

CAPITAL COMMENTARY

October 3, 2005

Light at the End of the Tunnel

The anti- and pro-war demonstrations in Washington last week bore an eerie resemblance to the demonstrations that surrounded the Vietnam War over 30 years ago and inevitably conjured up comparisons between the wars in Iraq and Vietnam.

There are several reasons why these two wars are not alike. Unlike the volunteer force in Iraq, the Vietnam War was conducted by a conscription-based military. The jungles of Southeast Asia and desert of the Middle East present the war fighter with far different tactical and strategic problems. Also, there are far more foreign fighters in Iraq than there were in Vietnam and the enemy in Iraq is much more disparate, decentralized, and unstructured than was the case in Vietnam.

Moreover, the Iraq war has produced far fewer casualties than the war in Vietnam—but, it's still early! Consequently, the Iraq war has produced neither the public interest nor the level of protest that the Vietnam War generated—but again, it's still early!

At a deeper, at a more profound level, however, there are striking similarities between the two wars.

In Vietnam and increasingly in Iraq, Washington defines victory in terms of “body count.” In other words, the more enemies we kill, the closer we are to victory. It is true that in both wars we killed far more of the enemy than they killed of our troops. But victory by body count is essentially a measure of self-deception because in Iraq as in Vietnam insurgents are replaced as quickly as they are killed and the bloodier the insurgency becomes the more frustrated we become. Notwithstanding our occasional offensive operations, it is the insurgents that normally determine where and when attacks will take place and once the attack is over—unlike our forces—they can fade into the background.

In both wars we successfully destroyed “unacceptable” political and military establishments. But we also destroyed the social and economic fabrics and infrastructures of Vietnam and Iraq and fractured

the political power structures of both countries. In Vietnam a north-south divide and an insurgency closely allied with the north emerged, but over time an increasingly effete and unproductive relationship developed between us and our putative allies in the south. The situation is even worse in Iraq, where literally dozens of political-military organizations vie for power in an unstable situation that some analysts believe is moving toward civil war.

In Vietnam we failed to rebuild the society, economy, infrastructure, and an effective political organization and we are finding it extremely difficult to do so in Iraq. Certainly there are measures of success in Iraq, but they are mostly what might be described as “brick and mortar” accomplishments. It is relatively easy to build new buildings, but it is enormously difficult to rebuild the social, economic and political institutions, processes and relationships that define a stable, productive country.

But the most compelling similarity between these two wars is the staggering strategic incompetence demonstrated by the Johnson administration in Vietnam and the Bush administration in Iraq. In both wars, ideological fervor blinded us to the lessons of history, regional reality, and—most importantly—to the consequences of actions. And as the strategic incompetence deepens, brilliant, triumphalist rhetoric degenerates into surreal sophistry. General William Westmoreland's hollow 1968 dictum that he saw the “light at the end of the tunnel” in Vietnam has its functional equivalent in the Bush administration's insistence that the insurgents in Iraq “are on the ropes,” that they are “breathing their last breath,” that we are seeing “the last gasps of insurgency” in Iraq.

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(The views expressed in this essay are the author's alone)

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