

**“Iraq: The Vietnam War We Cannot Afford to Lose—  
ironic thoughts on Vietnam’s legacy”**

by

**Timothy J. Lomperis  
Saint Louis University**

**Paper presented at the Conference of Vietnam Veterans and Scholars on  
Examining the Myths of the Vietnam War**

**Boston, Mass  
July 29, 2004**

**Working draft: Not to be quoted or cited without appropriate attribution**

## **IRAQ: THE VIETNAM WAR WE CANNOT AFFORD TO LOSE**

**By**

**Timothy J. Lomperis**  
**Saint Louis University**

*“The public views this every day, Mr. Secretary [Rumsfeld], more and more like Vietnam.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.)*

### **Introduction**

If Iraq has become another Vietnam, then Iraq is the Vietnam War we cannot afford to lose. A crescendo of arguments support this thesis. First, I do acknowledge that statements like Senator Graham’s above illustrate that the association between Iraq and Vietnam has taken hold. Certainly, in part anyway, this is because, second, there are sobering factors of similarity that do tie these events together. Third, however, this linkage owes too much to the ghost of Vietnam than to its reality. As a ghost, Vietnam conveys an almost deliberately false image of total defeat that, in making a linkage to Iraq, is dangerously debilitating to the American mission in Iraq. Fourth, I say false because in reality Vietnam was not the terrible defeat conjured up by this ghost. I say dangerous, finally, because the wars in Vietnam and Iraq are strategically very different. Vietnam, for all its successes and failures, was a peripheral war to the fortunes of the larger Cold War. To the War on Terror, however, Iraq has become pivotal. In strategic terms, Vietnam was a war we could afford to lose, but Baghdad, in the strategic terms of the War on Terror, is as central to the outcome of this war as the fate of Berlin was to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Liz Sidoti, “Rumsfeld comes under attack...,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 24 June 2005, p. A1.

Cold War. Iraq, then, is a war we must win, and we cannot allow the danger of a false analogy to Vietnam bring us down.

Those of us who grew up in the Cold War faced two life-threatening dangers. One was nuclear war. This was obvious and always immediate. Everyone devoted their treasure, intellect, and strategizing to avoid it. When we avoided it in the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the world celebrated. One scholar even proclaimed it to be “the end of history.”<sup>2</sup>

But the other danger, an insidious one, was the aspirational deficit between the rich industrialized world’s prosperity that affronted the emerging, but still relatively impoverished, “Third World,” as the two parts uncomfortably joined in a globalizing world. One of the most spectacular eruptions of this “revolution of rising expectations” was the Vietnam War. In this struggle, the American intervention to bridge this deficit through “nation building” rather than “revolution” failed. But the effects of this failure were localized. For a while, it did not spread.

But it simmered on: in flickering apparitions in the West, and in new sources of angst in the Third World. The most virulent of these new “revolutions in rising expectations” arose in the 1980s among Islamic radicals who saw the failure to engage in a global *Jihad*, or Holy War, against Western infidels as a “neglected duty” of morally bankrupt Islamic regimes.<sup>3</sup> This duty, Osama bin Laden, and his *al Qaeda* organization, took up with a vengeance on 9/11. This aspirational deficit, then, detonated in New York

---

<sup>2</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *National Interest* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 3-16.

<sup>3</sup>The textbook explanation of the “revolution of rising expectations” is Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970). For the case of Islamic radicals against the West, see John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. ix-x, 73-85; and Michael G. Knapp, “Distortions of Islam by Muslim Extremists,” *Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin* 28, no. 3 (July-September 2002): 37-43.

and Washington, DC, and the world has been engulfed in an open global War on Terror ever since.

The world's initial unified response to these attacks, however, has been shaken by the subsequent and controversial war in Iraq. For some, namely the Neoconservatives and those supporting President George Bush, the war in Iraq was a pre-emptive strike to prevent a fusion of the two dangers of Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. To others—like the French, Germans, Russians, and American war opponents—the American assault on Iraq was a mistake, a deed of arrogant hubris, and has become a quagmire that is leading us to another Vietnam.

There it is: the split metaphor—Pearl Harbor versus the Gulf of Tonkin. Which is the true guide? I will argue that Iraq and Vietnam do conjure up many eerie parallels. Vietnam's murky Gulf of Tonkin does have its echoes in Baghdad, but so does the fiery inferno of Pearl Harbor and of World War II. Whichever the more apt metaphor, this time the stakes are more grave. Vietnam we could walk away from—and did. From Iraq, however, there is no complaisant or safe withdrawal. Iraq is the Vietnam War we cannot afford to lose.

### **The Ghost**

Every country has its ghost. Ghosts become visible when a country loses its way and becomes fearful that it is on some precipice of looming disaster. At just this moment of vulnerability, the ghost appears, and the fright is enough to scare the country either to tip over the edge or to run back in terror. For America, this ghost is Vietnam.

Vietnam has been America's ghost for a long time. In fact, it began to haunt us before the war was even over. As in Iraq today, many predicted that Vietnam would be a

disaster when the war was just in its infancy.<sup>4</sup> When it did become a real disaster, it only got worse. In places like The Congo, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, where Washington contemplated interventions after Vietnam, it had the effect of chilling America's "interventionist impulse." Indeed, it was former President Jimmy Carter who complained, after coming under heavy criticism for sending resupply aircraft to Congolese military forces in 1979, that "Not every instance of the firm application of power is a potential Vietnam."<sup>5</sup> For some on the left, this was a good thing. If Vietnam has succeeded in freezing America's interventionist impulses, then the Vietnam War has had a good consequence. Hence, although the U.S. did intervene in Nicaragua and El Salvador in the 1980s, these interventions were subject to such intense Congressional scrutiny and strictures that they became almost furtive ventures.<sup>6</sup> For those on the right, however, this was a terrible thing. In former President Richard Nixon's words, it had reduced the United States to a "pitiable, helpless giant," and he called on his countrymen to "purge ourselves of the Vietnam syndrome" because it has "tarnished our ideals, ...crippled our will, and turned us into a military giant and a diplomatic dwarf."<sup>7</sup>

But in world politics time is not frozen into paralysis. Inexorably, it marches on to other things. Exigencies of politics and crises of danger arise, and even pitiable giants

---

<sup>4</sup>As early as 1965, when U.S. combat units first set foot in Vietnam, a group of scholars issued their warnings of impending disaster. See Marvin E. Gettleman, ed., Vietnam: History, Documents, and Opinions on a Major World Crisis (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1965). Similarly on Iraq, a group of distinguished scholars have offered their opinions of a looming debacle. See Demetrious James Caraley, ed., American Hegemony: Preventive War, Iraq and Imposing Democracy (New York: The Academy of Political Science, 2004).

<sup>5</sup>"Arms Policy: Farewell to Nixon Doctrine," Washington Post, 13 December 1979, p. A33.

<sup>6</sup>For such a celebration of the American defeat in Vietnam, see Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh, eds., Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), pp. 49-80.

<sup>7</sup>Richard Nixon, No More Vietnams (New York: Arbor House, 1985), pp. 13, 212.

are still needed. In the United States, while most civilians wrung their hands over all these apparitions of Vietnam, the military in the 1980s was busy. It was busy exorcising this ghost from the nation's armed forces. After the humiliation of "Desert One" in Iran in 1980, these problems within the military, between it and civilian leaders, as well as difficulties between the military and the larger society came to sharp national attention.

This attention gave rise to a military reform movement that consisted of members from both parties in Congress, serving and retired military officers, and national security academics. Among these luminaries were Senators Gary Hart and Barry Goldwater, Congresspersons Bill Nichols and Pat Schroeder, Generals Brent Scowcroft and David Jones, Admiral William Crowe, and such academics as Sam Huntington, Joe Nye, and Vince Davis. The efforts of these reformers culminated in the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. Many of its provisions were specifically designed to free the military from the strictures of the Vietnam era. The most salient were a.) the end of the unanimity rule that had prevented each of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) from speaking freely before the political leadership, which now enabled the Chairman of the JCS to serve as the single military adviser to the president, and b.) the granting to the commanders of the separate military commands (the CINCS) actual command over their constituent units (as opposed to command being retained in the separate services). These measures increased the clout of military advice, went a long way to ending civilian interference in military management, and did much to put an end to the squabbles of command that so debilitated the Vietnam war effort.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>For elaboration of the changes effected by the Goldwater-Nichols Act, see James Locher, "Organization and Management," in Joseph Kruzal, ed., *American Defense Annual, 1988-89* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co., 1988), pp. 171-190. The most vicious of these Vietnam debates was between the Army (represented by General Westmoreland) and the Marines (led by the caustic General Walt) over

By the end of the decade of the 1980s, America's military establishment formed itself into a veritable *Wehrmacht* with a *blitzkrieg* strategy, which, in English, became known as the "AirLand Battle." Today we should note that this was also a military strategy primed for pre-emption. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein still saw an America mesmerized by its Vietnam ghost. In the fateful year of 1990, as Saddam plotted over what he could get away with, he was encouraged by American nightmares of Vietnam. He specifically warned the United States that intervention in the Persian Gulf would bring another Vietnam river of body bags.<sup>9</sup> His subsequent invasion of Kuwait in August shocked the American public, and, indeed, Vietnam's ghost made it quail. The votes in the House and Senate for war were extremely close, as Vietnam and Munich struggled for symbolic mastery of the American psyche: 250 to 183 in the House and 53 to 47 in the Senate.<sup>10</sup> Munich won, but barely.

In the triumph of this strategy in the Gulf War's *Desert Storm* over the mass-surrendering Iraqi forces, George H. W. Bush's exultations were more about Vietnam than about Iraq. "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all," he crowed.<sup>11</sup> But it was this same Vietnam Syndrome that drew him up short at the

---

control of U.S. forces in I Corps (the northern most sector in South Vietnam). See William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976); and Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1970).

<sup>9</sup>Timothy J. Lomperis, *From People's War to People's Rule: Insurgency, Intervention, and the Lessons of Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 4.

<sup>10</sup>Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), p. 168.

<sup>11</sup>Maureen Dowd, "A Renewed Bush Confronts Old Problems," *Raleigh (NC) News and Observer*, 2 March 1991, p. 1A.

Euphrates River. Across this river lay a crowded road to Baghdad, and to another Vietnam—and he shied away.<sup>12</sup>

Vietnam, then, was far from finished as a ghost. Its most spectacular incarnation was in Somalia in 1993. In the streets of Mogadishu, with two “Black Hawks down” and 18 Army Rangers dead, Bill Clinton chose to withdraw from Somalia entirely. This sharp episode was an eerie revisitation of the 1968 Tet Offensive of Vietnam. Though Tet was a massive military defeat for the communists, and even a destruction of their revolution, it was Lyndon Johnson who resigned his presidency over this offensive and began the slow drumbeat of troop withdrawals to final defeat in 1975.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in Mogadishu twenty-five years later, despite the fundamental success of the *Task Force Ranger* mission in capturing two key lieutenants of the warlord Mohammed Farrah Aidid (and rounding up 70 others), the eighteen U.S. casualties were too much for Clinton—even though this force of 99 American soldiers killed 500 Somalis and wounded another 1,000. The warlord’s forces, in fact, were decimated in this assault, and had used up all their inventory of RPGs (rocket propelled grenades), the basic weapon of the Somali armed factions. Indeed, in the first aftermath of the assault, arrangements were underway for the surrender of Aidid—arrangements that were hastily shelved with Clinton’s

---

<sup>12</sup>Timothy J. Lomperis, The War Everyone Lost—And Won: America’s Intervention in Vietnam’s Twin Struggles, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1993), p. xviii.

<sup>13</sup>The interpretation of the Tet Offensive has become the pivotal analytical controversy in the scholarship on the Vietnam War. This view that Johnson’s fundamental misprision of what was both a military and a *political* triumph for the American war effort, and that this tragically spawned the ultimate American defeat has been labeled *revisionist* in the historiography of the Vietnam War. See Robert A. Devine, “Vietnam Reconsidered,” Diplomatic History 12, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 79-93. I advance this revisionist point specifically about Tet in “Giap’s Dream, Westmoreland’s Nightmare,” Parameters 18, no. 2 (June 1988): 18-33. One well-argued counter work contends that Tet was not a turning point. It was just part of the inexorable communist path to victory. See Ronald H. Spector, After TET: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam (New York: The Free Press, 1993).

announcement.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, one person who drew inspiration from this American withdrawal was Osama bin Laden, who had furnished Aidid with weapons and training. In an interview in 1998, bin Laden proclaimed, “We are certain that we shall prevail over the Americans...[because] the Americans rushed out of Somalia in shame and disgrace.”<sup>15</sup> Somalia ranks as one of the ghost of Vietnam’s proudest achievements.

When global attention shifted to the Balkans in the mid-1990s and to Kosovo in particular in 1999, the impact of Vietnam had become more muted. But it persisted in the express reluctance to deploy any ground forces on the part of almost all parties to this airpower alone victory by the NATO alliance over Serbia. The theater commander, General Wesley Clark, ran into a wall of resistance to any consideration of a ground option from all quarters (except from British Prime Minister Tony Blair), including his own White House and Pentagon. References to Vietnam as a source of this opposition were frequent.<sup>16</sup>

9/11 banished all this. America had a more tangible, real ghost or monster to fear, and it was a flesh-and-blood person, Osama bin Laden. Also, the snarling plumes of black smoke rising from the twin towers of the World Trade Center looked a lot more like the black inferno that engulfed the battleship Arizona at Pearl Harbor than the murky mists of the Gulf of Tonkin. For a time, the ghost of Vietnam wafted into a cave to hibernate.

---

<sup>14</sup>Mark Bowden, Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999), pp. 32, 311, 327, 331, and 333.

<sup>15</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), p. 48.

<sup>16</sup>General Wesley K. Clark, Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), pp. 268-324, and 436-437.

Unfortunately, this hibernation has been brief. It has returned with a vengeance in Iraq. Typical of its legacy, in its renewed invocation, people are quarreling over it. Neoconservatives and supporters of the war deny its relevance and seek to banish it. To Richard Perle, Chairman of the Defense Policy Board and a leader in the neoconservative movement, the Saddam Hussein regime was “a house of cards” that would “collapse at the first whiff of gunpowder.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, there would be no Vietnam lurking in Baghdad. Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld’s deputy secretary of defense, also saw no Vietnam in Iraq. His advice to President Bush was reassuring, “There is nothing to stop you from seizing it.”<sup>18</sup> Bush’s more sober response, nevertheless, had more of World War II in it than of Vietnam: “Defeating two enemies is difficult, but we will do it.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite these denials, the antiwar movement has pounced on the Vietnam analogy. Its value to them is in the simple message it conveys: defeat. To just utter the word, “Vietnam,” conjures up the perfect image of defeat in the American psyche. To syndicated columnist Maureen Dowd, the June 28, 2004 transfer of power to the Allawi interim regime was an empty, bankrupt gesture. The hasty departure of L. Paul Bremer (the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority) from Baghdad’s Green Zone reminded her of the helicopter evacuation of the American Embassy in Saigon.<sup>20</sup> The very

---

<sup>17</sup>“Richard Perle: A house of cards,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 1 April 2003, p. B6.

<sup>18</sup>Woodward, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>20</sup>Maureen Dowd, “Transfer of power suggests there wasn’t any power to transfer,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2 July 2004, p. B7.

invocation of this image, of course, was a prediction. As a ghost, Vietnam has become a harbinger of defeat.<sup>21</sup>

### Similarities

To be sure, there is much about Iraq that is like Vietnam. It is the first American war since Vietnam that has become protracted, and Americans do not like long wars. The subsequent Powell Doctrine, developed in the 1980s, speaks well to this aversion. It goes something like this: assemble an overwhelming force, quickly overcome your opponents with a *blitzkrieg* of “shock and awe,” pronounce victory (“mission accomplished”), and come home.<sup>22</sup> Americans like to order up their wars short, and bloodless—like the short little wars in Grenada, Panama, and Kosovo; not like the drawn-out ones in Korea, Vietnam, and now Iraq.

As two “long wars,” unfortunately, there is much that Vietnam and Iraq share. I will just surface four similarities that I think are the most dangerous in their potential to turn Iraq into a defeat as well. First, like many of our other wars, in both Vietnam and Iraq we were tempted by illusions of our own omnipotence and by the seductive weakness of our intended targets. Fundamentally, this has meant that, blinded by our own geostrategic power, we took little notice of the domestic politics on the ground and ran into complex labyrinths. These political ambushes—and, indeed, military ones as

---

<sup>21</sup>One leading antiwar newspaper has summoned the Vietnam analogy to virtually all of its weekly editorials against the Iraq war. In one of the most recent examples, in decrying the rosily optimistic official statements of progress, the paper intones: “All of these remarks recall the ‘5 o’clock Follies’ that U.S. commanders used to hold every afternoon in Saigon. . . . Most of us remember how that one turned out.” See “Iraq: Fatigue sets in,” Saint Louis Post-Dispatch, 7 June 2005, p. D8.

<sup>22</sup>General Colin Powell first put his doctrine into practice in the “Just Cause” operation in Panama in 1989-1990. See Bob Woodward, The Commanders (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), pp. 166-171. The phrase, “shock and awe,” however, belongs to Donald Rumsfeld. See Woodward, Plan of Attack, p. 102.

well—led us to that swamp called “quagmire,” the breeding ground of Vietnam’s ghost.<sup>23</sup> Similar to Richard Perle’s optimism in Iraq, President Kennedy’s senior military advisor, General Maxwell Taylor, reassured his boss after a quick pre-war inspection of Vietnam: “As far as an area for the operation of U.S. troops, South Vietnam is not an excessively difficult or unpleasant place to operate. ...The risks of backing into a major war by way of South Vietnam...are not impressive.”<sup>24</sup>

Here we arrive at one of the most serious similarities between these two wars. As a second dangerous parallel, in both Vietnam and Iraq policymakers relied on their ideologies to motivate their interventions and steamroller over any contrary local politics. In his prize-winning account of the Vietnam War, Leslie Gelb comes to the final conclusion that it was the doctrine of containment that led us blindsidedly into a set of local politics not driven by a global need to contain communism. The ultimate lesson, to him, was not to approach international crises, and potential interventions, from deductive, ideological lenses, but to return to a basic on-the-ground pragmatism in assessing international problems.<sup>25</sup>

In the case of Iraq, we have committed errors of ideology on both sides. While this writer certainly supports the creation of a democratic government in Iraq, as does

---

<sup>23</sup>For a fuller discussion of these pitfalls, see Timothy J. Lomperis, “The Perils of Seduction: Intervention From the Other End,” The Journal of Conflict Studies 22, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 5-26.

<sup>24</sup>Neil Sheehan, comp., The Pentagon Papers as published by The New York Times (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), pp. 142-143.

<sup>25</sup>Leslie H. Gelb with Ricard K. Betts, The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1979), pp. 363-369. This theme is echoed by Paul M. Kattenburg, The Vietnam Trauma in American Foreign Policy, 1945-1974 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1980), pp. 45-62. Completely unbidden by me, this inductive, non-predetermined approach to international problems was the consensus choice as Vietnam’s central lesson for the war in Iraq in a senior undergraduate class I taught in the fall of 2003 on “Asymmetric Warfare in Two Eras: Vietnam and the Cold War Vs. Iraq and the War on Terror” at Saint Louis University.

public opinion in Iraq by large numbers, making the blithe assumption that Iraqis would universally welcome American forces as liberators on a German or Japanese model, as Bush Administration spokespersons clearly did, runs a deductive roughshod over the deep nationalist sensitivities in virtually all sectors of Iraqi society, whatever their ethnic and sectarian divisions.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, the mantra that the Iraq War was all about oil drilling rights for Vice President Dick Cheney's Halliburton conglomerate does not bear up under scrutiny.<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that the interventions in either Vietnam or Iraq were necessarily wrong, but it does suggest that interventions guided by more local political pragmatism would have moved on more felicitous paths. In Vietnam, such an approach would have sought to embrace broader political groupings into the South Vietnamese government than just cliques of generals.<sup>28</sup> In Iraq, it might have at least extended to more postwar planning than crowd control at exuberant parades. Actually, this is a little harsh. There certainly was such planning in Iraq, but the State Department and the Pentagon had conflictual visions over how to manage a democratic postwar transition, and this has not helped. President Bush attempted to coordinate this by putting his national security advisor, Condoleeza Rice, in charge of this planning and direction of the Coalition Provisional Authority.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup>For a good overview of these factors in Iraqi society, see Eric Davis, "Democracy's Prospect in Iraq," Foreign Policy Research Institute: E-Notes [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org) (Philadelphia, PA: 30 June 2004—accessed July 1, 2004, 2:29 pm), pp. 1-6. More thorough analyses are contained in Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); and Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2003).

<sup>27</sup>Michael Moore makes much of this connection in his documentary, "9/11."

<sup>28</sup>One of the best analyses of such a broad-based polity in South Vietnam is Samuel P. Huntington, "The Bases of Accommodation," *Foreign Affairs* 46, no. 4 (July 1968): 642-657.

<sup>29</sup>At issue is the ire of the State Department over the rise of the Campaign Planning Committee and Special Plans Office in the Pentagon headed by Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith that has

The third of these similarities is that in any long war, there is an ineluctable pressure to provide upbeat accounts from the front to shore up public support at home. The tip of this spear of pressure is on numbers; namely, to use optimistic numbers to show progress. But in both Vietnam and Iraq, these numbers can get the best of you. In Vietnam, the most devastating such moment came in the deliberations of the “wise men” during the Tet Offensive of 1968 over the request for an additional 206,000 troops to deal with the offensive. In running through Pentagon calculations of enemy casualty rates, Arthur Goldberg, one of the “wise” ones, noted that, at this rate, reported communist deaths should have brought communist troop strength to zero. The request was shelved, and President Johnson announced two weeks later that he was stepping down from the presidency.<sup>30</sup>

Because of this humiliation, the military vowed “never again.” Never again would it furnish numbers of enemy forces or casualties. There would be no more “body counts.” It stuck to this vow in Grenada, in Panama, even in the Gulf War, and in Kosovo. But this can be overdone. Numbers of enemy casualties in Somalia might have helped overcome a public feeling that the eighteen dead Army Rangers represented a debacle of arms. Knowing that this small task force of 99 soldiers killed and wounded over 1,000 Somalis, which the American public did not know, might have mitigated the

---

superseded State’s own Future of Iraq project. See Melanie Kirkpatrick, “Analyze This: Clear Ideas Versus Foggy Bottom,” Wall Street Journal, 5 August 2003, pp. 1-2 (Laurie Mylroie E-mail list, [saml1@erols.com](mailto:saml1@erols.com), accessed 8/6/03). A useful account of the steps and missteps taken during the tenure of the Coalition Provisional Authority is Larry Diamond, “What Went Wrong In Iraq,” Foreign Affairs 83, no. 5 (Sep/Oct 2004): 34-56. L. Paul Bremer, as the head of the CPA, has vigorously defended himself in My Year in Iraq (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

<sup>30</sup>David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1969), p. 794. For a closer look at the perils of the various sets of numbers used to show progress in Vietnam, see Chester L. Cooper, The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1970), pp. 422-425; and Lomperis, The War Everyone Lost—And Won, pp. 70-73.

perception of defeat. The same has become true in Iraq where the large numbers of guerrilla casualties suffered by the forces of the Shi'ite cleric Muktadar al-Sadr, for example, have not been reported, even as the daily U.S. casualty rates pulse across the wires eroding American will. And these same numbers have come to haunt us in Iraq. In an editorial in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the paper noted that a year ago the Pentagon reported an insurgent force in Iraq of 5,000. Over this past year (2003), the Pentagon reported killing or capturing nearly 20,000 insurgents. A year later (2004), in reporting substantial progress, it still said there were 5,000 insurgents. The editorial concluded, "The delusion continues."<sup>31</sup>

When numbers become "delusions," we reach the fourth and final unfortunate point of tangency between the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, the "credibility gap." It came to Lyndon Johnson with all these numbers and with his optimistic seeing of a "light at the end of the tunnel" and promises "to bring the boys home by Christmas." In November of 1967, on the eve of the Tet Offensive, his commanding general, William C. Westmoreland, returned from Vietnam to declare to the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., "we have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view."<sup>32</sup>

Now in Iraq, President Bush is under assault for two of his three arguments for the war: the imminent threat of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction and the linkage between *al Qaeda* and Saddam's regime, a linkage that would have given Osama bin Laden an even more devastating capability for follow-on attacks in the United States.

---

<sup>31</sup>"Iraq's Reconstruction: Dangerous, unpredictable," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2 July 2004, p. B6.

<sup>32</sup>Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 527.

The third point of the brutal tyranny of the Baathist regime itself remains unchallenged. With these weapons still not found more than two years after the American invasion of Iraq, a chorus of voices has arisen to protest that the public has been misled. As just one of these voices, former Missouri Senator Thomas Eagleton has exclaimed, “Deception, exaggeration, and pandering created our fiasco in Iraq.”<sup>33</sup> Al Gore has called the president a liar.<sup>34</sup> Since virtually all the world’s intelligence services have reported that Iraq did possess these weapons, and Baghdad never showed proof of destroying any of this reported inventory, this *casus belli* remains deeply unsettled.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, the question of the linkage between *al Qaeda* and Iraq persists in controversy. The 9/11 Commission has acknowledged connections between the two, and fairly significant ones at that, but has confidently asserted that there was no “operational” collaboration between *Al Qaeda* and Saddam Hussein in the 9/11 attacks.<sup>36</sup> Douglas Feith, the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, and the independent Iraq scholar Laurie Myroie, a former Clinton advisor in his 1992 campaign, on the other hand, both insist

---

<sup>33</sup>Thomas F. Eagleton, “What do we say to the Mothers,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 22 July 2004, p. B7.

<sup>34</sup>“Gore Says Bush Lied,” The Washington Post, 25 June 2004 (Washingtonpost.com, accessed July 7, 2004)

<sup>35</sup>The reports from the various intelligence commissions of inquiry—the Senate Intelligence Committee, the 9/11 Commission, and the Butler Commission in England—are not likely to settle these disputes. The first two commissions are rather critical of the adequacy of the intelligence supporting the war, but the Butler Commission is more supportive. In a bizarre twist to these reports, one of the chief “factoids” that Bush has been criticized for in “misleading” the Congress, the country, and the world was the “false” reports of Iraq seeking uranium from Niger. Both the Butler Commission and the Senate Intelligence Committee are now conceding that these reports are actually “well-founded.” See Jonathan S. Landay and James Kuhnenn, “Prewar intelligence wrong, panel says,” The Charlotte (NC) Observer, 10 July 2004, pp. 1A, 4A; James Kuhnenn, “Report disputes assertions about uranium deal,” The Charlotte (NC) Observer, 10 July 2004, p. 4A; and William Safire, “Uranium claim warrants closer inspection,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 20 July 2004, p. B7.

<sup>36</sup>Terence Hunt, “9/11 Panel Says ‘We Are Not Safe’,” Netscape News with CNN, 22 July 2004, p. 4 (<http://www.cnn.netscape.com.com/n>, Accessed 7/22/04 10:15 pm).

that there is a deep history of links that possibly includes the Iraqi financing of the 9/11 attacks through a hand-off of funds in Prague shortly before the attacks.<sup>37</sup>

As a passing comment, it does not seem off the mark to note that this pattern of connections, albeit not yet building up to “operational” collaboration, does constitute what President Bush called a “gathering danger” in his September 12, 2002 speech before the United Nations.<sup>38</sup> Included in the long list of connections between Iraq and *al Qaeda* catalogued by the 9/11 Commission was a meeting in 1998 in which *al Qaeda* representatives requested weapons of mass destruction from the Iraqis. Then, Iraq refused. Earlier, Iraq had offered asylum to bin Laden, when he had to leave Sudan. He opted for Afghanistan instead.<sup>39</sup> Although no weapons of mass destruction have yet been found in Iraq, the Duelfer Report of the Pentagon’s Iraq Study Group did uncover an extensive laboratory effort to develop an aerosol version of the deadly toxin risin.<sup>40</sup> The sword-of-Damocles question hanging over these missed connections is: absent the U.S. intervention in Iraq, what if a second *al Qaeda* request of Iraq for risin had been successful?

If, in the face of this “gathering danger,” President Bush had done nothing about Iraq, and a second terrorist strike had fallen on American shores, this time with the

---

<sup>37</sup>Stephen F. Hayes, “The U.S. government’s secret memo distilling cooperation between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden,” Weekly Standard 9, no. 11, pp. 1-3. (Posted on Drudge at: <http://www.drudgereport.com/flash32.htm>. Accessed 11/17/03, 12:35 pm); and Laurie Mylroie, Bush Vs. The Beltway: How the CIA and the State Department Tried to Stop the War on Terror (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), pp. 68-75.

<sup>38</sup>“Excerpts from President Bush’s speech at the United Nations,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 13 September 2002, p. A9.

<sup>39</sup>The 9/11 Commission Report, pp. 61, 64-67.

<sup>40</sup>Richard Spertzel, “Have War Critics Even Read the Duelfer Report?” The Wall Street Journal, 14 October 2004. [Laurie Mylroie [sam11@erols.com](mailto:sam11@erols.com) 14 October 2004. Iraq News Note]. (20 October 2004).

footprints of an Iraqi- *al Qaeda* collaboration more explicit, given the scapegoating obsessions of both the Senate Intelligence investigations and of the 9/11 Commission, George Bush surely would have been impeached. In this 9/11 War on Terror era, as opposed to the defensive Containment Policy of the Cold War, prudence—even caution—would have counseled a pre-emptive attack on Iraq. Indeed, in his opening remarks in the public presentation of the 9/11 Commission Report, Lee Hamilton, the Democratic co-chair, declared, “After 9/11, we need to go on the offense.”<sup>41</sup> It can certainly be argued that this is precisely what the president did. As British Prime Minister Tony Blair explained, in justifying his support for President Bush in Iraq, “What happened for me after Sept. 11 is that the balance of risk changed.”<sup>42</sup>

It is like the controversial ambiguity of the Gulf of Tonkin all over again. In August of 1964, Lyndon Johnson asked for, and received, an overwhelming set of votes in both Houses of Congress authorizing the President to take whatever actions necessary to secure the peace in Southeast Asia, “including the use of armed force,” in response to a set of night time attacks on US Navy destroyers by North Vietnamese PT boats. Whether these attacks, as a *casus belli*, even took place remained mired in controversy all the way until 1996, when Edwin Moise a prominent Vietnam War historian, definitively concluded that the first attack *did* take place, but the second one did not.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Errant Ghost**

---

<sup>41</sup>Congressperson Lee Hamilton, “9/11 Commission Report with Scott Simon,” National Public Radio, 23 July 2004 (St. Louis, MO, KWMU).

<sup>42</sup>Cited by Patrick Quinn, “Blair backs Bush,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 30 June 2005, p. A2.

<sup>43</sup>Two of the most prominent books in this controversy are Joseph C. Goulden, Truth is the First Casualty: The Gulf of Tonkin Affair—Illusion and Reality (Chicago: Rand-McNally, 1969); and Eugene G. Windchey, Tonkin Gulf (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971). Because of his access to previously classified materials, Professor Moise was able to “settle” this dispute. See Edwin Moise, Tonkin Gulf: The Escalation of the Vietnam War (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

With two of the three arguments for the Iraq War mired in controversy, antiwar opponents have summoned the ghost of Vietnam to deliver this war its deathblow. As a talisman of defeat, Vietnam is advanced as proof positive that America cannot win “Third World Wars.” To invoke Vietnam is to project lists of failures from that war that appear to apply to whatever new war is in question. Recently, Christian Appy published his list, in a featured article in The Chronicle of Higher Education titled “The ghosts of War”:

We failed for many reasons, but mostly because the non-Communist government we supported never had the widespread support of its own people and because our military policies, which included the dropping of more bombs than have ever been dropped on any country and the ultimate killing of at least two million Vietnamese, only served to stiffen opposition to our intervention.<sup>44</sup>

From all the numerous such invocations of Vietnam, I have focused on Appy’s here because his is the only one to explicitly invoke Vietnam as a “ghost.” For Appy, of course, this invocation serves as a negative scare tactic. It is instructive, then, to see what

---

<sup>44</sup>Christian G. Appy, “The Ghosts of War,” The Chronicle of Higher Education, sec. B, 9 July 2004, p. B12. From all the numerous such invocations of Vietnam, I have focused on Appy’s because he is the only one to invoke Vietnam as a ghost, as I have done in my earlier writings on Vietnam. For Appy, of course, this reference serves as a negative scare tactic. It is instructive, then, to see what about Vietnam he surfaces as a clairvoyant message for a similar defeat in Iraq.

<sup>45</sup> Other recent invocations of the Vietnam analogy for Iraq are Bartholomew Sullivan, “The Road from Tet to Fallujah—Vietnam, Iraq: How Alike Are They?” The Commercial Appeal (Memphis, TN), 30 May 2004, p. B3; William B. Bader, “From Vietnam to Iraq: Pretext and Precedent,” International Herald Tribune (Washington), 28 August 2004, p. 8; Stanley I. Kutler, “Why have we landed in Vietnam again,” Wisconsin State Journal (Madison, Wis.), 5 September 2004, p. B2; and Scott Kraus, “Disabled vet, former lawmaker campaigns for Kerry in Whitehall; Max Cleland says Iraq is developing into another Vietnam War,” The Morning Call (Allentown, PA), 18 September 2004, p. A2. A positive reference to Vietnam is Jules Crittenden, “Vietnam, Iraq are battles in long struggle for freedom,” The Boston Herald, 30 May 2004, p. O25. Another explicit, and more thorough, consideration of the parallels between Iraq and Vietnam, mostly to carefully reject them (as does this article) is Jeffrey Record,

about Vietnam he highlights as a clairvoyant warning for similar defeat in Iraq.<sup>45</sup> These lists, of course, offer inspiration to the Baathist insurgents and *Al Qaeda* bombers in Iraq even as they urge Americans, once again, to quit. But to invoke this ghost of the past today simply no longer works. To begin with, these lists—that have become an almost sacred “received wisdom” of defeat—are wrong. Further, and more critically, this time we cannot quit. Vietnam has been superseded in Iraq by a more powerful metaphor.

There is no denying that it was fleeing American civilians who were plucked from the rooftop of the American Embassy in Saigon that April day in 1975. We were defeated. But we were not defeated for the reasons that gave birth to Vietnam’s errant ghost. For one thing, in all the lists of failures, none of them cites Vietnam as a military defeat for the United States. By the time Saigon fell, American forces had been out of Vietnam for two years. Also, contrary to what was implied in Mr. Appy’s statement, the bombing was not responsible for the two million deaths. Most of the bombing fell in support of combat operations in South Vietnam. Another third of the tonnage was directed at troop movements and supply convoys along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. For all the publicity of the bombing in North Vietnam, total casualties in the North were only 65,000 of this two million total.<sup>46</sup>

But, even as Harry Summers has conceded, this war was not decided on the battlefield<sup>47</sup> (at least not until the ignominious end in 1975). What is surprising is that, despite Mr. Appy’s statement, a lot had been accomplished politically in South Vietnam.

---

<sup>46</sup>For further breakdowns of the bombing in Indochina, see Lomperis, *From People’s War to People’s Rule*, pp. 260, 261, and 402. The figure of 65,000 is taken from the careful estimates of Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 451.

<sup>47</sup>He tells the story of the North Vietnamese officer who acknowledged that his forces had not won a single battle against American troops, but then said that this was “irrelevant.” See Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1984), p. 21.

A Constitutional Assembly was popularly elected in 1966. Local and national legislative elections were held. President Nguyen Van Thieu won two national presidential elections, one in 1967 and one in 1971. None of this occurred without problems or controversies, but South Vietnam did have its own non-communist political system in place. In the face of a continued communist insurgency and two massive invasions from North Vietnamese conventional armed forces (one in 1968 and one in 1972), it did require sustaining American support.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, as has been mentioned earlier, this whole system delivered a stinging defeat to communist guerrilla forces in the Tet Offensive of 1968. More than a military defeat, the Saigon government and U.S. forces essentially destroyed the communist insurgency. Its infrastructure was decimated. As a revolution, the communist cause was lost in Tet.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the official communist Vietnamese account of the war conceded the significant failings of this assault, while gratefully acknowledging that the offensive turned the tide for the American antiwar movement. For example, this account admitted: “our preparations...were insufficient...We were subjective in our assessments...of the mass political forces in the urban areas...Our plan for military attacks was too simplistic...[and] the battle did not progress favorably for our side.”<sup>50</sup> When U.S. and South Vietnamese forces beat back a subsequent fully conventional North Vietnamese invasion in 1972, the follow-on Paris Peace Agreement

---

<sup>48</sup>A thorough and balanced assessment of the extensive nation building efforts in South Vietnam is Allan E. Goodman, Politics in War: The Bases of Political Community in South Vietnam (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973).

<sup>49</sup>For further support of this “revisionist” argument from a leading scholar of Asian revolution, see Chalmers Johnson, Autopsy on People’s War (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1973).

<sup>50</sup>The Military Institute of Vietnam, Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), p. 224.

of 1973 represented an opportunity for a stable political and military arrangement in the South. U.S. forces had honorably fulfilled their mission.

But over two short years after the U.S troop withdrawals, the American public and Congress tired of the war that continued on in South Vietnam. Congress blocked the use of air power in Cambodia in 1973 and “legislated a ban” on any further U.S. combat role in Indochina in 1974.<sup>51</sup> President Nixon, crippled by the Watergate scandal, lost all political capital for independent executive action. His successor, Gerald Ford, was unable to bestir the American public, and arouse a Congress in an Easter recess, to stage any kind of rescue of a crumbling Saigon regime to a relentless final communist “shock and awe” offensive in March and April of 1975. This collapsed American resolve was the ultimate domino that fell from the embassy roof in Saigon.<sup>52</sup>

It was an ironic end because, as we have seen in the Gulf War, Kosovo, and Iraq, “shock and awe” has become an American specialty. As I concluded in an earlier work on Vietnam:

Thus, in losing a people’s war, the communists went on to win the war itself. But in adopting a conventional war strategy, they won by a means they should have lost. The United States, on the other hand, won a war it thought it lost, and lost by default what it could have won.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup>Gelb, The Irony of Vietnam, p. 351.

<sup>52</sup>As Leslie Gelb concluded: “U.S. politics—public support and opposition to the war—was to be the key stress point... Thus American public opinion was the essential domino.” See Ibid., p. 332.

<sup>53</sup>Lomperis, The War Everyone Lost—And Won, p. 176.

By this I meant that the communist revolutionary strategy of people's war was destroyed in the defeat of communist forces in the Tet Offensive of 1968. Southern guerrillas were decimated. When the communists rebuilt their forces afterwards, they were reconstituted primarily from North Vietnamese soldiers who came south as conventional military units. It was these conventional forces that mounted the successful offensive of 1975, not the revolutionary guerrillas who rose up at Tet. Thus, as a revolution, the communist insurgency had been defeated. It won in 1975 only as one conventional army overwhelming another conventional army. The United States never gave itself credit for defeating this revolution, and certainly could have thwarted this conventional communist victory. This was its "default." What was supposed to have been so compelling about Vietnam in communist iconography was how a national revolutionary movement overcame the conventional forces of the capitalist superpower. But the Viet Cong revolution was, in fact, destroyed, and the conventional forces that were defeated, thanks to Congressional prescriptions, were not American.<sup>54</sup>

The failure of Vietnam, then, did not lie in any of the lists invoked by the antiwar community. At root, the defeat in Vietnam was a self-inflicted wound. It is this that has made it fester for so long, and turned the legacy of this war into a nightmare, and such an intimidating ghost. In fact, then, Vietnam was not much of a defeat, and has become a very mistaken ghost.

### **Conclusion: Dispelling the Ghost**

Beyond Vietnam being a mistaken ghost, there is a very big difference between Vietnam and Iraq. In a seminal article on military interventions in countries like Vietnam, Andrew Mack termed these conflicts "asymmetric." By this he meant that for

---

<sup>54</sup> These are the points I set forth in "Giap's Dream, Westmoreland's Nightmare," pp. 18-33.

the target society, the war was the central and single fact of its national existence. For the intervening state, however, there were two arenas to the war: the one in the target society to be sure, but there was also the second arena in the home society of the intervening state. What made these conflicts asymmetric was that the war was total for the target society, but was not for the intervening state. In fact, “why big nations lose small wars” lay in the dynamic of the dilemma that the more vigorously the intervention was prosecuted, the more likely it would sap the political will in the home society; but, the less the intervener did because of this, the more likely it would lose.<sup>55</sup> This, of course, is why the American public was, and is, the ultimate domino.

The difference is simply this: Vietnam, and the other interventions of the Cold War, were ventures we could safely abandon. We could leave the target a wreck in terms of Secretary of State Colin Powell’s pottery barn metaphor without suffering any consequences at home. After all, the falling dominoes of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos did not follow us home.<sup>56</sup> As Niall Ferguson has observed, “Americans themselves were able to walk away from [this] wreckage of ‘containment’...[because] From the point of view of American national security, Communists in developing countries proved to be relatively harmless.”<sup>57</sup> In any defeat or withdrawal from Iraq, however, we will face consequences at home. In Iraq, there is another analogy operating besides Vietnam; namely, Pearl Harbor. 9/11 is the Pearl Harbor of the Twenty-First Century. Both events

---

<sup>55</sup> Andrew J.R. Mack, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict,” *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (January 1975): 175-201.

<sup>56</sup>In tracing why these dominoes fell, but not others, see George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Random House, 1986), pp. 268-272.

<sup>57</sup>Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 107. I have taken the liberty of reversing the two clauses of the second sentence.

ignited world wars. In this world war, as President Bush correctly warned, there are no safe harbors—not even in the United States.

Whether the invasion of Iraq was a mistake leading to a quagmire like Vietnam, in terms of the controversy surrounding the rationale for the war, is now a *tactical* matter (on the order of, say, whether it was a mistake for the British to invade Gallipoli in World War I, or whether the U.S. should have opened up a second front in Europe earlier in World War II, or would it have been better to have invaded the Japanese homeland rather than resort to the atomic bomb). However interesting these tactical questions are (and the studies that flow from these questions are endless), the plain truth is that Iraq has been *strategically* engulfed by the War on Terror.<sup>58</sup> At the start of this war, the regime of Saddam Hussein did harbor congeries of terrorists as, for example, the Abu Nidal network, the group responsible for the *Achillo Laurio* hijacking, cells of the Hezbollah organization that operated in Lebanon, and an enclave of *Anser al-Islam* (an *al Qaeda* affiliate) in Northern Iraq.

In the current fighting in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian confederate of Osama bin Laden, has joined the fray full force.<sup>59</sup> Zarqawi trained in Afghanistan with bin Laden, and was one of the terrorists on the lam under Saddam Hussein's protection at

---

<sup>58</sup>By referring to these objections to the war as *tactical*, I do not intend to be dismissive of the antiwar case against the Bush Administration. In moral terms, the President's failure to demonstrate an imminent threat from Saddam Hussein and to show an operational linkage between Iraq and the 9/11 attacks themselves, despite strong rhetoric that asserted this threat and linkage anyway, has certainly given Bush a credibility problem reminiscent of that of President Lyndon Johnson over Vietnam. Recent reports from the "Downing Street Memo" that President Bush had been planning for a war at least since the summer of 2002, while claiming that the decision to war came only as a last resort, would not be the scandal that it has risen to in some quarters, if he had been more forthright, that is, more qualified at the least, in this rhetoric. See "Democrat plans forum on war memo," Saint Louis Post-Dispatch, 16 June 2005, p. A14.

<sup>59</sup>For a profile of Zarqawi that makes clear his "operational" linkage with *al Qaeda*, see Jeffrey Gettleman, "Zarqawi's Journey: From Dropout to Prisoner to an Insurgent Leader in Iraq," The New York Times, 13 July 2004, p. A8. For a full biography, see Jean-Charles Brisard, Zarqawi (NY: Other Press, 2005).

the time of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Along with Baathist regime remnants, Zarqawi leads the foreign fighter contingent of the Iraqi insurgency. In October, 2004, Zarqawi proclaimed his fealty to Osama bin Laden, professing that he is “the best leader for Islam’s armies against all infidels and apostates.”<sup>60</sup> In December 2004, bin Laden accepted Zarqawi’s pledge, “We have been pleased that they responded to God’s and his prophet’s order for unity, and we in al-Qaeda welcome their unity with us.”<sup>61</sup>

This strategic fusion, or operational linkage, when viewed from the other side, makes Baghdad the ultimate prize of this now joined “double war.” For Osama bin Laden, final victory lies in the glorious restoration of the Muslim Empire, whose fabled capital was the “Caliphate of Baghdad.” President Bush, on the other hand, seeks to slay this terrorist dragon through the death ray of a democratic beacon from this same Baghdad. In this post 9/11 War on Terror, what Eliot Cohen has called World War IV,<sup>62</sup> Baghdad has become the Berlin of this new epic struggle. Unlike Vietnam, then, Iraq is the pivot, not the periphery.

What was asymmetrical in Vietnam has become symmetrical in Iraq. There were two separate arenas to the war in Vietnam. By the collapse of American will in Vietnam, the American intervention was lost—“over there.” But Iraq’s analogously nebulous Gulf of Tonkin origins were preceded by the vividly clear Pearl Harbor of 9/11—“over here.” The dominoes in New York and Washington, D.C. fell at the beginning. There is no

---

<sup>60</sup>Rawya Rageh, “Militant group vows loyalty to bin Laden,” Saint Louis Post-Dispatch, 18 October 2004, p. A1.

<sup>61</sup>“Tape, apparently from bin Laden, praises leader of insurgents in Iraq,” Saint Louis Post-Dispatch, 26 December 2004, p. A2.

<sup>62</sup>Cited in Ashley J. Tellis, “Assessing America’s War on Terror: Confronting Insurgency, Cementing Primacy,” NBR Analysis 15, no. 4 (December 2004): 63.

“over there” to this war. In this war of pre-emption, rather than the containment lines of the Cold War in Europe; the defense lines of Boston, in this war, lie in Baghdad. From Saigon, there still stirs the haunting ghost of the memory of a collapsed American will. This ghost, however, must be dispelled because Iraq has become the Vietnam War we cannot afford to lose. “Staying the course,” means seeing this war through to some form of homegrown representative government in Baghdad.<sup>63</sup> It is only through such a frontal, up-the-middle campaign that terrorism can be dried up, and the false ghosts of defeat from Vietnam, that still swirl around us, banished.

As part of the global “revolution of rising expectations,” the ultimate defeat of the fertile terrorist breeding ground of the impoverished and radicalizing “Arab street” lies in an uplifting democratic beacon from Baghdad that can deflect bullets into ballots, warrior mercenaries into peaceful entrepreneurs, and the struggle of *jihad* back from the streets of violence into the hearts of faithful Muslims who follow the Holy *Quran*, and not heretical *fatwas*.

---

<sup>63</sup> In what is still a cogent analysis of the sources of political legitimacy in the Arab world, Michael Hudson makes a strong case for the importance of instituting processes of accommodation to representative institutions in ways that incorporate features of traditional political cultures. His warning is that it will be a slow, but not impossible, journey because of what he terms the “mosaic” feature of Arab society (pulled between conflicting forces of traditional resistance and the attractions of modernization). See Michael C. Hudson, Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 7-30.