

A second Vietnam War for America?

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Article

- Comment - New Sunday Times - 11/16/2003

THE American F-16 jet-fighters that attacked an area near the Iraqi towns of Fallujah and Tikrit with 500lb bombs last weekend have contradicted what President George W. Bush had confidently proclaimed in May.

Bush had on May 1 proudly announced the official end of major combat by the invading forces, and that the situation in Iraq was "firmly under US control".

The bombing, the first after that Bush announcement, is part of *Operation Ivy Cyclone* — a new drive to root out guerillas around Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown.

It was intended as a "show of force" designed to scare unknown assailants (at one time assumed as undetermined and unskilled) who were responsible for shooting down a Chinook transport helicopter on Nov 2, killing 16 US soldiers, the largest single casualty so far.

The admission of the presence of guerilla forces taking the lives of US soldiers in numbers exceeding that of the pre-May casualties has brought forth the images of an organized peopled movement as in the Vietnam War.

On July 17, this was publicly alluded to by no less than the new commander of all US forces in the Middle East, Gen John Abizaid.

He was quoted as saying that the army might have to make Iraq a year-long deployment and was making plans to introduce a rotational system — as what happened during the Vietnam War.

However, his comments fell on deaf ears as the US administration is busy downplaying the insurgency.

In fact, there are those who do not believe that the two wars are similar based on aspects such as time-frame (nine years in the case of Vietnam versus less than nine months for Iraq), or peak troop strength as many in Vietnam at almost 550,000 versus 250,000 for Iraq currently), or even more so the number of US deaths (almost 60,000 for Vietnam compared with about 400 in Iraq, at the time writing — Vietnamese and Iraqi deaths do not count!).

On the contrary, others cited many strikingly familiar features between the two wars, especially in the way the White House fumbled away public support just like Vietnam, reported Dave Moniz of *USA Today* (Nov 10).

In other words, like Vietnam, the Iraq war, too, is gradually plagued by the so-called "credibility gap" or more accurately "lies" relating to the various facets of the wars.



This can be clearly gauged from the waning US public support for the war as it drags on.

Not to mention that the international community had never lent any credible support to the very idea of an Iraq war right from the start as witnessed from the worldwide marches involving millions of anti-war protesters.

What more, the pre-emptive unilateral strike defied the authority of the United Nations.

Indeed, according to Moniz, many who served in Vietnam are beginning to voice their concerns. Among them are respectable member of US Congress, former Pentagon officials and an influential group of retired generals.

Some of them have taken notice that the mistakes made by the Bush administration "are eerily similar to the ones Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and military leaders made a generation ago".

More specifically, some of the similarities are spelt put by George A. Lopez, director of policy studies at University of Notre Dame's Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies as outlined in his editorial "US repeats past mistakes" (*USA Today* Nov 10).

One of them is: "Both wars are justified on the basis of 'a larger, more ominous enemy, — communism in the case of Vietnam, and terrorism as for Iraq, though at times this overflows into Islam.

"Like in Vietnam, as the US imperial ambitions become apparent, more of the 'enemies' are enticed to be new home-grown recruits keen to expel the invaders.

"This is particularly so when the US President in July arrogantly urged to 'bring them on', insisting that he has the force necessary to deal with the situation."

Another is: "These 'home-grown' guerilla forces which may not be visible initially, is similar to the so-called Vietcong in South Vietnam.

"And in Iraq, it is possible that there are more than one emerging force fighting in various parts of the country, as the perception that the US and its allies are occupying their country gets concretised in their minds.

Yet another is: "Despite the mayhem on the ground, the assumption about the goals and means by the US tends to remain **uk?** same even as it 'becoming lost in a fog of uncertainty and opposition'."

Thus, it is not surprising to hear the US President reasserting his resolve to remain on course, and frequently offer wildly unrealistic forecast regardless of the innocent lives lost on both sides by the day.

Worse still for the US soldiers, they will be in Iraq (and also Afghanistan) for "a long hard slog" (contrary to their expectations) as revealed in an internal memo by the US Defence Secretary recently.

Last but not least, of course, in both the Vietnam and Iraq wars, noted Lopez, the mission runs into a presidential campaign, which complicates matters further.

He predicted the result to be a "quagmire" with "the imperative not to fail, not to withdraw before Iraq is fully stable".

Under such a situation, the war will continue to claim many more lives and could culminate in yet another bitter Vietnam experience — the "Tet offensive" of 1968.

This refers to the massive attack by the Vietnamese guerillas on their New Year holiday that finally caused the US to retreat from a major war that it expected to win hands down.

Should this be the case is perhaps still too early to predict, especially when there is a lack of candour.

But the reality is that there have been and will be thousands of innocent Americans and Iraqis killed.

For the Americans, there is already the fear that the number of deaths will be far greater than predicted for a war that Bush thinks he could walk over easily.

One indication of such a fear is the recent desperate attempt to filter out this frightening reality by banning coverage of the arrival of flag-draped body bags (some due to suicides, with at least 15 so far) at Dover Air Force base.

"Be that as it may, the Vietnam lessons humbly taught us that reality has a way of availing itself particularly following what seems to be almost a repeat of the Vietnam rhetoric," analysed a retired high-ranking Marine official who served two tours in Vietnam.

In short, to paraphrase Lopez, until sanity prevails among world leaders, there could well be a second Vietnam soon just because of their moronic dead-end mindset.

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