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Vietnam Rorschach

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An "invisible enemy" strikes U.S. soldiers in a faraway land we claim to be saving; overwhelming American firepower kills thousands before many citizens realize their president used phony pretexts to justify military action; policy makers insist that while progress is steady we must be patient; anti-American guerrillas attack their own countrymen, whom they deem U.S. "puppets"; only a few nations send troops to support the United States' cause; talk of a "quagmire" fills the air.

Sound familiar? The specter of the Vietnam War so haunts the American soul there is no keeping it repressed, try as we might. Even events bearing only superficial similarity to that two-decade disaster can trigger its memory. So for many the ongoing guerrilla war in Iraq has become a Vietnam War Rorschach test, in which troubling images of the present evoke nightmares of the past.

No wonder Donald Rumsfeld clinches his jaw whenever he hears the Q-word. In many ways, of course, the Iraq-Vietnam analogy is strained, even absurd. We're comparing four months to two decades; linking a beleaguered occupation of Iraq after the speedy overthrow of a despised dictator to a protracted war on behalf of an unpopular South Vietnamese government against a nationwide Communist movement led by the widely revered Ho Chi Minh (who was supported by China and the Soviet Union); 240 American deaths in Iraq to 58,000 in Vietnam; perhaps 15,000 Iraqi deaths to three million Vietnamese.

However, there are also real similarities between the two wars that should be of great concern, the most important of which is that in Iraq, as in South Vietnam, massive numbers of American troops are being asked not just to fight a war, but to achieve an extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, political goal. In both wars the United States publicly defined its ultimate objective as the establishment of political self-rule and independence on foreign ground, of a local government that could survive without a large and permanent American occupation force.

On April 7, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson said, "We want nothing for ourselves -- only that the people of South Vietnam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way." President Bush makes precisely the same claim about Iraq. In truth, the selflessness is as fraudulent now as it was then. Just as four American presidents refused to consider a South Vietnamese government that would include Communist participation, the Bush administration is not about to tolerate a radical Islamist government unfriendly to a significant U.S. political, economic and military presence. In Iraq, perhaps even more than in Vietnam, the United States wants to determine the outcome of "self-determination."

But just as in Vietnam, American troops in Iraq are likely to prove incapable of building local support for any government -- pro-American, truly self-determining or otherwise. In fact, if we can predict one thing from history, it's that their armed presence is almost guaranteed to generate opposition to any government associated with U.S. interests. In Vietnam, the more troops we inserted and the more Vietnamese we killed, the more anger and resentment our policies produced, thus giving ever more legitimacy to the forces opposing U.S. intervention.

We can't expect soldiers to win "hearts and minds," least of all when they're being fired on. What we can expect is that our increasingly frustrated, homesick and demoralized troops may become ever more cynical about "nation-building" and fall back on the line infamously uttered by an American officer in Vietnam, "Grab 'em by the balls and their hearts and minds will follow."

We should have learned from Vietnam that military dominance is not the same thing as political legitimacy. Of course, we have the power to occupy Iraq indefinitely. But, as in Vietnam, it may be that no foreign power can install a government that will gain the widespread support of its own people. And the American people may eventually decide it is no longer worth trying.

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