IRAQ AND VIETNAM COMPARED

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INTRODUCTION

Comparisons, whether pointing to similarities or differences, made between Iraq and Vietnam abound. They are made by policy-makers, journalists, scholars and others.1 This is understandable because the Vietnam War has made such an impression on the American psyche that any conflict overseas the American government subsequently undertakes invariably evokes Vietnam. It is thus not surprising that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 has Vietnamese echoes, given the fact that the US in both cases had to dispatch a massive number of troops in attempts to institute democratic governments. In Iraq it was to introduce democracy while in Vietnam it was to defend South Vietnamese democracy from communism. And the most dreaded similarity of all to many Americans is that their Iraqi invasion could, instead of bringing in democracy, lead to a Vietnamese type quagmire.2 Is the comparison of Iraq with Vietnam valid?

In answering this question, this article will consider the historical, geographical-physical, and ideological aspects involved in both situations. The stakes for the US will also be examined. Then the manner in which the American administration sold both wars to Congress and the American public will be compared. Finally, and not the least important, the impact of both wars on the American global position will be analysed.

HISTORICAL

The history of the American involvement in both countries shows an America practicing a consistent policy in Vietnam while in Iraq, America was far less consistent in its approach towards Saddam Hussein. When the Americans began to be seriously involved in Vietnam in 1950 as a result of the outbreak of the Korean War, their main objective was to ensure that Vietnam did not fall into communist hands. They tried to do so by first helping the French colonialists through heavy financing and material help short of American troop deployment to put down the Vietnamese communist insurgency. When the French proved unable to do so and were finally defeated by the Vietnamese communists in 1954 in Dien Bien Phu, the Americans prevented the Vietnamese communists from completely dominating the whole of Vietnam by creating a South Vietnamese state that was not communist south of the 17th parallel. After that the Americans did everything they could to defend this South Vietnamese state (at one stage sending as many as half a million American soldiers) from a South Vietnamese communist insurgency that was backed by the North Vietnamese communists. The Americans were ultimately not successful and withdrew in 1973, and in the aftermath allowed South Vietnam to fall to the communists in 1975.

In Iraq on the other hand, the Americans went on to overthrow a despotic regime under Saddam Hussein in the hope a new democracy in Iraq would be built that could serve as an example to the rest of the Middle East. Regime change was the aim in Iraq whereas in Vietnam, it was regime maintenance. But the Americans had not been consistent in their policy towards the Saddam Hussein regime, unlike in Vietnam where they had not wavered in their support for the various South Vietnamese regimes so long as they were not communist. In one well known case where the Americans forced the overthrow of a government, such as for example in the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem by an American backed military, it was not so
much a case of the American government disagreeing with the aims of the Diem government but because the Diem government was proving to be ineffective in fighting the communist insurgency. Not so in Saddam Hussein's case. Before Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, the Americans had supported him as they needed him to prevent the Iranian Islamic regime from spreading militant Islam to the Middle East. Only after the Kuwaiti invasion did the Americans turn against him.

Thus the Americans even by their own terms had a weaker moral case in Iraq than in Vietnam. While the Americans can be rightly accused of doing things in Vietnam not consistent with what they say like defending autocratic and military dominated regimes in the name of democracy, they were at least consistent in not wanting any communist dominated South Vietnamese regimes. But in Iraq, some of the moral arguments deployed by the Americans against Saddam Hussein in order to justify his overthrow in 2003 cut little ice, even when compared to Vietnam. It was held for example that Saddam Hussein had used poison gas against his own people and did all manner of vile things against them. But the Americans knew of all these before and chose to turn a blind eye to them, (one of his greatest detractor, the US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, even met with him at a time when he was a high official in the Reagan Administration) when they needed him then to fight the militant Islamic government in Iran.

**GEOGRAPHICAL-PHYSICAL.**

From a geographical point of view, Iraq shares no border with a powerful sympathetic ally, unlike Vietnam which had as a neighbouring country, a strong ally in communist China. This is important because in the Vietnamese case there was a powerful deterrent against an American invasion of North Vietnam as it might lead to war with China. The Americans saw what happened in the Korean War when China intervened militarily after General Douglas MacArthur, after having successfully driven back the North Koreans to north of the 38th parallel, the demarcation line between North Korea from South Korea, decided to cross that parallel. China sent its troops as it feared an American dominated North Korea which bordered China would be a threat to the Chinese communist government. Thus based on the Korean experience, the Americans believed China would likely intervene in North Vietnam should the US cross the 16th parallel and invade North Vietnam. However, the important countries Iraq shares borders with are Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Not only are these three countries not as strong militarily as China, they are not even friends with and are indeed hostile to Saddam Hussein. Saudi Arabia is an ally of the United States while Syria and Iran themselves fear they might be next on the list of the countries after Iraq to be invaded by the United States!

Second, the physical terrain in Iraq is different from that of Vietnam. Vietnam is a tropical country with dense jungle foliage. Such enabled the communist insurgents to hide in the jungle, thus allowing them to wage a protracted war which ultimately proved successful. A lot of Iraq on the other hand is desert and cannot offer the kind of protection a jungle does. Hence the Iraqi insurgents will most likely hide in the towns. This means that a lot of the fighting and bombing would be in towns like Baghdad, Fallujah, Najaf and many others. This raises the great possibility that conflict by the insurgents with the Americans would involve massive bombing and massive attacks by the Americans as to lead to the obliteration of many of these towns. Not that the Americans did not attack Vietnamese towns. In the Tet Offensive of 1968, the Americans heavily attacked the town of Hue. An American military
man was then quoted to have famously, or notoriously, said that they had to destroy Hue in order to save it! But American attacks on Vietnamese cities were the exceptions rather than the rule as the Vietnamese Communists resisted primarily in the rural areas and away from the towns.

IDEOLOGICAL

A very crucial difference lies in the adversaries the US is fighting against. As was mentioned, the US adversary in Vietnam was communism. It was held then that communism intended to take over the world. If the US did not stop communism in Vietnam, there would be a domino effect. The rest of Southeast Asia would be engulfed by the communists with the US soon having to fight the communists on the shores of Hawaii. On the other hand, the Americans are supposed to be fighting terrorism in Iraq rather than communism. The Americans asserted that Saddam Hussein had been in league with international terrorists, particularly Al Qaeda, who were out to destroy the United States and the civilized world. Especially threatening to the United States was the belief that Saddam Hussein had in his possession weapons of mass destruction which not only as Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, originally claimed could be launched in forty five minutes but could also be given to these terrorists to wreak havoc in the West.

Another crucial difference is that communism then had two states that claimed to be its leader while a third had great influence over the communist insurgents in South Vietnam who were fighting the Americans. The two were of course the then Soviet Union and China while the third was North Vietnam. This meant that if the US needed to negotiate with its communist adversary, it could do so with the Soviet Union, China and also that of North Vietnam. The leaders of terrorism however are at once found in a particular state and also across states. This makes it very difficult for the US to fight or negotiate, if it deems necessary, with these terrorists as they are not fixed targets. If the US makes the assumption that the terrorists were ensconced in Afghanistan and Iraq, it could go after these states as it actually did in 2001 and 2003. Yet the US could not completely defeat the terrorists with their invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq (if anything the invasion of Iraq has increased recruitment for the terrorist groups) as they are not found only in these two states alone but are also found in Pakistan and elsewhere, including in Western Europe and the US! It is thus frustrating for the US to combat these terrorists as their leaders are spread across states and hence not so easily traceable. At the time of writing, the Americans have still to locate the whereabouts of the putative leader of Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden.

There is also another difference between the communist and the terrorist threat. The US war against Vietnamese communism was basically confined to Vietnam and the rest of Indochina. The Vietnamese could not hit back against the American in American territory. There were of course communists and non-communist sympathisers of Vietnam in the United States. These however supported the Vietnamese communists largely by lawful means through for example lawful demonstrations and writings. Not so with the terrorist sympathisers of Iraq. They can and do have the intention (as September Eleven clearly demonstrated) of striking in US territory. And most frightening of all to the Americans would be the very real possibility that these terrorists could grab hold of weapons of mass destruction and have them exploded in the US.
THE STAKES

Truth to tell, the stakes in Vietnam were not fundamental to the interests of the United States. Vietnam and even the rest of Southeast Asia did not possess the kind of natural resources such as oil or some other that the US was absolutely dependent on or could not find alternatives to. That the US fought so long and expended so many lives and much treasure in Vietnam has more to do with the maintenance of its global prestige (more later) than with the exploitation of the natural resources of Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia. There of course have been arguments about the material motivation behind the American involvement in Vietnam. One such argument had it that the actual reason for the US involvement in Vietnam had been to protect the Southeast Asian markets and the natural resources for its ally Japan as Japan was greatly needed by the Americans in the war against Asian communism. Such an argument sounds somewhat contrived and not very convincing as few countries will do so much for the sake of another even if that other country is very friendly and subservient.

The Iraqi stakes are however different. Iraq has the second largest reserves of oil in the world, not to mention that it is in a region awash with this liquid. Given the great dependence of the US on imported oil, as a result of what one might say to be its profligate ways, American control of Iraq or America ensuring that any government there does not threaten the US is a very fundamental US interest. In addition if the US could use its conquest of Iraq to gain control of the oil in the entire Middle East region, then it will be in a very powerful position to put a squeeze on other powers in the world which might need oil from the Middle East. In particular it could hold its putative future rival, China, to ransom, given China's increasing dependence on imported oil from the Middle East.

THE SELLING OF BOTH WARS

One could say that Americans are more sanctimonious than most other people regarding the reasons they give to justify their overseas wars. These invariably are always related to the defence of freedom and democracy. Not for the Americans that they will fight overseas, as many others are said to do, for crass material or other less than noble reasons. Thus, as stated, they had claimed to fight in Vietnam to save democracy from communism and, in Iraq, to spread democracy both in Iraq and in the Middle East. It may be that given the belief of the American people that America is an exceptional country whose aims overseas are, or should be, always idealistic, any American administration trying to persuade the American people to go to war overseas has no choice but to resort to such high minded rhetoric. But such high-minded rhetoric aside, America had not always gone to war to bring democracy to all and sundry. Indeed there are many non-democratic countries the US, where it sees no interest fundamental to it, has not sought to bring democracy to. It can even be argued that when it suited the US it is willing to aid undemocratic regimes. The examples of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States come readily to mind. In the final analysis it is not so much for democracy that the Americans are persuaded to expend blood and treasure as much as for things that are perceived to be related either to the national security of the United States or the fact that the US had been attacked.

And here we see similarities in Vietnam and Iraq. This is most evident in the attempt by the American administrations during Vietnam and Iraq to persuade Congress to pass a resolution enabling both administrations to prosecute the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. Such
congressional resolutions are important as under the American constitution only Congress can declare war. While the resolutions obtained by the Johnson administration, the so called "Gulf of Tonkin resolution", and the Iraqi resolution under the Bush administration stopped short of actually declaring war, they in effect gave the two administrations the power to wage war in Vietnam and Iraq. And both administrations succeeded basically not by appeals to saving democracy but by resorting to scare tactics, (subsequently to prove untrue) that America had been attacked and had to respond.

Thus in 1964 at a time of a deteriorating security situation in Vietnam and where the Americans would have to send a large number of troops, the Johnson administration desperately needed a congressional resolution to allow him to wage war in Vietnam. To persuade Congress to pass such a resolution, the Johnson administration told Congress that an American destroyer, the USS Maddox, while sailing in the Gulf of Tonkin, had been attacked by two North Vietnamese PT boats. The US needed some legal basis to hit back. The then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, Senator William Fulbright, who subsequently became a fierce critic of the Vietnam War, allowed this resolution to go to the full house which passed it, from his committee primarily because he believed the administration version that an American ship was attacked. As it subsequently turned out, the administration's version was wrong or rather fabricated. There was no attack from one Vietnamese ship while the other attacked only because it was provoked by the USS Maddox! No matter, the Johnson administration by the use of this scare tactic, based on a falsehood, was able to secure the domestic legal basis to wage war in Vietnam.

Similar scare tactics were used in Iraq. The first was that Iraq under Saddam Hussein had a link with the Al Qaeda terrorist organisation that had brought about the attack on America on September 11, 2001. The one piece of evidence that was always touted initially to show this link was "uncovered" by a former high American administration official, James Woolsey, who was sent by the Bush administration to find a link between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. That evidence was a presumed meeting between one of the September 11 hijackers, Muhammed Atta, and an Iraqi agent in Czechoslovakia before September 11. Even as Czech intelligence were to deny such a meeting occurred, the incessant repeating of this meeting taking place and of a connection between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein had an effect initially on the American public and Congress. At one stage more than half the American people, according to polls, believed there was such a link! So the administration is justified in seeking a congressional resolution allowing it to attack Iraq because America had been attacked on September Eleven by terrorists linked to Iraq as the an American destroyer was attacked by North Vietnamese ships. While the presumed link may be a powerful justification in Congressional eyes for an attack against Saddam, even more scary to Congress and the American people was the line the Bush administration was pushing to the effect that Saddam Hussein had in his possession weapons of mass destruction that could be thrown against Iraq's neighbours and even possibly the United States. Bush claimed in his State of the Union address in 2003 that Saddam Hussein had sought uranium from the African state of Niger while Colin Powell made his famous, or notorious, speech to the United Nations in February 2003 to the effect that the US had solid evidence that Saddam Hussein had the means to produce and in fact was producing weapons of mass destruction! This "evidence" (subsequent efforts to find these weapons after Iraq was invaded were unsuccessful) was challenged by some people. But within America any such challenge was often crushed by arguments that America cannot take any chances and had to assume the worst. The Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld argued successfully in a Congressional hearing to many Americans that one has to connect the dots from the evidence, even if
fragmentary, available. While the National Security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, resorted to a chilling metaphor. America cannot wait for a smoking gun as a mushroom cloud might appear before that!

Whatever the veracity of the link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda or the possession of weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein, the Bush administration successfully pushed these two arguments to persuade Congress to pass a resolution in October 2002 to allow the US to wage war in Iraq.

There is also another interesting similarity between both situations. It is that of persuasion by analogy, and that analogy is Munich. Many historians have contended that the fact the then British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, gave in to Hitler in 1938 in Munich over Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenlands of Czechoslovakia. This then led Hitler to believe that the British and the French would not stop him from conquering Europe. Had the British and French made it clear to Hitler, according to these historians, that unless he withdrew from Czechoslovakia, the British and the French would force him out, Hitler would not have embarked on or so easily bring about a conquest of Europe. Thus Munich became synonymous with appeasement in Western minds.

The Munich analogy was frequently used by the Americans to justify their involvement in Vietnam and Iraq. In Vietnam, it was held that if the communists were not to be stopped in Vietnam then these communists would then sweep over Southeast Asia and even to the shores of Hawaii. These communists must not be appeased as Hitler was appeased by Chamberlain to the detriment of Europe. Similarly, the Bush administration also made much about not having another Munich in Iraq. If Saddam Hussein were not stopped then the consequences for America would be very grave. In particularly, the consequences of Munich had a profound influence on the neo-conservatives, a deeply influential group in the Bush administration particularly over the decision to invade Iraq. These neo-conservatives were the intellectual disciples of a German Jewish émigré, Leo Strauss, who fled Nazi Germany and taught in the University of Chicago. Strauss like many of those who fled from Hitler believed that Hitler and the Nazis should have been stopped, particularly in Munich, before they became so dominant.

IMPACT ON THE AMERICAN GLOBAL POSITION

While as mentioned there are some vast differences between Iraq and Vietnam, there is nevertheless a profound similarity in that, as both situations developed, the stakes became for the Americans not only what might happen in Vietnam and Iraq but more on the impact of such happenings on the global position of America. By that is meant that as it became evident that the American involvement in both countries were no quick adventures but ones that increasingly involved a huge number of American troops and vast amounts of money, the Vietnamese and Iraqi issues turned into an issue of American credibility. And that is, whether America, after the commitment of so much American resources, can withdraw without the achievement of its aims.

It is true that the Americans followed a different sequence in troop deployment in Vietnam from Iraq, and also that the Vietnamese adventure is over while the Iraqi involvement is still on. Thus, as to the sequence, the US only dispatched a massive number of troops in Vietnam after all available means, including financial aid, failed to quell the communist insurgency.
Whereas in Iraq, the Americans, apart from the earlier bombing of the Iraqi no fly zones, sent in more than 100,000 troops to topple Saddam Hussein right from the start.

Whatever the sequence and the timing it became clear even as early as 1965 in Vietnam that as far as the American administration was concerned, the reason for America staying on in Vietnam had more to do with American prestige than with the defence of South Vietnamese democracy. This is attested to by a revealing document written by a close aide to Defence Secretary, Robert McNamara, John McNaughton, an assistant Secretary of Defence, concerning the real aims of the US in Vietnam. In quantitative terms, McNaughton gave 70 per cent to avoiding a “humiliating U.S. defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor)” and 30 per cent to the rest. Of this 30 per cent, 20 per cent was given to keeping South Vietnam and the adjacent territory from Chinese hands and 10 per cent to protect the freer life of the South Vietnamese people! It is also clear now that however mistaken the Bush administration might have been in invading Iraq, both sides of the mainstream American political spectrum, the Republicans and the Democrats, are not for a precipitous American withdrawal for fear of its impact on American prestige in the Middle East and globally. For example, John Kerry, the then Democratic candidate for the presidency in July 2004 said that having a failed Iraqi state was dangerous not just in the context of the war on terror, it would also be dangerous to the Middle East, the Arab countries and to Europe. That leaves this question. If, as seems increasingly evident, the US cannot stabilise the situation even if it has hurriedly handed over in the middle of 2004 the reins of government to an American appointed government headed by an Iraqi, Iyad Allawi, without the massive presence of American troops, can the US then sustain this level of troop commitment in Iraq given the American reluctance to sustain too many American casualties in combat? As things appear the odds do not look good to the Americans as far as building a democratic Iraq and an effective Iraqi fighting force are concerned. If the Americans were forced to withdraw from Iraq could they do so, as they finally did in Vietnam, without their global credibility being fundamentally damaged? One way to consider this is to describe how the US withdrew from Vietnam without its global position being fundamentally affected.

When it became clear in 1968, especially after the Tet Offensive in February of that year, that the American people had turned against the Vietnam War, Nixon campaigned for the presidency in the November 1968 elections with an undertaking to withdraw American troops from Vietnam and end the war. After he was elected, he was confronted with the dilemma as to how to withdraw American troops and not allowed the anti-communist Thieu regime to collapse immediately. If that happened it was believed that America’s credibility in the world would be deeply affected. What Kissinger, Nixon’s National Security adviser and subsequently Secretary of State, wanted most of all was a “decent interval” between American withdrawal and the collapse of the American supported regime that would allow the Americans to be seen as withdrawing with dignity and not scuttling. To do so Nixon and Kissinger needed to do two things. One was to pressure the North Vietnamese not to attack or not to inspire the South Vietnamese communists to attack the South Vietnamese government after the Americans are gone. And two, American would build up an indigenous South Vietnamese fighting force, through what is called a process of “Vietnamisation”, by massive military assistance to the South Vietnamese army.

To achieve the former, he did two things. One was to open up to the two communist giants, the Soviet Union then and China, and persuade them to stop their support of the North Vietnamese. Nixon thus pursued a policy of détente with the former while he ended the containment of the China by a historic visit to that country in 1972. Second, he sent a tough
message to the North Vietnamese that unless they stopped their support of the South Vietnamese communist insurgency, he would not be restrained by the self imposed limits to American military actions imposed by the previous Johnson administration. Those limits essentially meant that the Johnson administration, beyond the bombing of North Vietnam while leaving Hanoi relatively untouched, would not widen the war beyond South Vietnam. Thus, Nixon sent American troops to Cambodia to hunt for the headquarters of the Vietcong in 1970 and unleashed South Vietnamese troops to Laos in 1971 to stop the infiltration of South Vietnam by North Vietnamese fighters. And in 1972, he mined the port of Haiphong in May and carpet bombed Hanoi with B 52s just before Christmas.

All these measures did not prevent the North Vietnamese from eventually conquering South Vietnam and reunify Vietnam. But there was an interval of about two and the half years between the peace agreements the US effected with North Vietnam in January 1973 and the collapse of the South Vietnamese government in May, 1975. In the event the American global credibility was not fundamentally affected in part because of the ‘decent interval’ of two and the half years but primarily because the Vietnamese communist revolution was more of a nationalist revolution. In other words, the Vietnamese communists were more interested in reunifying their country than spread communism to the rest of Southeast Asia. Moreover, Southeast Asian communism was then slowly losing its appeal in Southeast Asia after 1975. Indeed in 1978, communist Vietnam invaded communist Cambodia. If anything the dominoes have gone backward rather than forwards to the rest of non-communist Southeast Asia. The question remains. If finally forced to, can an American administration avoid a precipitous withdrawal from Iraq? Can any US administration leave behind an Iraqi government that will be more successful than the one the US left behind in Vietnam? These questions remain unanswered at the time of writing.

CONCLUSION

There are great differences between Iraq and Vietnam. They are found primarily in the historical, geographical-physical and ideological aspects. The stakes are also different in that the US had a more fundamental interest in Iraq than it had in Vietnam. But there are also similarities. They consist of the manner in which the two wars were sold by the administration to Congress and the American people and of the two wars turning into an issue of the American global credibility. America’s global credibility had not been fundamentally affected by the manner in which the US withdrew from Vietnam. Whether the US can manage a similar extrication in Iraq remains uncertain at the time of writing.
NOTES

1 Colin Powell, one of the most senior of the American policy makers, made a reference to the My Lai massacre in Vietnam when he was queried about the Abu Ghraib torture in Iraq in Larry King Live. See Larry King Live, May 4, 2004 on CNN. A more dramatic statement comes from a leading politician Senator Ted Kennedy, who said that Iraq was Bush's Vietnam: See “Kennedy: Iraq is George Bush's Vietnam” by Brad WRIGHT and Jennifer YULLE posted on CNN website on April 6, 2004. There are also many other comparisons of Vietnam and Iraq. For some thoughtful pieces, see “Vietnam and Iraq: has the U.S. learned anything” by Gabriel KOLKO in Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney (www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/04/11/1081327000981.html?from=storyrhs) April 11, 2004, and “Vietnam and Iraq have more similarities than differences” by Georgie Anne GEYER, November 10, 2003 in Waging Peace.Org (http://www.wagingpeace.org/articles/2003/11/10_geyer_iraq.vietnam.htm)

2 For references to the Iraqi quagmire, see “Imperial Dreams Sink in Iraqi Quagmire” by Jim LOBE in Antiwar.com, May 19, 2004 (http://antiwar.com/lobe/?articleid=2604) and “the Iraqi Quagmire” by Patrick COCKBURN in counterpunch, May 10, 2003 (http://www.counterpunch.org/patrick 05102003.html).

3 For a reference in 1954 to the economic and political effects of a Vietnamese disintegration on Japan, the key to the American containment of Russia and China in the Far East, see Walter LAFEBER, American Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1966 New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1967, p. 162.

4 For Fulbright's role in the Gulf of Tonkin's resolution and his apology to other members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for having misled them, see David HALBERSTAM, The Best and the Brightest, New York, Random House, Inc. 1971.

