

We're Fighting Not to Lose

Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Washington Post*, January 14, 2007

Iraq is not Vietnam, yet history seems intent on harnessing them together. Three years ago this seemed an unlikely pairing; surely President Bush would not take the United States down the same trail as Lyndon B. Johnson. Yet even though Iraq's story is far from complete, each day raises the odds that the U.S. fate in Iraq could eventually be the same as it was in Vietnam -- defeat.

The differences are clear. The policy consensus over the Vietnam War ran deeper and lasted longer than on the Iraq conflict. While Johnson and his advisers slogged deeper into Vietnam with realistic pessimism, Bush and his colleagues plunged ahead in Iraq with reckless optimism. And in Vietnam, U.S. leaders made most of their mistakes with their eyes wide open, while it is impossible to fathom exactly what the Bush team thought it was doing after the fall of Baghdad.

Twenty-eight years ago, we wrote a book, "The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked," which argued that although U.S. policy in that war was disastrous, the policymaking process performed just as it was designed to. It seems odd that a good system could produce awful results, but the subsequent declassified documents and the public record showed it to be true. U.S. officials generally had accurate assessments of the difficulties in Vietnam, and they looked hard at the alternatives of winning or getting out.

On Iraq the insider documents are not available, but journalistic accounts suggest that Bush's policy process was much less realistic. The president did not take seriously the obstacles to his goals, did not send a military force adequate to accomplish the tasks, failed to plan for occupation and took few steps to solve the underlying political conflicts among Iraqis.

Despite these different paths, Bush now faces Johnson's dilemma, that of a war in which defeat is unthinkable but victory unlikely. And Bush's policy shift last week suggests that he has come to the same conclusion as Johnson: Just do what you can not to lose and pass the problem on to your successor.

In both cases, despite talk of "victory," the overriding imperative became simply to avoid defeat.

How did these tragedies begin? Although hindsight makes many forget, the Vietnam War was backed by a consensus of almost all foreign-policy experts and a majority of U.S. voters. Until late in the game, opponents were on the political fringe. The consensus rested on the domino theory -- if South Vietnam fell to communism, other governments would topple. Most believed that communism was on the march and a worldwide Soviet-Chinese threat on the upswing.

The consensus on Iraq was shallower and shorter-lived. Bush may have been bent on regime change in Baghdad from the start, but in any case a consensus emerged among his

advisers that Saddam Hussein was on the verge of securing nuclear weapons capability -- and that deterrence and containment would not suffice. That judgment came to be shared by most of the national security community. Congress also saluted early on. The vote to endorse the war was less impressive than the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which passed almost unanimously, but many Democrats signed on to topple Hussein for fear of looking weak.

As soon as the war soured, the consensus crumbled. Without the vulnerability of middle-class youth to conscription, and with the political left in a state of collapse since Ronald Reagan's presidency, the antiwar movement on Iraq did not produce sustained mass protests as Vietnam did by the late 1960s. But the sentiment shows up just as clearly in the polls.

Consensus held longer over Vietnam because few in or out of the government had ever expected a quick and easy resolution of the war. Officials knew what they were up against -- the force of nationalism embodied by Ho Chi Minh, and a succession of corrupt, inefficient and illegitimate South Vietnamese governments. Officials usually put on a brave face, but they understood that Washington was in for the long haul. In the Bush administration, by contrast, a gap opened almost immediately between senior political leaders on one side, and most military and diplomatic professionals as well as the media on the other. The steady optimism of the former in the face of the reporting of the latter quickly undid public confidence in the Pentagon's and White House's leadership.

By 1968, Johnson understood that victory was not in the cards at any reasonable price, but that defeat would be catastrophic. The war had reached a deteriorating stalemate. If victory were possible, it would require all-out use of military force against North Vietnam, a move that the administration believed ran the risk of war with the Soviet Union and China. If the United States were defeated, however, the dominos would fall, and one of those dominos would be the occupant of the White House. Periodically, top officials concluded that events in Vietnam had taken another turn for the worse, and to prevent defeat they had to dispatch more troops and do more bombing -- and so the steady escalation proceeded without lasting effect on the balance of power in Vietnam.

Constrained against achieving victory or accepting defeat, Johnson and his aides chose to do the minimum necessary to get through each crunch in Vietnam and at home, hoping that something would turn up to save them. In the end, Johnson made the ultimate political sacrifice and declined to run for reelection. But as he announced a halt of the bombing and the offer of negotiations with Hanoi, he also increased the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam. Even as he was leaving office, he had no intention of being "the first American president to lose a war."

By contrast, Bush never had to worry that escalation would bring an all-out global war; the United States is the world's sole superpower. Nonetheless, until last week, he never chose to increase the combat commitment significantly; the "surge" announced last week is but the latest experiment with a temporary increase in forces. At the beginning this was

probably because he did not believe more troops were needed to win. As the venture went bad, the volunteer army was stretched too thin to provide an option for massive escalation. But now it is clear that Bush does not believe he can possibly win with anything close to the number of forces currently committed. The president certainly perceives the risks of losing, and at this moment of truth, he is repeating Johnson's decision pattern -- doing the minimum necessary not to lose.

Whatever the similarities in the way Washington dealt with Vietnam and Iraq, there were few similarities between the two wars themselves. Vietnam was both a nationalist war against outside powers -- first the French, then the Americans -- and a civil war. In Iraq, the lines of conflict are messier. The main contest is the sectarian battle between Arab Shiites and Arab Sunnis. The Kurds, so far, are mostly bystanders, while the Americans struggle to back a weak yet balky government they hope can remain a secular alternative.

Combat in Vietnam was a combination of insurgency and conventional warfare, and the conventional element played to U.S. strengths. By contrast, Washington's massive firepower advantages are nullified in Iraq because the fighting remains at the level of guerrilla warfare and terrorism. Iraq is harder for our military than Vietnam was, yet we eventually had 540,000 troops in Vietnam compared with barely a quarter of that number in Iraq. The current U.S. footprint in Iraq is much smaller -- only about one-tenth the density of U.S. and allied forces per square mile in South Vietnam at the height of U.S. involvement, and with an Iraqi population 50 percent larger than South Vietnam's. Consequently, the security situation was never as bad in Vietnam as it is in Iraq today. In Vietnam, Americans could travel most places day and night, while in Iraq it is dangerous to leave the Green Zone. Even Bush's planned 21,500-troop increase will not make a lasting difference if the host government does not become far more effective. As in Vietnam after the Tet Offensive of 1968, the enemy can lie low until we stand down. In both countries, U.S. forces worked hard at training national armies. This job was probably done better in Vietnam, and the United States certainly provided South Vietnamese troops with relatively better equipment than they have given Iraqis so far. South Vietnamese forces were more reliable, more effective and far more numerous than current Iraqi forces are.

In both cases, however, the governments we were trying to help proved inadequate. Unlike their opponents, neither Saigon nor Baghdad gained the legitimacy to inspire their troops. At bottom, this was always the fundamental problem in both wars. Americans hoped that time would help, but leaders such as South Vietnam's Nguyen Van Thieu and Iraq's Nouri al-Maliki were never up to the job.

Americans have not stopped arguing about Vietnam -- about whether the war could have been won if fought differently, or was an impossible task from the outset, or about who was to blame. Hawks claim that the United States could have won in Vietnam if the military had been allowed to fight without restraint. Supporters of the war in Iraq say that the United States could have prevented the resistance if it had been better prepared for occupation after the fall of Baghdad. Doves in both cases say that the objectives were never worth any appreciable price in blood and treasure.

After Vietnam, recriminations over failure became a never-healed wound in American politics. Now Iraq is deepening that wound. With some luck, Washington may yet escape Baghdad more cleanly than it did in the swarms of helicopters fleeing Saigon in 1975. But even if the United States is that fortunate, the story of the parallel paths to disaster should be chiseled in stone -- if only to avoid yet another tragedy in a distant land, a few decades down the road.

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Unity Through Autonomy in Iraq

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A decade ago, Bosnia was torn apart by ethnic cleansing and facing its demise as a single country. After much hesitation, the United States stepped in decisively with the Dayton Accords, which kept the country whole by, paradoxically, dividing it into ethnic federations, even allowing Muslims, Croats and Serbs to retain separate armies. With the help of American and other forces, Bosnians have lived a decade in relative peace and are now slowly strengthening their common central government, including disbanding those separate armies last year.

Now the Bush administration, despite its profound strategic misjudgments in Iraq, has a similar opportunity. To seize it, however, America must get beyond the present false choice between "staying the course" and "bringing the troops home now" and choose a third way that would wind down our military presence responsibly while preventing chaos and preserving our key security goals.

The idea, as in Bosnia, is to maintain a united Iraq by decentralizing it, giving each ethno-religious group — Kurd, Sunni Arab and Shiite Arab — room to run its own affairs, while leaving the central government in charge of common interests. We could drive this in place with irresistible sweeteners for the Sunnis to join in, a plan designed by the military for withdrawing and redeploying American forces, and a regional nonaggression pact.

It is increasingly clear that President Bush does not have a strategy for victory in Iraq. Rather, he hopes to prevent defeat and pass the problem along to his successor. Meanwhile, the frustration of Americans is mounting so fast that Congress might end up mandating a rapid pullout, even at the risk of precipitating chaos and a civil war that becomes a regional war.

As long as American troops are in Iraq in significant numbers, the insurgents can't win and we can't lose. But intercommunal violence has surpassed the insurgency as the main

security threat. Militias rule swathes of Iraq and death squads kill dozens daily. Sectarian cleansing has recently forced tens of thousands from their homes. On top of this, President Bush did not request additional reconstruction assistance and is slashing funds for groups promoting democracy.

Iraq's new government of national unity will not stop the deterioration. Iraqis have had three such governments in the last three years, each with Sunnis in key posts, without noticeable effect. The alternative path out of this terrible trap has five elements. The first is to establish three largely autonomous regions with a viable central government in Baghdad. The Kurdish, Sunni and Shiite regions would each be responsible for their own domestic laws, administration and internal security. The central government would control border defense, foreign affairs and oil revenues. Baghdad would become a federal zone, while densely populated areas of mixed populations would receive both multisectarian and international police protection.

Decentralization is hardly as radical as it may seem: the Iraqi Constitution, in fact, already provides for a federal structure and a procedure for provinces to combine into regional governments.

Besides, things are already heading toward partition: increasingly, each community supports federalism, if only as a last resort. The Sunnis, who until recently believed they would retake power in Iraq, are beginning to recognize that they won't and don't want to live in a Shiite-controlled, highly centralized state with laws enforced by sectarian militias. The Shiites know they can dominate the government, but they can't defeat a Sunni insurrection. The Kurds will not give up their 15-year-old autonomy.

Some will say moving toward strong regionalism would ignite sectarian cleansing. But that's exactly what is going on already, in ever-bigger waves. Others will argue that it would lead to partition. But a breakup is already under way. As it was in Bosnia, a strong federal system is a viable means to prevent both perils in Iraq.

The second element would be to entice the Sunnis into joining the federal system with an offer they couldn't refuse. To begin with, running their own region should be far preferable to the alternatives: being dominated by Kurds and Shiites in a central government or being the main victims of a civil war. But they also have to be given money to make their oil-poor region viable. The Constitution must be amended to guarantee Sunni areas 20 percent (approximately their proportion of the population) of all revenues.

The third component would be to ensure the protection of the rights of women and ethno-religious minorities by increasing American aid to Iraq but tying it to respect for those rights. Such protections will be difficult, especially in the Shiite-controlled south, but Washington has to be clear that widespread violations will stop the cash flow.

Fourth, the president must direct the military to design a plan for withdrawing and redeploying our troops from Iraq by 2008 (while providing for a small but effective

residual force to combat terrorists and keep the neighbors honest). We must avoid a precipitous withdrawal that would lead to a national meltdown , but we also can't have a substantial long-term American military presence. That would do terrible damage to our armed forces, break American and Iraqi public support for the mission and leave Iraqis without any incentive to shape up.

Fifth, under an international or United Nations umbrella, we should convene a regional conference to pledge respect for Iraq's borders and its federal system. For all that Iraq's neighbors might gain by picking at its pieces, each faces the greater danger of a regional war. A "contact group" of major powers would be set up to lean on neighbors to comply with the deal.

Mr. Bush has spent three years in a futile effort to establish a strong central government in Baghdad, leaving us without a real political settlement, with a deteriorating security situation — and with nothing but the most difficult policy choices. The five-point alternative plan offers a plausible path to that core political settlement among Iraqis, along with the economic, military and diplomatic levers to make the political solution work. It is also a plausible way for Democrats and Republicans alike to protect our basic security interests and honor our country's sacrifices.

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