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SECOND IN A SERIES
IRAQ & VIETNAM: DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER
AGAIN?

By Andrew Krepinevich

SUMMARY

The Vietnam War left deep scars on America's national psyche, its political leaders, and, most of all, its military. In the three decades since the end of US military involvement in that war, no conflict has been referred to more often than Vietnam, either in the United States or by its enemies. Americans and their military fear being tied down in another quagmire, where victory is elusive and the light at the end of the tunnel appears distant, if not receding. America's enemies see "another Vietnam" as their best hope of defeating the juggernaut that is the US military.

Fears of "another Vietnam" were on display during the US involvement in counterinsurgency warfare in El Salvador during the 1980s, and animated demands for an "exit strategy" when US troops were sent to low-intensity conflicts in places like Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia in the 1990s. Now concerns are expressed as to whether ongoing US stability operations in Iraq—by far the largest since Vietnam—risk trapping American forces in another protracted conflict where victory is elusive, if not impossible.

Is Iraq "another Vietnam?" If the similarities are high, a strong case might be made that the United States should cut its losses in Iraq, and seek some form of "peace with honor." However, if the case is mixed, or if the similarities between the conflicts are low, then perhaps such comparisons are more a reflection of nagging, old wounds than new dangers—a willingness to give counsel to old fears, rather than confront new realities. At the outset, however, it is also important to note that a thorough analysis of the prospects for success, or failure, in Iraq would need to look far beyond a simple comparison of the two conflicts. Thus the following assessment is an attempt to *inform* the debate over our policies in Iraq, rather than resolve it.

The conflicts in Iraq and the Vietnam War have several important similarities:

- § In both cases the United States confronted an enemy intent in pursuing a protracted conflict with an eye toward seizing power after the American military's departure.

- § Early US public support for the US military involvement began to wane as they perceived that progress was not being made toward achieving the country's war objectives.
- § A number of America's closest allies were unwilling to support US military intervention, and US standing in the international community declined.
- § Although in both cases many close US allies did not actively support the intervention, several states did provide significant military forces in support of the United States' efforts.

Overall, however, the dissimilarities between Iraq and Vietnam at the same period following US intervention are far more pronounced than their common characteristics:

- § The demographic and geographic differences between the two countries are striking.
- § The US intervention in Vietnam was undertaken at the request of a recognized government; US forces in Iraq are there as part of an occupation force.
- § The Vietnamese Communists pursued a rural-based insurgency, whereas the Iraqi insurgency is centered primarily in urban areas. In general, the former approach has offered a greater prospect for success than the latter in contemporary times.
- § US ground combat forces were introduced in Vietnam when the insurgency had achieved sufficient strength as to threaten the existence of the Saigon regime. The Iraqi insurgent movement is still in the early stages of insurgency warfare.
- § The enemy forces confronted in Vietnam were an order of magnitude greater than those found in Iraq today. Moreover, the Vietnamese Communists were far superior to the Iraqis in training, organization and experience.
- § In Vietnam, indigenous South Vietnamese military strength actually exceeded that of the United States, while in Iraq there are effectively no significant Iraqi forces working to defeat the insurgency.
- § The United States force in Iraq a little over one year after their initial deployment is only one-third the troops the United States had in Vietnam at a comparable period.
- § The US military that fought in Vietnam relied on conscription to fill its ranks, whereas in Iraq it relies wholly on volunteers.
- § The external support provided the Vietnamese Communists was far greater than any such support being rendered to the Iraqi insurgents.

- § The cost in human terms was far greater in the Vietnam War than at a comparable period in the current conflict in Iraq.
- § The cost in material terms was substantially greater in the Vietnam War than at a comparable period in the current conflict in Iraq.

In conclusion, the dissimilarities between the Vietnam and Iraq conflicts far outweigh their similarities.

While there may be substantially more differences than similarities between the two conflicts, this is not to say that the United States' goals can be easily accomplished in Iraq. Defeating the present insurgency will not necessarily mean that the United States will also achieve its goals of establishing a free, democratic and pro-US Iraq. Suppressing the insurgency is almost certainly a prerequisite to accomplishing those higher goals, but by itself, it provides no guarantee that those goals will be achieved.

In the final analysis, the ability to defeat the Iraqi insurgency depends in large part on how Washington chooses to employ its resources, and its ability to sustain this effort over a protracted period of time. In short, much depends on the strategy pursued, and on the Bush Administration's ability to convince the American people (as well as its coalition partners) that its goal is both worthy of the sacrifices they are being asked to make, and that such sacrifices will, in fact lead to not only the defeat of the insurgency, but enhance the prospects of achieving America's overall strategic objectives in Iraq and in the Middle East. In the final analysis, no matter how less formidable the Iraq insurgency appears when measured against America's Vietnam experience, or how low the relative costs, they will not offset a flawed strategy.

CHARACTER OF THE CONFLICT: Both the Vietnam War and the current conflict in Iraq can best be defined as insurgencies, with US and allied forces working with indigenous forces to wage counterinsurgency. Both the Vietnamese Communists (Viet Cong) and its allies (i.e., North Vietnam), as well as the Iraqi insurgents are conducting operations that characterize insurgent movements, to include the use of intimidation and violence—terror, assassination, hit-and run-attacks, ambushes, and attacks on key infrastructure.¹

However, the two insurgencies are different in some significant respects. The Vietnamese Communist insurgency was rural based, whereas the Iraqi insurgent movements are urban based. While contemporary rural insurgencies have had a significantly better chance of success than urban insurgencies, too much should not be made of this, as many other factors exert a significant influence on the outcome of such conflicts. For example, the Iraqi insurgency is fragmented. There does not appear to be a significant level of coordination between the Sunni and Shi'ite insurgent groups, or among the small foreign

¹ For an overview of insurgency warfare, see Andrew F. Krepinevich, "The War in Iraq: The Nature of Insurgency Warfare," *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, June 2, 2004.

element.² The Vietnamese Communists, on the other hand, exhibited a high degree of unity and coordination.

GEOGRAPHY: Countries with rugged, complex natural terrain and long borders often work to the advantage of the insurgents. They often seek sanctuary in inhospitable areas that are difficult for counterinsurgent forces to access, such as jungles and mountains. The insurgents' ability to slip across nearby borders and find sanctuary in neighboring states can also prove extremely useful. In this respect, South Vietnam, dominated to a by mountainous terrain and rain forest, played to the advantage of the insurgents. Moreover, South Vietnam's long narrow shape meant that insurgents could slip, with relative ease, across the border into Cambodia, Laos or North Vietnam to seek sanctuary. Indeed, South Vietnam's strategic depth rarely exceeded 150 miles from its nearest neighbor.

Iraq, on the other hand, poses far greater challenges for an insurgent movement. It is a country dominated by desert, which offers little in the way of shelter or sanctuary for insurgents. Its strategic depth is significantly better than South Vietnam's, making it more difficult for insurgents to strike and withdraw to foreign sanctuaries. Moreover, with the possible exception of Syria and perhaps Iran, it is far from clear that those countries bordering Iraq—including Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Turkey—would be willing to risk US retaliation by providing sanctuary.

DEMOGRAPHICS: South Vietnam was primarily an agrarian economy, while Iraq's barren terrain features have led to a far greater concentration of people in urban areas. Not surprisingly, Iraq's insurgency is centered on its cities, while the communist insurgency in South Vietnam was rural based. Rural insurgencies have been, on average, more successful than urban-based insurgent movements.³

South Vietnam's population was relatively homogenous compared to Iraq's. Over 80 percent of South Vietnam's population was Vietnamese. The remainder of the population was dominated by Montagnard tribes, whose members had an intense dislike for the Vietnamese, somewhat similar to the relationship the Kurds "enjoy" with their Sunni Arab countrymen. In Iraq, the Shi'ia Arab population forms a majority, comprising about 60 percent of the country's population, with the Kurds and Sunni Arabs representing significant minorities. During the Vietnam War, the conflict was dominated by ethnic Vietnamese. So, too, with respect to infiltration by foreign insurgents, in the form of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA).

² This foreign element, comprising members of radical Islamic movements, may also be attempting to promote discord between the indigenous insurgent movements and the Kurds as well, as a means of laying the groundwork for the emergence of a radical Islamic regime.

³ Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, China, Cuba, Indochina, Indonesia, Laos, Nicaragua, Vietnam, are among the states that have witnessed relatively recent rural-based insurgencies succeed. A mixed rural-urban insurgent movement succeeded in Algeria.

The situation in Iraq is more fractionated. Foreign infiltration has been microscopic compared with what occurred in the Vietnam War.⁴ Moreover, most foreign insurgents are of different ethnic backgrounds from many indigenous Iraqis. In summary, one might generally characterize the Vietnamese insurgency as rural and homogenous, while the Iraqi insurgency is urban and heterogeneous, comprising elements of its Shi'ia and Sunni population, with a smattering of Kurds and foreign fighters of different ethnicity.⁵

OBJECTIVES/STAKES: The Vietnamese Communists were fighting a total war with the ultimate aim of uniting both North and South Vietnam under Hanoi's rule and evicting all foreign forces. The Iraqi insurgents also seem to be fighting a total war in that they seek to dominate the country following the departure of foreign forces. Unlike the Vietnamese Communists, however, the Iraqi insurgent movements—particularly the Sunni and Shi'ia Arabs—likely envision this as a prelude to an internal struggle for power. Thus Iraqi insurgent success could pave the way for civil war.

The Vietnamese Communists viewed the Saigon regime as illegitimate, a creation of the United States. In fact, the South Vietnamese regime claimed the support of a substantial number of its citizens, as was demonstrated in the Communists' failure to trigger a popular uprising during their Tet Offensive in 1968.

The situation in Iraq is more complex. There is as yet no regime to even attempt to command the loyalty of the Iraqi people, although one may be created through elections in the coming months and an interim government has been formed and assumed power on June 28. Therefore it is the coalition occupation that is viewed as illegitimate. It is quite possible that Iraqi insurgents seek, through their efforts, to establish a claim to representation in any provisional government, to lay claim to the credit for evicting the forces of the "infidel" (thereby making a down payment in blood for the right to rule Iraq), and as a way of developing a favorable military balance in any civil war that might follow the departure of coalition forces.

As for the counterinsurgents, in Vietnam the United States was playing for high stakes, but not nearly as high as in Iraq. The US objective in Vietnam was to arrest the expansion of communism as part of an overall strategy of containment. It also hoped to demonstrate that wars of national liberation (as insurgencies were often called) would not succeed just as communist attempts at overt aggression (i.e., the Korean War) had not succeeded. The United States had suffered some setbacks in its efforts to block communist insurgents from seizing power (e.g. China, Cuba), and some successes (e.g., Greece, the Philippines). The success or failure of the containment policy did not rest upon US success in Vietnam the way that the Bush Administration's ambition for a democratic Middle East is linked to American success in Iraq.

⁴ To be sure, nearly all the infiltration into South Vietnam was by ethnic Vietnamese from North Vietnam

⁵ Kurdish insurgents primarily operate as part of Ansar al Islam.

In Iraq, the United States has extremely ambitious objectives that will be realized, if at all, only over the course of a generation. They include winning a major victory against radical Islam by assisting in the creation of a state that offers an alternative to the oppressive Islamic fundamentalist regimes—advocated by al Qaeda and similar groups and as practiced in Iran, Sudan, and (until recently) Afghanistan—and repressive authoritarian secular regimes, as represented in countries like Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Syria, and even Egypt.⁶ By supporting efforts to create prosperous, democratic states, the administration hopes to reduce the root causes that have led to a significant threat of attack on the American homeland by Islamist elements.

THE ENEMY: Although figures vary, it is clear that the combined Iraqi/foreign insurgent movements are miniscule compared to the communist forces confronted by the United States and its allies in Vietnam. There are no indications that the current insurgent force in Iraq exceeds more than a few tens of thousands, perhaps 20,000 at most. Comparatively speaking, one year after the introduction of US ground combat forces to South Vietnam, enemy strength was estimated at over *ten times* that number.⁷

In Iraq, the enemy has shown the ability to stand and fight. Although the insurgents apparently lack a unified command at the level practiced by the Vietnamese Communists, they are showing the discipline to operate in groups of 20-40 fighters. This figure is small by comparison to Vietnamese communist forces, which at times in 1966 operated in formations that numbered in the hundreds and even thousands. Recent uprisings in cities like Fallujah and Najaf witnessed insurgent groups massing in substantially larger numbers, although at this point their command element's ability to coordinate large force groupings appears inferior to that of the communist insurgents during the Vietnam War. The shifts in the scale and form of insurgent attacks, if they persist, could have important implications for training. On average, the Vietnamese communist force structure was not only far larger, but its troops were also far better trained and better-led than their Iraqi counterparts. They were capable of conducting operations on a far greater scale and level of sophistication. By 1965 the Vietnamese Communists were veterans of two decades of nearly constant war against the Japanese, French and American militaries. As one American officer put it, "Haji ain't Charlie."⁸

⁶ President Bush has declared that "America's task in Iraq is not only to defeat an enemy, it is to give strength to a friend—a free, representative government that serves its people and fights on their behalf." Speech, President George W. Bush, US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, May 24, 2004.

⁷ Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), p. 32.

⁸ "Haji" is a generic term used by some US troops to describe Iraqi insurgents. However, some argue that the term has acquired a highly derisive connotation, more similar to the US troops' reference of all Vietnamese as "gooks" during the Vietnam War. Others assert that this is not the case, noting that the word "haji" in both Iraq and Afghanistan, at least among Marines and Special Forces, is more often used as an endearment than a slur. To wit, "let's drink tea and hang out with the hajis" and "haji food is so much better than what they feed us." See Bob Hebert, "From 'Gooks' to 'Hajis,'" *The New York Times*, May 21, 2004; and Robert Kaplan, "The Real Story of Fallujah," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 27, 2004. "Charlie" was a widely used term in

Having said that, it should be noted that the tactics employed by the various Iraqi insurgent movements with which coalition forces must contend are, in most cases, not dramatically different from what the US military experienced in Vietnam—again, acknowledging that the Iraqi insurgency is primarily in its early stages. Suicide bombers are hardly novel; nor are car and truck bombs a recent phenomenon.⁹ Attacks on convoys in Iraq, which are increasing, again reflect nothing new in insurgency warfare.

As for improvised explosive devices (IEDs), American forces have seen them before as well. For example, owing to the US military's emphasis on firepower, in Vietnam in 1966, over 27,000 tons of unexploded ordnance (artillery shells that were fired or bombs dropped by aircraft), or "duds" were generated. The Viet Cong proved expert at converting these duds into mines and booby traps—their version of IEDs. Over 1,000 US soldiers died that year from these weapons. During the first six months of 1967 the problem worsened, as 17 percent of all US casualties (539 killed and 5,532 wounded) were caused by these devices.¹⁰ Once again, this points out the enormous difference in scale between the two insurgencies.

Insurgents in Iraq have demonstrated a willingness to target noncombatants, including their own people. Again, this is nothing new. Indeed, when in doubt as to their ability to win the "hearts" of the people, insurgents—including the Viet Cong—often used intimidation and terror to win their "minds," and thereby gain their unwilling cooperation, or passivity.

US FORCES: The United States currently has roughly 135,000 troops in Iraq a little over one year after their initial deployment. This is roughly one-third the troops the United States had in Vietnam at a comparable period after the deployment of ground combat forces in the spring of 1965. The US military strength in Vietnam peaked in 1968 at 549,000.

One huge difference between the US military of the Vietnam era and today was brought about in 1973, when conscription ended and an all-volunteer force created. The shift has had both positive and negative affects. The draft era military not only saw troops rotated in and out of Vietnam, but in and out of the military as well, as most draftees departed after having served their period of obligation. This enabled the United States to raise fresh forces for Vietnam by increasing the draft calls, greatly diminishing the need to establish a rotation base. However, a force composed primarily of draftees suffered from a lack of combat experience, giving birth to the statement that

describing the Viet Cong (the "VC," or "Victor Charlie") in the US military's phonetic alphabet. In Vietnam, the US military developed a grudging respect for "Charlie," derived from the enemy's competence and courage on the battlefield. The term "Haji" has, as yet, to achieve that distinction. Indeed, a more widely used term among the US military in describing the Iraqi insurgents is "knuckleheads."

⁹ Consider, for example, the attack on the US Marine Corps barracks in Beirut over two decades ago, and the Khobar Towers attack on US forces in 1996.

¹⁰ Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 201.

“the US Army did not have ten years’ of experience in Vietnam, but one year of experience ten times over.”¹¹

Another major difference in the two wars concerns the participation of National Guard and Reserve soldiers, which is far greater in both absolute and relative terms in Iraq than in Vietnam. For example, no major Army National Guard combat units were called up to serve in Vietnam. Today in Iraq, the National Guard provides roughly 30 percent of the deployed Army ground combat forces.¹²

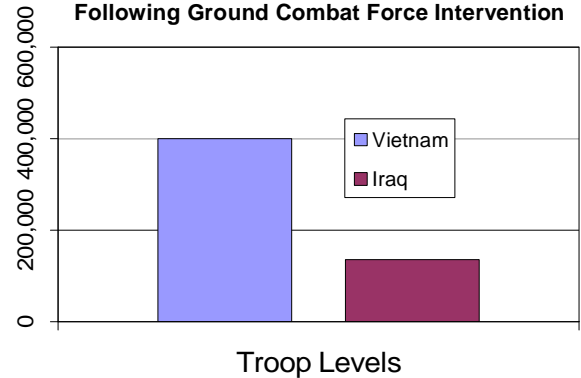
The all-volunteer force deployed to Iraq has a much higher level of experience, on average, than the draft era force. Moreover, assuming the US military sustains relatively small casualties and maintains recent troop retention rates, should forces be rotated in and out of Iraq for a protracted period, it seems likely that over time the depth of experience (and, hopefully, effectiveness) in US forces deployed to Iraq will substantially surpass that of the draft era force. The risk, of course, is that troop retention rates will suffer given the high level of deployments the Army is now experiencing. This posits the need to establish a rotation base that limits how often soldiers are deployed into combat zones. This places either a *de facto* cap on the forces available to meet requirements in Iraq and elsewhere, or demands an expansion of the Army, and perhaps the Marine Corps as well.¹³

Finally, there was a major air and naval component to US military operations during the Vietnam War. In Iraq, however, these forces have a relatively minor role, in terms of forces committed, operations undertaken, and support provided to American ground forces. In short, the Vietnam War saw a far greater balance in terms of size of force and level of effort among US air, ground and naval forces. The current war in Iraq is dominated by the Army, with a significant contribution by the Marines.

THE COUNTERINSURGENT COALITION: In both Vietnam and Iraq the United States military represented by far the most powerful counterinsurgent force. In both instances, the United States received significant support from allies. During Vietnam, Free World Military Forces (FWMFs, as they were called) peaked at over 68,000 troops, principally drawn from South Korea (by far the greatest contributor), Australia, New Zealand and Thailand.

In Iraq, the United States coalition partners have contributed over 22,000 troops. While allied contributions in Iraq are not as great as those in

Figure 1: Troop Commitment One Year Following Ground Combat Force Intervention



¹¹ This refers to the fact that the tour of duty in Vietnam was for one year.

¹² Of the 14 Army brigades currently in Iraq, three are National Guard brigades.

¹³ This issue will be explored in detail in a forthcoming CSBA paper.

Vietnam in terms of raw numbers, they actually represent a greater percentage of the overall coalition force than the FWMFs of the Vietnam era. Aside from the United States, no NATO country forces were deployed to South Vietnam. In Iraq, however, several NATO nations have made significant force contribution, especially the British, Dutch, Italians and Poles.¹⁴

There is also a major difference, at least thus far, between the indigenous counterinsurgent forces provided in these two conflicts. In the Vietnam War, the United States worked with the South Vietnamese Army, and South Vietnamese paramilitary forces (the Regional Forces and Popular Forces), whose numbers exceeded those of the external allied powers. One year after US ground combat forces deployed to South Vietnam, Saigon fielded a force of over 600,000 troops.¹⁵ Iraq, which has yet to form a government following the end of Saddam Hussein's regime, has nothing remotely comparable to the forces fielded by the Saigon regime.¹⁶ Thus US and allied forces are bearing a substantially greater burden for counterinsurgency operations. This may also serve to enhance the insurgents' appeal to Iraqi nationalism, in that they can claim the coalition is acting on its own behalf and not with the support of the Iraqi people, as reflected by the policies of their government.

ENEMY EXTERNAL SUPPORT: External support can be crucial in determining the success or failure of an insurgent movement. During the Vietnam War, the Viet Cong benefited enormously from their ability to draw upon external sources of support. North Vietnam provided substantial military forces, and NVA battalions actually outnumbered Viet Cong battalions as early as 1968, less than three years after the deployment of US ground combat forces. By 1972 the ratio was over six NVA battalions for every VC battalion. That year over 400 battalions of NVA troops were engaged in the war. External support for Iraqi insurgents is microscopic by comparison. Some Jihadists are operating in Iraq, but their numbers are trivial.

With very few exceptions, Communist forces were afforded sanctuary from allied ground attack in North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. No such sanctuaries exist for Iraqi insurgents.¹⁷ Moreover, the North Vietnamese (directly) and Viet Cong (indirectly) received substantial aid from two major powers, the Soviet Union and China, particularly in the form of equipment and munitions. For example, during the period 1967-69 aid to North Vietnam was roughly \$8 billion in current dollars, of which roughly half was directly associated with the war effort.¹⁸ External material aid for Iraqi insurgents is, again, miniscule by comparison, although they do enjoy limited sanctuary in Iran and Syria.

¹⁴ As of May 20, 2004, the British had 7,900 troops deployed, the Dutch 1,260, the Italians 2,700, and the Poles 2,400, for a total of 14,260 NATO member forces in addition to those of the United States.

¹⁵ These forces were comprised of regular army units, regional forces and popular forces.

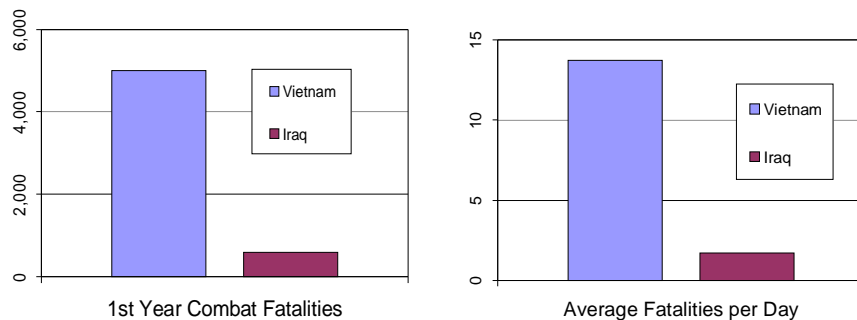
¹⁶ The South Vietnamese Government in 1966 had been in existence for twelve years.

¹⁷ Allied forces briefly raided communist sanctuaries in Cambodia in 1970 and in Laos in 1971 (Operation Lam Song 719).

¹⁸ Thayer, *War Without Fronts*, p. 87.

CASUALTIES: The human cost of the war in Iraq is small in comparison with that incurred during the Vietnam War, or even during the initial period of direct US involvement in ground combat operations. In 1966, the first full year of US ground operations in South Vietnam, 5,008 troops died in combat, for an average of 417 per month, or 13.72 per day. (American combat deaths increased to over 9,000 in 1967 and reached nearly 15,000 in 1968.) South Vietnamese forces suffered roughly 12,000 deaths, while allied force combat deaths exceeded 550.¹⁹

Figures 2 & 3: US Combat Fatalities One Year After Ground Combat Force Intervention



As of May 2004, US military fatalities in Iraq from all sources since the beginning of major combat operations stood at 816, with 591 combat casualties. If one discounts the period of conventional military operations, US military fatalities stand at 678, or an average of 52 per month, or 1.70 per day.²⁰

Put another way, US forces in Vietnam during this period suffered battle deaths at a rate over eight times greater than that being experienced thus far in Iraq. At this rate, *it would take over eight years for US casualties in Iraq to exceed those suffered in South Vietnam in 1966 alone.*²¹ And 1966 combat losses were mild in comparison of what was to come. It is worth noting that the casualty rate in Vietnam would nearly double over the next two years. Indeed, at the current combat death sustainment rates, *it would take over 73 years for US forces to incur the level of combat deaths suffered in the Vietnam War.*

The dramatically lower rate of US casualties being suffered in Iraq is remarkable also in that there are as yet no significant indigenous allied Iraqi forces to shoulder a major portion of the security responsibility, as there were

¹⁹ Southeast Asia Statistical Summary, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), April 11, 1973, pp. 1-9. Cited in Thayer, *War Without Fronts*, p. 105.

²⁰ See <http://www.icasualties.org/oif>

²¹ This would exceed the period of major US combat operations in South Vietnam, which ran from the spring of 1965 to 1971.

in South Vietnam. In 1966, for example, South Vietnamese forces suffered some 12,000 killed in action, a rate roughly 140 percent that of US forces.

According to one source, Iraqi civilian casualties since the end of major combat operations are estimated at 2,000-4,000.²² Civilian casualties during the Vietnam War are more difficult to discern. In 1967, the closest year to 1966 in which data was identified, over 48,000 South Vietnamese civilians died in hospitals as a result of wounds suffered as a result of the war.

But “actual civilian casualties were surely much higher,” perhaps by a factor of two.²³ Many civilian casualties were never admitted to hospitals. Many hospitals did not record all admissions. There were a significant number of other hospitals whose admissions records were not accessed (e.g., Catholic hospitals). A significant number of injured civilians likely sought help from local physicians or from doctors practicing traditional Chinese medicine. The most obvious omission concerns those civilians who were killed outright, and thus had no need of medical treatment. This has led to widely varying estimates of civilian casualties.²⁴

If we take the midpoint between estimates, then South Vietnamese civilian casualties in 1967 would have been roughly 72,000 and those in Iraq around 3,000. Thus civilian casualties suffered in Iraq are occurring at a rate that is twenty-four times lower than that experienced in Vietnam. If one measures casualties on a per capita basis, taking into account that Iraq’s population is roughly 50 percent greater than that of South Vietnam in 1966, then *the Iraqi casualty rate is but one-thirty-sixth that suffered in Vietnam in the first full calendar year of US ground combat operations.*²⁵

It is important to note that in both Vietnam and Iraq, the casualty figures do not differentiate between the source; i.e., whether US/allied forces inflicted the casualties, or the enemy. In both wars the enemy consciously sought to inflict casualties on civilians.

COST:

In budgetary terms, the war in Iraq has, to date, cost substantially less than the war in Vietnam. Congress has appropriated about \$100 billion to cover the cost of military operations in Iraq through the end of fiscal year 2004 (which ends on September 30th). By comparison, the Vietnam War cost about \$500

²² See www.iraqbodycount.net. This site is maintained by a group of academics and peace activists. Given the polemics associated with the site (e.g., “Civilian Deaths in ‘Noble’ Iraq Mission Pass 10,000”), it seems reasonable to conclude the data probably provides an upper limit on civilian casualties. The site does not differentiate between civilian casualties as caused by insurgent or Coalition forces. It estimates total civilian casualties since the onset of hostilities in March 2003 as somewhere between 9,300 and 11,200.

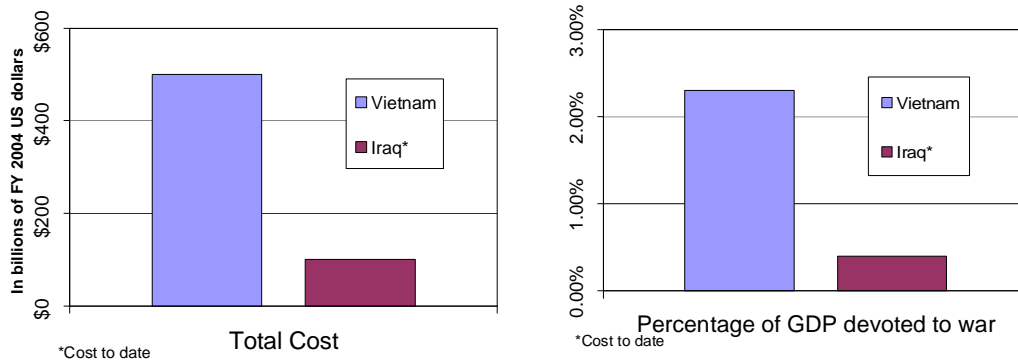
²³ Thayer, *War Without Fronts*, p. 125, 127-29.

²⁴ Casualty estimates for the period 1965-1972 range from just under 200,000 to over 400,000. Ibid.

²⁵ South Vietnam’s population in 1966 was slightly over 16 million; Iraq’s population is slightly over 24 million. Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 301.

billion (in today's dollars). Depending on how long US forces remain engaged in counterinsurgency operations in the country the cost of the war in Iraq would, of course, grow. However, at the current rate of expenditure—roughly \$50 billion annually—US forces would have to remain in Iraq in their present numbers for another eight years for costs to reach the level of the Vietnam War.

Figures 4 & 5: Economic Costs of the War



In evaluating the cost of the war in Iraq relative to Vietnam, it must also be recognized that the United States is a far richer country today than it was during the Vietnam War. The US economy is now more than two-and-one half times larger than it was in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War. In 1968, the United States spent the equivalent of about 2.3 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on the Vietnam War. By comparison, this year the cost of military operations in Iraq is projected to amount to some 0.4 percent of GDP.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The ongoing conflict in Iraq and the Vietnam War have several important similarities:

- § In both cases the United States confronted an enemy intent on pursuing a protracted conflict with an eye toward seizing power after the American military's departure. Both the Vietnamese Communists and Iraqi insurgents have employed tactics common to insurgent movements during their early stages, such as ambushes, assassinations, random acts of terror, kidnappings, and the use of mines and booby traps.
- § A significant coalition supported the United States' efforts. It is interesting that neither coalition approached the level of support found in America's major conventional wars of the 20th century; however, external allied representation in Iraq is quite similar to that of the Vietnam War, and by some measures, the level of participation in the current conflict is superior to that experienced in Vietnam.

Overall, however, the dissimilarities between Iraq and Vietnam are far more striking than their common characteristics:

- § The demographic and geographic differences between the two countries are striking.
- § The Vietnamese Communists pursued a rural-based insurgency, whereas the Iraqi insurgency is centered primarily in urban areas. In general, the former approach has offered a greater prospect for success than the latter in contemporary times.
- § US ground combat forces were introduced in Vietnam when the insurgency had achieved sufficient strength as to threaten the existence of the Saigon regime. The Iraqi insurgent movement is still in the early stages of insurgency warfare, and is in no position to forcibly overthrow the existing order in Iraq, as represented by the Coalition Provisional Authority or the interim government.
- § There is an enormous disparity in the size of enemy forces the US military confronted in Vietnam, as opposed to those they face in Iraq today. At roughly the same point following the introduction of US ground combat forces to Vietnam (the spring of 1965) and Iraq (the early spring of 2003)—that is to say, mid-1966 and mid-2004—the enemy forces confronted in Vietnam were an order of magnitude greater than those found in Iraq today. Moreover, the Vietnamese Communists operated as part of a unified, coherent command structure, were on average highly experienced, and were capable of conducting fairly sophisticated ground combat operations. Viewed in this way, the Iraqi insurgents do not merit serious comparison.
- § The United States currently has roughly 135,000 troops in Iraq a little over one year after their initial deployment. This is roughly one-third the troops the United States had in Vietnam at a comparable period after the deployment of ground combat forces in the spring of 1965.
- § The external support provided to the Vietnamese Communists was far greater than any such support being rendered to the Iraqi insurgents, whether measured in terms of manpower, military equipment, or economic assistance.
- § The human cost far greater in the Vietnam War than at a comparable period in the current conflict in Iraq. At the current combat death sustainment rates, it would take over 73 years for US forces to incur the level of combat deaths suffered in the Vietnam War. Iraqi civilian casualties, including those caused by insurgent activity, are only one-thirty-sixth those suffered in Vietnam in a comparable period following the introduction of major US ground combat forces.
- § The material cost was substantially greater in the Vietnam War than at a comparable period in the current conflict in Iraq. By one measure, the

cost to sustain current US operations in Iraq is less than half that required during the period of major US involvement in Vietnam.

In conclusion, the dissimilarities between the Vietnam and Iraq conflicts far outweigh their similarities.

This is not to say that the Vietnam War has no relevance to the ongoing conflict in Iraq. Nor does this imply the United States' goals can be easily accomplished in Iraq. What can be concluded is that, to date, the insurgency in Iraq is far less formidable than the one confronted in Vietnam. It also suggests that, due to today's much larger economy, the economic burden imposed on the United States by the conflict in Iraq is also likely to be much less than that imposed by the Vietnam War, even if the conflict lasts many more years.

As in the Vietnam War, the key to US perseverance will rest on the American peoples' calculation of whether, even at a reduced cost, the effort in Iraq is worth the sacrifice. It will be the Bush Administration's challenge to convince the US public not only that it is possible to defeat the present insurgency, but that such a victory is also likely to constitute a major step toward the creation of a free and democratic Iraq.

It is important to note that, unlike during the Vietnam War, the US military now relies exclusively on volunteers to fill its ranks. Thus public support for the war extends beyond public opinion polls and contributions to the treasury. A sufficient number of volunteers must be willing to commit to serve their country as members of the armed forces to sustain the war effort.²⁶

In the final analysis, much depends on how Washington chooses to employ its resources and the time frame over which it is able to sustain its efforts—in short, the strategy pursued. No matter how less challenging the Iraq insurgency appears when measured against America's Vietnam experience, or how low the relative costs, they will not offset a flawed strategy.

²⁶ Both of these subjects—the adequacy of the volunteer force and the choice of metrics—will be addressed in future essays.