

“Welcome to Vietnam, Mr. President”

As White House denials grow insistent, some of the sharpest thinkers of the Vietnam generation see stark parallels with the war in Iraq.

By Jessica Kowal

Helicopters are blown out of the sky by unseen enemies. Car bombs are detonated by guerrillas who seem to melt into the night. Casualties among U.S. troops and their allies are mounting by the day, and so are worry and mistrust among American voters. In Washington, top officials in the administration of George W. Bush insist there's no comparison between Iraq and Vietnam—yet to judge by their actions, they have recently come to the nightmare realization that the parallels are real.

Abruptly, last week, Bush and his top advisors scrambled to change the dynamic of the 8-month-old conflict in Iraq: They abandoned their vow to make a slow, steady transition to democracy. Instead of moving ahead with plans to write an Iraqi constitution, they're rushing into elections. Desperate to bring more troops home before Election Day next November, they've enrolled untested Iraqis in an Evelyn Wood course in speed-policing.

And meanwhile, the CIA is warning that the U.S. is nearing a tipping point in Iraq, with more Iraqis losing faith in their liberators and edging closer to support for a guerrilla insurgency.

Is Iraq the new Vietnam? Partisans on the left and right have argued the issue since before the war began, and now the question is seeping into the mainstream. Both the White House and war critics know that it's a high-stakes debate, because success in the region—and Bush's chances for reelection—will depend in great part on whether skittish voters believe that the current conflict is another tragic, costly, unwinnable quagmire.

But as the Bush denials grow more insistent, some of the brightest and most critical thinkers of the Vietnam generation—journalists, historians, soldiers and policy analysts—are seeing stark similarities between the two wars. They defined the popular understanding of the Vietnam era with their works of journalism, memoir and history, and in a series of interviews with Salon they expressed amazement that the United States seems to be blundering its way into another misadventure that soaks up our financial, political and human resources.

“Vietnam is, I'm sorry to say, quite relevant here,” says Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers, the famed Defense Department study of American decision-making in Southeast Asia, to newspapers in 1971.

“We have clasped the tar baby to our bosom,” says Joseph L. Galloway, senior military correspondent for Knight Ridder newspapers and coauthor of “We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young,” an acclaimed account of a crucial battle in Vietnam. “We cannot afford to cut and run. We cannot declare victory and walk out. Our whole policy in the Middle East is wrapped up in this thing—so we can't afford to lose but we can't afford to win either.”

It's tempting to conclude that Iraq is another Vietnam just because of the helicopter crashes, the dozens of daily attacks on U.S. troops, or footage of average Iraqis celebrating American deaths with charred wreckage in their hands. But that may be too simple.

Consider, also, that President Bush just weeks ago was telling the nation, in Vietnam-worthy doublespeak, that the daily ambushes against U.S. troops were proof of American success. And that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld reminded us, after 15 soldiers lost their lives when their helicopter was shot down, that casualties in this war are inevitable, even “necessary.”

The term “exit strategy” arose from the quagmire of Vietnam, and the U.S. plainly doesn't have one for Iraq, either. Pentagon officials, high on American military might,

continue to tout the effectiveness of U.S. military superiority, but have consistently underestimated the capabilities of Iraqi guerrillas.

Any one of these can be summoned as a strand of proof but, in the end, it's the sum total of what's happening in Iraq—the combination of these many elements—that argues that Iraq is Vietnam redux.

The United States volunteered to fight the Vietnam War, too, in the context of a global war against an evil enemy, communism. Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon told Americans that a small country halfway around the world was essential to American security. U.S. leaders ignored that region's long opposition to occupying forces. They lied to get troops into the war, and lied throughout the war. Defying reality, they insisted the U.S. was making "progress" as the situation deteriorated, and blamed critics for encouraging "the enemy."

Historian David Maraniss, author of the recently released "They Marched Into Sunlight," about the Vietnam War circa 1967, says he has a "basic sense of history repeating itself."

"Circumstances change," Maraniss says, "but human nature tends to remain the same, and so people and governments find themselves repeating the mistakes of the past."

Different Wars, Differences of Opinion

It's important to acknowledge the substantial differences between the Iraq and Vietnam wars, not least their scope and duration.

The Vietnam War lasted for 16 years, from 1959 to 1975. At its height in the late 1960s, more than half a million U.S. troops were deployed in Southeast Asia. More than 58,000 Americans died there.

The Iraq War began nearly eight months ago, on March 19, and now involves about 130,000 U.S. troops. U.S. troops have also volunteered for military duty, while most were drafted to fight in Vietnam. As of Sunday night, the death toll had climbed to at least 416, including the 17 killed in the Black Hawk helicopters in Mosul this weekend. That's more deaths than in the first three years of Vietnam.

Vietnam was a jungle; Iraq is a desert. The U.S. inserted itself into a civil war in Vietnam; the U.S. toppled a dictator in Iraq. If he is alive, Saddam will never be a Ho Chi Minh to most Iraqis, who welcomed an end to one of the world's most brutal dictatorships. And the Iraqi guerrillas and leftover Baathists fighting U.S. occupation do not have help from a global power, as China and the Soviet Union aided Vietnamese Communists.

These are not minor distinctions. And there are honest differences about whether comparisons of the two conflicts are relevant.

Secretary of State Colin Powell, who served two tours in Vietnam, has called attempts to make a Vietnam-Iraq comparison "rather bizarre historical allusions."

Vice President Dick Cheney hasn't answered the Vietnam question, but recently disagreed with the description of U.S. occupation as a quagmire. "The fact is," he said in September, "most of Iraq today is relatively stable and quiet."

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld also refuses to accept the premise. "A lot of critics have been consistently saying it's a quagmire and we're—we're bogged down," he said in September. "The truth of the matter is that—that we're not." But in a private Pentagon memo leaked last month, Rumsfeld undermined his own optimistic statements, conceding that victory in Iraq and Afghanistan would be "a long hard slog."

And that's where the Vietnam parallel begins to emerge, even among Republicans. Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, a Vietnam veteran, sees "some parallel tracks," including the difficulty of "getting out," and the lack of international support for U.S. policy.

Arizona Sen. John McCain, a Vietnam POW, decried the Vietnam analogy early on, but has inched toward making the link. He recently advised Bush to send more troops to

Iraq or risk “the most serious American defeat on the global stage since Vietnam,” and described the administration’s positive spin on events there as “a parallel to Vietnam.”

Former Sen. Max Cleland, a Georgia Democrat who lost both legs and his right arm in Vietnam, considered the parallels in an essay for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. His conclusion was blunt: “Welcome to Vietnam, Mr. President. Sorry you didn’t go when you had the chance.”

Justifications for War: Dominoes and WMD

In the Cold War crucible of the 1960s, and after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Americans had an overwhelming sense of anxiety about potential foreign threats to their safety. Presidents Johnson and Bush responded by sending thousands of troops into combat with solid public support and without significant political opposition.

The now-discredited “domino theory”—that a Communist takeover of Vietnam could lead to “fighting in Hawaii . . . and San Francisco,” as LBJ put it—convinced Americans that victory in Southeast Asia was essential to our national security.

Bush, in laying out the broadest justification for war in Iraq, offered a sort of reverse domino theory: that by overthrowing Saddam Hussein, the U.S. could promote the establishment of democracies in a region now dominated by autocratic regimes—many of which encourage the anti-American sentiments of their people.

As the New York Times’ David L. Sanger wrote in September, Bush “has made the Middle East what Southeast Asia was to the nation of his youth: a place where dominoes could not be allowed to fall, where a vicious ideology could not be permitted to take hold and spread.”

The more immediate justification for the Iraq war was, of course, weapons of mass destruction—biological, chemical and nuclear—which, Bush argued, could be used against the United States or its allies.

(While the White House often says that Bush never used the word “imminent” to describe the threat, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice’s warning, “We don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud,” made the point quite urgently.)

To the historians of Vietnam, the White House’s justifications for war in Iraq present an astonishing parallel to the falsehoods of the 1960s. They particularly see similarities between the administration’s dire warnings about weapons of mass destruction and (still unproven) ties between Iraq and al-Qaida, and Lyndon Johnson’s inflation of a minor skirmish in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964 into a *causis belli* used to persuade Congress to send ground troops to South Vietnam.

Author Philip Caputo, a Marine lieutenant who spent 16 months in Vietnam in the mid-1960s, agrees that there’s conceptually a “broad parallel” between America’s unwarranted response to “what we saw as Soviet expansionism, and now what we call worldwide terrorism.”

He is even more disturbed by what he calls “the fraud of Iraq,” the insistence that WMD and Iraqi ties to al-Qaida demanded a U.S. invasion. “This administration was so eager, almost lusting, to go to war with Iraq,” says Caputo, who wrote the memoir “A Rumor of War.” The administration was “deceiving itself and grasping at whatever little intelligence straw floated down the stream to justify what they wanted.”

“The same was true in Vietnam,” adds journalist Stanley Karnow, who arrived in Southeast Asia in 1959 as a correspondent for Time magazine. American leaders sought “to depict Ho Chi Minh as part of a whole global terrorist network, and if we don’t defeat him, we’ll be fighting on the beaches in Waikiki. That’s a similar bit of nonsense.”

Robert McNamara—the Sequel

There are some eerie similarities between a certain defense secretary today, and his doppelganger of the 1960s, Robert McNamara, who served under Kennedy and Johnson. Rumsfeld and McNamara do look alike, with their 1950s Brylcreem-slick hairdos, but the comparison goes far beyond that. Galloway, who as a journalist earned the Bronze Star for rescuing wounded soldiers in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965, says that Rumsfeld, like McNamara, is a “control freak” who ran his own show as a CEO and now ignores the nation’s more cautious generals.

“Some of this reminds me (so much) of McNamara I can hardly stand it,” Galloway says. “If it keeps up like it’s going, Rumsfeld is going to make McNamara look good.”

Ellsberg, who sees McNamara (his former boss at the Defense Department) as a more tragic, tortured figure, thinks Colin Powell may be playing a similar role in the Bush administration. Both, he says, are “paying the price of being part of an unnecessary, wrongful war.”

No one has yet been cast in the devil’s advocate role of George Ball, an undersecretary of state in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Ball consistently argued, as early as 1961, against sending U.S. troops to Southeast Asia and warned that the U.S. could never succeed in the “treacherous quicksands” of Vietnam. His bosses never followed his advice, but at least they didn’t fire him for it, either.

On the Ground: Early Vietnam

As upsetting as it is that a few U.S. soldiers die nearly every day, administration officials have argued, with some justification, that these are relatively small numbers. After all, hundreds of U.S. troops died each *week* at the height of the Vietnam War in the late 1960s.

And, as the Pentagon likes to point out, resistance to U.S. occupation is focused in one region of the country, Saddam’s stronghold, the Sunni Triangle north and west of Baghdad. For now, Iraqi guerrillas are a tiny fraction of the population and can’t be compared to Vietnamese armies and their popular support.

That doesn’t mean the current situation on the ground can’t deteriorate to Vietnam-era proportions.

Galloway compares Iraq today to South Vietnam in 1963, when local Vietcong attacked American troops with ambushes and mines. Killing a few soldiers or knocking down a few helicopters in smaller strikes emboldens those who oppose U.S. occupation, as it did in Southeast Asia where opposition intensified over the years, he says.

In that vein, Iraq’s guerrilla fighters are steadily improving their capabilities, moving up from shooting individual soldiers and planting roadside landmines, to firing rockets at troop-transport helicopters. They are also expanding their territory; the Italian military police compound, wrecked by a car bomb on Nov. 12, was south of Baghdad in a region that had been mostly peaceful. Similarly, the two Black Hawk helicopters that crashed this weekend, after one tried to avoid hostile fire, were in Mosul, a friendlier city in Northern Iraq.

In their daily patrols, as they did in Vietnam, American soldiers face confusion about who is enemy and who is friend. For evidence of the fog of war, one has only to look at U.S. soldiers’ shooting of 10 newly minted Iraqi policemen in mid-September, or the Nov. 9 killing of the U.S.-appointed mayor of Sadr City in Baghdad.

The White House has repeatedly assured the public that the United States will win this conflict. But the recent bloody attacks, and the Pentagon scramble to call up reservists for yearlong tours, leaves a contradictory impression: that this occupation is already squeezing the military to its limits. “There’s definitely a concern that we’re going to be there for some god-awful long period,” says Caputo, “and that eventually, everything there could become unglued.”

Some war critics—including some troops and their families—have already expressed a sense of frustration that the U.S. isn't able to simply stamp out the opposition. In Vietnam, that entailed destroying the village in order to save it—a mistaken strategy the military hasn't repeated in Iraq. But Iraqis have complained, to the Washington Post, that in the Sunni Triangle, U.S. troops have closed markets and detained family members (including women) of men suspected of attacking Americans. That approach didn't win the hearts and minds in Southeast Asia, either.

Author David Halberstam, a Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times reporter in Vietnam, says the Bush administration repeated a crucial error of the past when it assumed the U.S. could control Iraq with raw military power—just as Presidents Johnson and Nixon believed they could bomb the Vietnamese into submission.

Because of arrogance and ideology, Halberstam says, Bush and his advisors failed to heed what he calls the “undertow”—the complex historic, cultural, and racial issues that limit the military's clout in postcolonial nations such as Vietnam and Iraq.

Before invading Iraq, the White House wrongly predicted that, as Cheney said, U.S. troops would be “greeted as liberators.” Now Halberstam wonders if the United States can inspire Iraqis to have faith that America offers the best opportunity for their freedom.

“Is our cause popular enough [in Iraq] to generate the intelligence we need to stamp out the other side?” Halberstam asks. “In Vietnam, it couldn't be done.”

Halberstam points to another critical, and tragic, similarity between Vietnam and Iraq: The losing battle for support among the population we're ostensibly trying to aid. The tragedy is that U.S. troops might have been welcomed as liberators, as predicted—but the Bush team has so badly mismanged the occupation that, for the average resident of the Sunni Triangle, daily life is in many ways *more difficult* now than it was under Saddam. Combine that with nationalism, suspicion of American intentions and the injured pride of an occupied people, and you have a recipe for disaster.

The Power of the Body Count

After 9/11 and during the war in Afghanistan, the public seemed more willing to accept military casualties than it had at any time since Vietnam. But U.S. deaths in Iraq—highlighted on newspaper pages and, for the establishment intelligentsia, in the final minute of “The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer”—have renewed the collective questioning about the costs and benefits of war.

Even before 22 troops died in two helicopter attacks this month, the public was already shifting against Bush's policy in Iraq. Americans endured years of combat in Vietnam, tens of thousands of funerals, and billions of dollars spent on a failing policy, before turning on the Johnson administration. Today's result is the same, but it's only taken eight months to get there.

A recent Associated Press story noted that “[almost] four in 10 Americans, 39 percent, think the United States made a mistake by sending troops into Iraq—roughly the same number that said that about Vietnam in the summer of 1967.” A majority of Americans also now disapprove of Bush's handling of the Iraq war, and disapprove of his request (now granted) for \$87 billion in new spending.

It's not for lack of White House efforts to convince Americans that the battle is as important as any this country has faced since World War II.

Bush said in September that “we will do whatever is necessary . . . spend what is necessary” to win in Iraq—a vow that reminds many Vietnam hands of Kennedy's pledge to “pay any price, bear any burden” to assure liberty around the world.

But Karnow, author of the comprehensive “Vietnam: A History,” says Vietnam destroyed the whole notion that victory was worth any price. “Nobody believes that stuff any more,” he says.

This careful attention to the body count may also be a direct result of our Oprah-ized culture, which personalizes death more than ever, whether people die in a terrorist attack, an ambush in the Sunni Triangle, or in an airplane crash. Perhaps Americans will never again accept a war that leads to thousands of U.S. casualties.

In today's culture, "one American dying in Iraq becomes the equivalent of 1,000 Americans dying in Vietnam," Karnow says. He remembers visiting an Ohio town that had lost six graduates from the same high school in Southeast Asia. It seemed routine then.

"Now you lose two people," Karnow says, "and next thing you know, it's all over Page One."

The Credibility "Canyon"

Public opinion is also being shaped by growing doubts about the Bush administration's honesty, much as the Johnson and Nixon administrations were undermined politically by a "credibility gap" in the 1960s and 1970s. The White House has forcefully papered over the worst news—Bush hasn't attended a single military funeral and barred television cameras from recording the return of flag-covered coffins in the U.S.

Gen. John Abizaid, the chief of U.S. Central Command, has insisted his military won't twist the truth. "It's just absolutely essential" that the Iraq war not get "perverted" as it did in Vietnam, "where we didn't really tell the truth," Abizaid told Congress in September. "We've got to tell you the truth every day."

But Caputo says the high command today is "far more aggressive" in selling optimistic pronouncements about the war, in ways that go beyond "light at the end of the tunnel" promises in the 1960s.

Rumsfeld and his acolytes "know goddamned well that what they've been trying to sell to the American people, or the way they've been trying to sell it, is bull," Caputo says.

Karnow compares yesterday's credibility gap to "a canyon" in Iraq.

Gordon Goldstein, coauthor of an upcoming autobiography of McGeorge Bundy, national security advisor to John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, argues that the Bush administration's authority was hurt by its early efforts to obscure debate about the basis for a war and what a U.S. occupation might look like. Now they have to deal with the backlash, he says.

"There was no strategy to generate public support for an engagement that would be long and costly and difficult," Goldstein says. "They didn't sell it that way in Vietnam and they haven't sold it that way in Iraq."

Just as there are questions about the reasons for war and, indeed, whether it's a quagmire, Maraniss points out that, as in Vietnam, we also don't know what entails victory.

"With Iraq, President Bush declared 'Mission Accomplished' and yet American soldiers keep getting killed every day," Maraniss says. "With Vietnam, the Nixon administration sought 'Peace with Honor' and declared peace was at hand long before the U.S. disengaged from the war."

Vietnam historians remember, too, how critics of that war, too, were labeled unpatriotic and even helpful to the enemy.

"This is a direct parallel to Vietnam: You fool yourself, you lie to yourself," Galloway says. "And eventually you become convinced by your own lies. I hope that we do not go that way in Iraq with this administration; this country really can't afford it."

The Road Ahead: Dead ends, blind alleys and cul-de-sacs

While some people compare Iraq to Vietnam, others suggest parallels that are different, but similarly grim: Iraq for the British (1920-1932); Algeria for the French (the 1954-1962 war of independence); Afghanistan for the Russians (1979-89); Lebanon for the Israelis (1978-2000). That is, futile, bloody sinkholes where militarily superior nations didn't have a prayer of victory against a determined local foe.

According to Halberstam, Bush's war architects believed they could reshape history with might, just as the engineers of the war in Southeast Asia did. In his book about Vietnam, "The Best and the Brightest," Halberstam cites a maxim from Ralph Waldo Emerson that he believes still reflects today's reality: "Events are in the saddle and ride mankind."

The Vietnam experts suggest that the administration could, and should, do much more to help itself by swallowing its distaste for a powerful United Nations presence, and by trading away the spoils of occupation for the support of other nations.

"Find some way, even if it means not giving contracts away to friends, of giving business to the French, German and Russian firms—of internationalizing this campaign to rebuild and reconstruct Iraq," Caputo says. Otherwise, "I just see us there for years and years, an unending commitment."

Then again, it's almost certainly too late to ask for help.

Absent significant groveling, the U.S. probably won't see cooperation from France, Germany, Russia or the United Nations as long as Bush is president. They have every incentive to let him suffer the consequences of his father-knows-best approach, and no incentive to deploy troops into a chaotic security situation.

If the United States can't change its fate, if the White House refuses to admit its faults and address allies' concerns, we'll have to manage the long-term consequences. Chief among the downsides, we may not have help against actual terrorists. The U.S. needs allies, and their intelligence services, to conduct an effective war against al-Qaida.

The current fight in Iraq is supposed to enhance U.S. national security. Ellsberg argues that not only does it *not* do that, but instead places the nation at greater risk of attack.

"We're not fighting them there so we don't have to fight them here," Ellsberg says. "We've made the home front more dangerous while adding a front in Iraq." He describes today's war as "irresponsible, reckless and dangerous"—even worse than Vietnam.

In the 1980s, Reagan Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, and later Colin Powell, when he was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for President George H.W. Bush during the Persian Gulf War, outlined what became known as the Powell Doctrine.

Before sending troops into battle, American leaders must have broad and durable support from Congress and the public; must commit enough resources to win the battle; must set clear political and military objectives; and must have a clear exit strategy.

This doctrine was a product of the American experience in Vietnam. From the standpoint of political and military planning, it summarized what had gone wrong, and prescribed a potential solution—use caution beforehand, and overwhelming force if need be.

But Bush administration neoconservatives ignored the concerns of people, including Powell, whose worldview was shaped by Vietnam, and dismissed them as "wimps," Halberstam says. Similarly, he says, hawks dismissed warnings about Southeast Asia "because they hadn't been there."

In retrospect, the doctrine that governed U.S. military policy from the 1980s until Sept. 11 failed to define the crucial factor that, in the end, forces presidents to defend their conduct of all wars, large or small, defensive or humanitarian, successful or not.

Is it in the United States' national interest to expend these resources, in this way, right now?

After a more than a decade of hubris and death in Southeast Asia, we realized that the answer was a resounding no. We will have to wait, probably for many more years and many more deaths, to answer that question in Iraq.

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