

## Imperialists and Running Dogs

By Niall Ferguson

John Kerry's tribute in New Hampshire last week to "the band of brothers that I depended on some 30 years ago" was a carefully crafted hint that Vietnam could be as important an issue as Iraq in this year's presidential election.

In Sen. Kerry's eyes, Vietnam and Iraq are both "win-win" issues. For his courage as a Swift Boat officer in Vietnam, he was awarded a Silver Star, Bronze Star with Combat V and three Purple Hearts. If that doesn't make a man a war hero, what does? But his testimony before the Senate Committee of Foreign Relations in 1971 also established him as one of the war's most credible opponents. "We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them," he declared. "We saw America lose her sense of morality. . . . How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"

Sen. Kerry has been having it both ways over Iraq as well. He voted for the resolution in October 2002 that authorized the use of armed force against Saddam Hussein. But last year he voted against the \$50-billion package requested by the Bush administration to finance Iraq's occupation and reconstruction. This war, too, now seems to Sen. Kerry to have been "a mistake." It's a position greatly strengthened by weapons inspector David Kay's admission that the prewar intelligence on Iraq's WMD was "all wrong."

Many pundits and, I suspect, most voters would prefer this year's election to be about domestic bread-and-butter issues. But this is a typical symptom of American imperial denial—to believe that you can invade and occupy a sovereign state one year and then campaign about Medicare the next. The reality is that this year's debate needs to be about Iraq—not to mention Afghanistan. Like it or not, the candidates' plans for national security matter more than their plans for Social Security.

And that's where the Vietnam factor gives Sen. Kerry an edge—an edge that could cut deep into the support not just of Howard "Hulk" Dean but also, if Sen. Kerry wins the Democratic nomination, of George W. Bush. For the reality is that ordinary Americans live in dread of "another Vietnam." And every time an American soldier is killed in Iraq—low though the total U.S. casualties remain, in relative terms—the suspicion grows that this is just a sandy version of the same, horrible quagmire. If the whole operation now turns out to have been a mistake, President Bush starts to look faintly like Lyndon Johnson, waging a war that is simultaneously unwinnable and pointless. Enter Sen. Kerry.

President Bush and his campaign managers need to deal with this threat, and fast. Unlike Tony Blair, the president did not lance the swelling boil of public disquiet with a judicial inquiry (the remit of which nicely excluded the big question: Was the invasion of Iraq actually necessary?). Worse, there is a very real risk that the situation in Iraq could deteriorate rather than improve as the June 30 deadline for the transfer of power to an Iraqi government draws near—and get even worse after that.

This is where lessons from Vietnam are indeed apposite. But they are not the lessons learned by John Kerry.

First, fighting the war in Vietnam was *not* a mistake. Abandoning it was the mistake. I have just returned from a short tour of that country, which allowed me to see firsthand what three decades of Communist rule have achieved there. The very best that can be said is that they achieved nothing. The worst that can be said is that by throwing in the towel in 1973, the U.S. condemned South Vietnam to 30 years of repression, corruption and poverty. And the best proof that these were truly "lost years" for the people of Vietnam are the current frantic efforts of the country's leaders to bring back capitalism.

There is virtually nothing about Ho Chi Minh City today that differentiates it from the Saigon of 1973, except the red flags with the gold stars and the tired old socialist-realist posters. The free market is rampant. In Hue, too, and even in the charmless town of Dong Ha, just south of the former Demilitarized Zone, the streets are lined with small businesses and thronged with scooters propelling people from warehouse to store to Internet café. An ill-informed visitor might be forgiven for wondering if perhaps the U.S. won the Vietnam War in stoppage time.

Except that stoppage time is exactly what Vietnam has experienced since the American withdrawal. Under Communism, the economic clock stood still until the 1990s. Even today, per-capita GDP is little more than a tenth of what it is in nearby Thailand, the one part of Indo-China that has managed to stay on the liberal capitalist

30-year detour down an ideological cul-de-sac. South Vietnam might be where South Korea is today if the U.S. had not quit.

In many ways, of course, the U.S. finds itself in a quite different predicament in Iraq today. It went to war in the belief that Saddam posed a threat not just to Iraqis but to Americans. In a matter of weeks, the enemy's conventional forces were smashed. Now U.S. forces control virtually the entire country. The levels of military commitment and of casualties are much lower than in Vietnam. Yet in one respect there is a similarity. If the U.S. withdraws prematurely from Iraq the chances that it will prosper as an economically liberal democracy are slim. It could become an Islamic republic. More likely, it could descend into civil war. In either case, it would take Iraqis a generation to recover, just as it has taken the people of Vietnam a generation to get over the miseries of Marxism-Leninism.

Even President Bush himself strikes me as being in too much of a hurry to get out of Iraq. But at least he—unlike John Kerry—does not regard the overthrow of Saddam as a mistake, best expunged by cutting off the aid Iraq so desperately needs.

Nobody would dare cast aspersions on Sen. Kerry's record as a war hero. It is his grasp of history—and its implications for U.S. strategy today—that looks shaky. And let's not forget: the original "band of brothers" won their war.

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### Has John Kerry learned the real lessons of Vietnam?

road. The mortality rate among children under five is 35% higher. And this is *after* more than 10 years of rapid growth since the regime embarked on its course of economic liberalization.

There is something quite surreal about this system of real existing capitalism—perhaps the best way to describe the East Asian synthesis of one-party rule and the free market. As slogans go, "We will earnestly take up the World Trade Organization's Message of Tourism as a Driving Force For Poverty Reduction" is certainly a far cry from "Crush the American Imperialists and their Running Dogs." I was especially delighted to come across a list of the latest "Red Star award winners for business management." And yet, like the regime's efforts to attract tourists and, more importantly, expatriate Vietnamese (the *Vietkieu*), there is something pathetic about all this. You have to ask yourself why between one and three million had to die for the sake of a