have taken individuals out of their units to serve as de facto army regulars, many in specialties for which they have not been trained, a practice that eats at the morale of reservists. Nearly 80 percent of the airlift capacity for this war and about 48 percent of the troops have come from Reserve and National Guard units. The high percentages are due, in part, to the specialized missions of those troops: transporting cargo, policing, rebuilding infrastructure, translating, conducting government affairs -- in short, the stuff of building a new nation. We have realized too late that our regular army forces have not been as well trained as they should have been for the new reality of an urban insurgent enemy. Nor was the military hierarchy paying serious attention to the hints that their mission in the twenty-first century would be nation building.

Secretary Rumsfeld is trying to reshape the army to be more mobile with fewer soldiers, in "units of action" built on the Special Forces model. But he is not being honest with himself or with Congress and the American people about how much money will be needed to make the transformation. Those specialized units will be more suited for urban guerrilla warfare, but light and lean is not the only way to maintain our military. Although guerrilla warfare looks like the wave of the future, we still face the specter of conventional divisional and corps warfare against other enemies. Both capabilities are expensive, but the downward trend of defense budgets does not recognize that. Except for bumps up in the Ronald Reagan years and during the Gulf War, the defense budget has been on a downward slide when viewed in constant dollars. We are coasting on the investments in research, development, and equipment made during earlier years.

## SHORING UP OUR ALLIES

Our pattern of fighting our battles alone or with a marginal "coalition of the willing" contributes to the downward spiral in resources and money. Ironically, Nixon had the answer back in 1969. At the heart of the Nixon Doctrine, announced that first year of his presidency, was the belief that the United States could not go it alone. As he said in his foreign policy report to Congress on February 18, 1970, the United States will participate in the defense and development of allies and friends, but "America cannot -- and will not -- conceive all the plans, design all the

programs, execute all the decisions and undertake all the defense of the free nations of the world. We will help where it makes a real difference and is considered in our interest" (emphasis in the original).

Three decades later, we have fallen into a pattern of neglecting our treaty alliances, such as NATO, and endangering the aid we can give our allies by throwing our resources into fights that our allies refuse to join. Vietnam was just such a fight, and Iraq is, too. If our treaty alliances were adequately tended to and shored up -- and here I include the UN -- we would not have so much trouble persuading others to join us when our cause is just. Still, as the only superpower, there will be times when we must go it alone.

President Bush does not have the luxury of waiting for the international community to validate his policies in Iraq. But we do have the lessons of Vietnam. In Vietnam, the voices of the "cut-and-run" crowd ultimately prevailed, and our allies were betrayed after all of our work to set them on their feet. Those same voices would now have us cut and run from Iraq, assuring the failure of the fledgling democracy there and damning the rest of the Islamic world to chaos fomented by extremists. Those who look only at the rosy side of what defeat did to help South Vietnam get to where it is today see a growing economy there and a warming of relations with the West. They forget the immediate costs of the United States' betrayal. Two million refugees were driven out of the country, 65,000 more were executed, and 250,000 were sent to "reeducation camps." Given the nature of the insurgents in Iraq and the catastrophic goals of militant Islam, we can expect no better there.

As one who orchestrated the end of our military role in Vietnam and then saw what had been a workable plan fall apart, I agree that we cannot allow "another Vietnam." For if we fail now, a new standard will have been set. The lessons of Vietnam will be forgotten, and our next global mission will be saddled with the fear of its becoming "another Iraq."

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