

The Illogical Logics of America's Wars in the Middle East: Vietnam and Iraq

Sarah Attia

PhD in English Language and Literature

Assistant Professor, Oman College of Management and Technology, Muscat,
Sultanate of Oman

sattia@omancollege.edu.om, sarahattia2015@gmail.com

Abstract:

Introduction: Describing the US wars in Vietnam and Iraq, many critics assert the similarity between US decision making in both wars. The critics of U.S. administration often link between Iraq and Vietnam, charging George W. Bush and his policy makers that they had rejected the lessons of Vietnam War 1965–73 and involved the country in a similar kind of conflict.

Purpose: This study aims to draw parallels between Iraq and Vietnam wars which mainly center on the role of misinformation and deception in the run-up to the two wars, the political and military problems that the United States confronted in each case, and the ebbing of public support in the face of two similarly draining conflicts.

Study questions: The study raises many substantive questions concerning the two wars: How did America become involved in Vietnam? How did it launch war in Iraq? What were the main motivations in both wars? What were their main aims? Did the decision makers in George W. Bush's administration learn the lessons of Vietnam or they repeated the same mistakes?

Methodology/Approach: The study depends on the analytical and comparative approaches to analyze thoroughly how USA became involved in Vietnam and Iraq.

its motivations, and its aims, trying to find satisfying answers to the questions it raised.

Keywords: Iraq war, Vietnam war, war on terrorism, US, and Middle East.

1. Introduction

Dwight Eisenhower (US President 1953-1961) once gave his famous statement in his News Conference on August 11th, 1954: "All of us have heard this term 'preventive war' since the earliest days of Hitler. In this day and time ... I don't believe there is such a thing; and frankly, I wouldn't even listen to anyone seriously that came in and talked about such a thing." One thinks Eisenhower was foreseeing what would happen from his country's consecutive administrations in the Middle and Far East for decades. The United States had to struggle with the consequences of Vietnam, but the war in Iraq was not another Vietnam. It was far worse. The United States in Vietnam aimed at putting down the communist aggression in Southeast Asia, but in Iraq, the Bush administration engaged in a war of choice to promote American ideals and democracy in the Middle East, as they pretended.

2. Vietnam and Iraq: Common parallels:

In *America at War since 1945*, Gray Donaldson argues that Vietnamese people had been in a struggle for their own independence almost from the beginning of Vietnam's existence. From early 1847 France moved to colonize Vietnam. The French colony of 1847 became Indochina and included Laos and Cambodia. On December 7th, 1941, when negotiations with the US broke down, the Japanese army bombed Vietnam. (Donaldson, 72-73). After the end of WWII, the guerilla forces resisted the Japanese presence, then the colonial power of France in the north. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was established in Hanoi with Ho Chi Minh as

president. After years of military conflict and in 1954, The French and Ho Chi Minh signed an agreement of division of Vietnam restricting the French authority in the south around Saigon. But soon, and only one year before the American intervention in Vietnam, France decided to pull out from Vietnam. Donaldson agrees that "for France, Vietnam was little more than a way to regain some international prestige following the humiliations of World War II. Paris was no longer a world player.....It had absolutely nothing to gain by staying on." (Donaldson, 82) The French troops withdrew from Vietnam in 1954. But there is a great difference between the presence of France during more than a century in Vietnam and the intervention of the US there later. L. C. Gardner sees that "France in 1954 was a colonial power seeking to re-impose its rule, out of tune with Vietnamese nationalism and divided at home. The US in 1965 was responding to the call of a people under Communist assault, a people undergoing a non-Communist national revolution." (Gardner, 1995: 237)

Moreover, Donaldson states that the US intervention in Vietnam was based mainly on the 'Domino's theory' which assumes that if Vietnam became communist, the rest of southern and southeast Asia would fall to communism. This theory was not based on a clear understanding of Asian history. Only in Vietnam was communism a factor, and even there it took a backseat to nationalism. There were two main reasons for the US policy mistakes in misjudging the situations in southern Asia; the first was that the US diplomats assigned to Vietnam were almost always French-speakers with no knowledge of Vietnam or the Vietnamese people. They spent their time in the controlled environment of Saigon, well away from the life of the peasants and the pulse of the nation. Another reason was that the domino theory was based on racism; the US administration believed that since all Asians looked alike, they must somehow think alike as well, and as one went so went the others. Whatever the reason, it is clear now that the policy makers in Washington misjudged Vietnam and had a profound misunderstanding of Asia and Asians. (Donaldson, 79-80)

For decades, Donaldson asserts, the defeat of US forces in Vietnam and the loss of the US role as a world leader and defender of freedom since the end of the Second World War had a great impact on American politics and disturbed the American governments. Therefore, in the 1991 Gulf War, after the fighting had continued for one hundred hours in the Iraqi desert, President Bush said in confidence that "the nation had finally kicked the Vietnam syndrome, that the many ghosts of Vietnam and Korea had finally stopped haunting the nation." (Donaldson, xiv)

To understand what happened in Iraq, we need to flashback to the 1980s. The Americans and Iraqis forged an alliance in 1983 as both had the same enemy: Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran. "The Iraqis had long-standing disputes with Iran and the Americans were still smarting over the seizure of American hostages in 1979. Twenty years ago, each side had something the other needed. The Americans wanted an ally in the Middle East and Iraq needed food, money, and military supplies."¹ To pursue a war for territory and navigation rights with Iran, Saddam invaded Iran in 1980 using chemical weapons, the war that lasted for eight years and left a million fatal casualties. The United States supported Saddam Hussein with arms not only during his eight-year war with Iran, but also in his suppression of Shiite uprising of 1991 and his military operations against the Kurds in the north. The Kurds, who represent a fifth of Iraq, tried to fight back as a reaction to Saddam's attacks; but "they were crushed with aerial assaults and chemical attacks involving mustard gas and nerve agents." Raid Juhi, the chief judge of the Iraqi High Tribunal's investigative court, said at a news conference on April 5th, 2006: "It was during this campaign that thousands of women, children, and men were buried in mass graves in many locations. The natives of Kurdistan suffered very hard living conditions,

¹Originally broadcast on March 26th, 2003, on CBC News.

<http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/curds/alliance.html>

forced relocation, and illegal detention for a large number of people." (Wong, 2006) "Kurdish officials often say that 180,000 were killed in the *Anfal* campaign, but the actual number is closer to 80,000, according to Joost Hiltermann, the Middle East director of the International Crisis Group." This wasn't all; "the massacre in the village of Halabja left at least 5,000 Kurds died from gas attacks on March 16th, 1988." (Wong, 2006)

According to Dr. Stephen Bryen², a Pentagon official in charge of monitoring technology exports, the Reagan administration was aware that Iraq was using chemical weapons in its war against Iran. This was against the Geneva Convention which outlawed the use of chemical and biological weapons in 1925. He states:

As early as 1983, the Reagan Administration was already well aware that Iraq was using chemical weapons in its war against Iran. According to U.S. intelligence, it was on an 'almost daily basis'. But that wasn't all; there were also intelligence reports the Iraqis were using chemical weapons in the north of their own country, in the battle against the Kurds, but the White House did nothing.

Bryen states that "Iraq requested 1.5 million vials of atropine - the antidote for nerve gas;" and although "official U.S. policy prohibited military sales to Iraq, the Commerce and State departments pushed to sell the Iraqis 'dual-use' items." On March 16th, 1988, Saddam Hussein attacked the Kurdish city of Halabja with chemical weapons. The reaction of the US administration was deadly bizarre. Although the U.S. administration officially denounced the use of chemical weapons in the attacks on the Kurds, it was in fact business with Iraq. Senate staffer Peter Galbraith drafted a legislation to impose harsh economic sanctions on Saddam's

² CBC, March 26th, 2003.

regime. Bryen notes that "although the bill passed through the Senate in only one day, the powerful farm and business lobbies warned that the legislation would only punish the Americans trading with Iraq."

Bryen assumes that this reaction of the US administration towards Saddam's attack on the Kurds made him believe that his alliance with US is strong enough that he could attack the oil rich Kuwait and claim it as an Iraqi province. Therefore, not long after that, in August 1990, Saddam Hussein ignored warnings of US, Arab countries, and UN and sent his troops to invade Kuwait. Bryen asserts: "For a decade, the American government turned a blind eye towards the Iraqi government." But the end of the US-Iraq alliance drew near. Thereafter, the USA led a UN coalition troop and launched operation Desert Storm in Iraq in February 1991.

Galbraith notes that "the U.S. seriously under-estimated Saddam Hussein." He asserts: "We would not be here today in a 2nd Gulf War against Saddam Hussein if he had understood and if he had been made to understand that his behavior would have consequences." (Quoted by Bryen)

Searching for the common parallels between the American two major military adventures since the Second World War, both Vietnam and Iraq were fought in Asia and "for no real strategic advantage", as Donaldson asserts. (Donaldson, xiv) It seems clear that Johnson purposefully deceived the American public. Donaldson states that on the afternoon of August 4th, 1964, there was a new evidence brought forward suggesting that "a second attack had not occurred in the Tonkin Gulf." Nevertheless, Johnson ignored this evidence and accepted the recommendation of his Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to "launch the attack". Johnson told the American people on TV about the North Vietnamese attacks and the U. S. response. He assured his people that "firmness will always be measured. Its mission is peace." (Donaldson, 25) The common policy in the US foreign relations in both Vietnam

and Iraq wars was to strike against adversary before it can strike at you. Thus, both Johnson and Bush went to war and had expanded their presidential power with the support of the vast majority of the American public. Trying to justify the invasion of Iraq, George Bush, in the President's Radio Address, stated:

American and coalition forces have begun a concerted campaign against the regime of Saddam Hussein. In this war, our coalition is broad, with more than 40 countries from across the globe. Our cause is just the security of the nation's we serve and the peace of the world. And our mission is clear, to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, to end Saddam Hussein's support for terrorism, and to free the Iraqi people.³

In his claims, Bush focused on two key items: Saddam's development of new weapons of mass destruction to use against the US and Israel, and his support of a terrorist network that included many members of Al-Qaeda team. Although minority members in Congress opposed the war resolution, and argued that it gave the president an "unchecked authority", most members of Congress believed that Iraq was now a direct threat to the security of the US and that a "military action in Iraq is inevitable." (Donaldson, 29) After Bush had safely tucked the war resolution in his pocket, he moved to his second step to gain the support of the American people. In his speech to the Americans, Bush declared that "the British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." Bush considered this British report as the first hard evidence that Iraq was planning to develop weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, Bush assured that Iraq harbored most of America's enemies and international terrorists. The normal result of Bush's arguments was that the vast majority of Americans favored a direct

³ Bush, George W. The White House: Operation Iraqi Freedom. 2003.

attack against Iraq. With Congress and American public support, Bush needed to secure the support of the United Nations. When the security council refused to produce a resolution against Iraq, Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense suggested that "the US didn't need old Europe to defend its interests", a thinly veiled attack on the French who had opposed the UN resolution forcefully. In short, by March 2003, Bush had had the congressional resolution, the support of American people and a major ally by his side. (Donaldson, 30-31)

3. Aims and motivations of war

The Iraq war aims include effecting regime change, spreading democracy in the region, and destroying an international terrorist network. For nearly a year before the March 2003 invasion, in 2002 Bush argued that "the United States had a responsibility to change the course of events in Iraq because the threat from that country "stands alone" and because it gathers the most serious dangers of our age in one place." In early 2003 Colin Powell, secretary of state, warned before the United Nations that "Saddam was developing weapons of mass destruction to project power, to threaten, and to deliver chemical, biological and, if we let him, nuclear warheads". He added "a second-order issue for the Bush administration was a sinister nexus between Iraq and Al-Qaeda terrorist network, a nexus that combines classic terrorist organizations and modern methods of murder." (Cited in Brigham, 13)

However, just as in Vietnam, the major reason for Iraq war turned out to be quickly discredited. In both cases, the US went to war "under the cloud of insecurity", but as there had been no second attack in the Tonkin Gulf, there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Moreover, the only evidence that Bush offered to assure the link between Saddam and nuclear weapons vanished. "It was discovered that the British report making the connection between Iraq and a source of uranium in Africa had

been fabricated." (Donaldson, 31-32) So, no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq after the invasion. Furthermore, there was no clear connection between Iraq and the terrorist network that attacked the US on September 11th, 2001. Hence, US shifted its war rationale completely to the war on terror and promoting democracy in the region.

In their book, *The Five Biggest Lies Bush Told us About Iraq*, Christopher Scheer, Robert Scheer, and Lakshmi Chaudhry claim that George W. Bush pushed the United States into a defensive war with Iraq. And, to do this, his administration established five key "facts" in the Americans' minds as a precursor to deploy hundreds of thousands of troops and spend billions of dollars. These five lies, they argue, were hardly arbitrary, but chosen with a clear understanding of what it takes to overcome the innate isolationism of Americans. To wage war, the American public needs to feel an immediate sense of danger. These five lies are: Iraq had something to do with 9/11 and/or Al Qaeda, Iraq illegally possessed chemical and biological weapons which were a threat to USA, Iraq was fast pursuing the means to build and deliver a nuclear bomb, occupying Iraq would not only be a "cakewalk," but also Iraqi people would welcome us and cooperate to rebuild their country, and Iraq could become a democratic model for the rest of the region. (Scheer and al. 2003: 29-30)

After the first four lies had become clear to the American public and/or the international community, the fifth lie turned out to be the only support for US administration to launch its war: promoting democracy in Iraq. Scheer and al. argue that: "The fact that Iraq holds under its dry soil the world's second largest oil reserves only complicated the pitch for occupation: Americans don't like to think of themselves as imperialists, getting their hands dirty to secure wealth." They continue: "Thanks to our history as a former colony, US foreign policy has always

been clothed in the rhetoric of moral exceptionalism – the idea that wars must be undertaken at least partly for the greater good of humanity." Invading a country 6000 miles away for its oil or to create a new American empire was not likely to win a resounding approval from a nation that think of itself always as the "good guy in the white hat," they assume. (p. 30)

Sen. Edward Kennedy launched a severe attack on Bush accusing him that he has created "the largest credibility gap since Richard Nixon", and that "truth is the first casualty of policy in the Bush administration." The Democrat Sen. said that "Iraq was never a threat to the United States and that Bush took the country to war under false pretenses, giving al Qaeda two years to regroup and plant terrorist cells throughout the world." (CNN, April 6th, 2004)

Later on September, Senate Edward Kennedy delivered a speech at George Washington University and asserted that the Bush administration's insistence on the correlation between Saddam and Al Qaeda and his development of WMD lack credibility and truthfulness. "It should have never been used by George W. Bush to justify an ideological war that America never should have fought. Saddam had no nuclear weapons. In fact, not only were there no nuclear weapons, there were no chemical or biological weapons either, no weapons of mass destruction of any kind." Kennedy asserted "We now know beyond doubt, [Saddam] did not pose the kind of immediate threat to our national security that could possibly justify a unilateral, preventive war without the broad support of the international community. There was no reason whatsoever to go to war when we did, in the way we did, and for the false reasons we were given." (Kennedy, Sep. 27th, 2004)

Going back to the 1960s to know what motivated US to fight a war also under false pretenses, John McNaughton, McNamara's chief deputy in Vietnam, states that the US aims in priority were: "70 percent—to avoid a humiliating defeat (to our

reputation as a guarantor), 20 percent—to keep SVN (and then adjacent) territory from Chinese hands, and 10 percent—to permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life. ALSO - to emerge from crisis without an unacceptable taint from methods used." (Cited by Young, 135)

Nevertheless, McMaster argues that the war in Vietnam lacked a clear strategy and a real logic motivation. He wonders: "How and why Vietnam had become an American war- a war in which men fought and died without a clear idea of how their actions and sacrifices were contributing to an end of the conflict." (McMaster, xiv) He considers the US intervention in Vietnam as "one of the greatest American foreign policy disasters of the twentieth century;" and the more important is to determine the responsibility of decision making and why this decision was made. McMaster notes that from the beginning of Johnson's presidency until July 1965, his decisions of escalation of US troops in Vietnam and the way these decisions were made were so critical. He asserts that "although impersonal forces, such as the ideological imperative of containing communism, the bureaucratic structure, and institutional priorities, influenced the President's Vietnam decisions, those decisions depended primarily on his character, his motivations, and his relationships with his principal advisors." (McMaster, 324)

David Barrett, in *Uncertain Warrior: Lyndon Johnson and his Vietnam Advisors*, states that Johnson was overly influenced by the policy advisors he inherited from Kennedy: "In the matters of foreign policy, Lyndon Johnson was unusually susceptible to the influence of the so called intellectuals in the administration who were members in the Kennedy presidency." (Barrett, 118) Barrett refers to the National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. This view is echoed by George McTKahin, in *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam*, who asserts the impossible dilemma

bequeathed to Johnson by Kennedy. He argues that "Johnson is depicted as a reluctant president being dragged into a war by McNamara and Bundy." (Barrett, 118)

Therefore, McMaster asserts that beginning with wrong decisions, deception of American public, lies to Congress in July 1965 concerning the number of troops requested and the monetary cost of action, confidence in McNamara's false strategy, and disregard of any advice that he wasn't willing to hear, Johnson shouldn't be surprised by the consequences of his decisions. After the Tet Offensive in 1968, Johnson declared his withdrawal from the race for the presidential nomination of his party. McMaster sees that the president's lies and deception were the real loss, and that "The war in Vietnam was not lost in the field, nor was it lost on the front pages of the *New York Times* or on the college campuses. It was lost in Washington." (McMaster,333)

Likewise, the Downing Street Minutes confirmed that "The Bush Administration was determined to go to war in Iraq, regardless of whether there was any credible justification for doing so," argues Sen. Kennedy. The Administration lied and misrepresented the intelligence trying to link Saddam Hussein with the terrorists of 9/11 and Osama bin Laden despite Osama bin Laden's disdain for Saddam⁴, and with weapons of mass destruction that Iraq did not have." Scheer and al. state: "One of the hallmarks of the long-running Iraq disinformation campaign led by the White House is to repeat things that aren't true until a great many people believe they are." They mention for example Bush's speech on October 7th, 2002, a few days before

⁴ In a tape urging Muslims to fight against the United States, Osama bin Laden said that the fighting should be for God, not for "pagan regimes in all the Arab countries, including Iraq. . . . Socialists are infidels wherever they are, either in Baghdad or Aden." Transcript is posted on <http://www.indybay.org>, retrieved April 10th, 2003.

the decision of Congress whether or not to authorize the attack against Iraq. Bush said: "Iraq could decide on any given day to provide a biological or chemical weapon to a terrorist group or individual terrorists. (...) Alliance with terrorists could allow the Iraqi regime to attack America without leaving any fingerprints." Scheer and al. argue that Bush and his administration had a key strategy which was "to pack the words *Iraq, Saddam Hussein, Al Qaeda, terrorism, and 9/11* together in the sentence as often as possible." (41-42) Bush states in Cincinnati:

Some have argued that confronting the threat from Iraq could detract from the war against terror. To the contrary; confronting the threat posed by Iraq is crucial to winning the war on terror... Terror cells and outlaw regimes building weapons of mass destruction are different faces of the same evil. (...) Some citizens wonder, after eleven years of living with this problem [of Iraq's pursuit of WMD], why do we need to confront it now? And there's a reason. We have experienced the horror of September 11th.

On *Meet the Press* in mid-September, Dick Cheney stated another astonishing claim that victory in Iraq means "we will have struck a major blow right at the heart of the base, if you will, the geographic base of the terrorists who had us under assault now for many years, but most especially on 9/11." Scheer and al. argue that Cheney's claim means that "If the money, manpower, and shelter for Al Qaeda came from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, then attacking Iraq was smart because it was in the same geographic area?" They refer again that Iraq and 9/11 were being mashed together in an illogic sentence, but it's made by an intelligent man. (43)

General Brent Scowcroft, the National Security Advisor for Presidents Gerald Ford and George Bush, wrote in August 2002 in the *Wall Street Journal*:

Saddam's strategic objective appears to be to dominate the Persian Gulf, to control oil from the region, or both. But there is scant evidence to tie Saddam

to terrorist organizations, and even less to the September 11 attacks. Indeed, Saddam's goals have little in common with the terrorists who threaten us, and there is little incentive for him to make common cause with them. He is unlikely to risk his investment in weapons of mass destruction, much less his country, by handing such weapons to terrorists who would use them for their own purposes and leave Baghdad as the return address.

"If the only problem the United States had with Saddam Hussein's regime were its involvement with terrorism, our problems would be relatively mild," wrote Kenneth M. Pollack in his book *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq*. He continues: "Saddam has never given WMD to terrorists (at least to our knowledge) for the same reasons he has distanced himself from international terrorist groups in general." (Cited by Scheer and al. 47, 48)

In September 2002, however, Dick Cheney went on affirming the Prague meeting between Mohamed Atta, the leader of 9/11 hijackers, and an Iraqi official a few months before the attacks. He stated: "We have reporting ... that places [Atta] in Prague with a senior Iraqi intelligence official." A month earlier, in August, the headline of *Los Angeles Times* was "US Returns to Theory on Iraq September 11 Link," and quoted a senior Bush administration official claim: "There is growing evidence of the ties between Al Qaeda and Iraq... The White House is now backing claims that the Prague meeting took place." This linkage has a fundamental importance as the European leaders and politicians insisted on such a link to justify an attack against Iraq. Fred Barnes, executive editor of *Weekly Standard*, wrote on August 12th, 2002: "The meeting has political and international importance. A connection between Iraq and Atta, an Al Qaeda operative under Osama Bin Laden, bolsters the case for military action by the United States to remove the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq."

"Within the week;" state Scheer and al., "however, the story had been completely demolished. First, CIA Director George Tenet admitted to Congress that his agency could find no evidence to confirm that the meeting took place." In addition, the Czech domestic intelligence agency told Bush administration officials that "there was no evidence of a meeting;" according to the *Times*. The Czech officials told US that "they have no evidence that Mr. Atta was even in the country in April 2001." (pp. 55-57) After US administration presented a worldview in which Saddam was the New Hitler, unsurprisingly on September 17th, 2003, Bush confessed briefly that there was no evidence linking Iraq to 9/11.

4. War analogies

At the end of the Gulf War, Bush declared: "By God, we have kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all." Commenting on Bush's statement, George Herring states that it suggests "the extent to which Vietnam continued to prey on the American psyche more than fifteen years after the fall of Saigon." (Herring, 1991-1992: 104)

Vietnam is one of the lethal wars in the last century. Brigham argues that in 1967 and afterwards, according to CIA's own studies, the bombing strategy in Vietnam had not achieved the desired results. Nevertheless, US commanders in Vietnam declared that bombing had succeeded, and until today, there are many US military leaders believe this and insist on it. Much of South Vietnam had been seriously destroyed through the American bombing operations. Each American blow "was like a sledgehammer on a floating cork," reported the journalist Malcolm Browne, who covered the war. The number of civilians killed during the Vietnam War (1964-

1975)⁵ is huge. It represents more than 10 percent of the entire population of Vietnam. On the other hand, US troops suffered heavy losses. Over 58,000 were killed and another 150,000 were wounded. The question now is: Did South Vietnam really worth all this death and destruction? Or are the protracted war results satisfying? Most policy analysts today suggest that the air war in Vietnam might only have strengthened the morale of North Vietnam and its citizens. (Brigham, 43, 44) In January 1973, Congress cut off funding for South Vietnam, whereas the Soviets were funding Hanoi with more than \$1 billion. This was the main reason that harried the US withdrawal. (P. 46)

Moreover, David Elliott states that one of the most significant lessons of Vietnam is “be very careful in applying analogies.” In his book *Analogies at War*, Khong asserts that when the decision makers face novel problems, analogies serve as “a cognitive filter which transforms the unfamiliar into something recognizable, and reduces complexity to manageable proportions.” But this approach has many pitfalls if the decision maker chooses an unsuitable analogy. There is no better example than Kennedy and Johnson who would have been better served with cautions about the French experience in Indochina than with bracing lessons from Munich and Korea, as Khong notes. (Cited by Elliott, 1).

In a parallel context, in 2001 when the US troops launched a military strike on Afghanistan, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was asked if the U.S. might be getting into another Vietnam. As usual, his answer was short and ridiculous: “All together now: Quagmire!” (Woodward, 37) In 2003, after the US had started the invasion of Iraq, he was again asked the same question, and again gave another

⁵ These dates designate the so-called 'American' phase in the war in what is now called Vietnam. The whole military conflict stretched from 1946-1975.

absurd answer: "It's a different era. It's a different place." (*The Associated Press and Reuters*, July 1st, 2003) One argues that Rumsfeld's statement is incorrect, as the analogies of Vietnam predate the invasion of Iraq. It's for that reason that Sen. Edward Kennedy has called Iraq "George Bush's Vietnam." (Kennedy, April 6th, 2004) Melvin R. Laird, the secretary of defense during Richard Nixon's first term, argues that "Both the Vietnam and Iraq wars were launched based on intelligence failures and possibly outright deception." (Laird, 4) The idea is echoed by Brigham who asserts that "Both wars were justified by false reports, in Vietnam the Gulf of Tonkin attacks, and in Iraq the weapons of mass destruction that weren't there and the phony connection between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda." (Brigham, 12) The most common similarity in the two wars was the illegal procedures and presidential deception to gain Congressional authorization to launch military strikes. The parallel is clear between the deception of Johnson's administration concerning the resolution of Tonkin Gulf and Bush's foreign policy makers' concerning using military force to overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime. Therefore, both wars first enjoyed wide public support and Congress authorized Presidents Johnson and George W. Bush to achieve their objectives; but after many failures and impending defeat, and one can add after the reasons for wars had vanished, the public and Congress turned against the wars." (Brigham, 12-13)

Although their cautionary warnings haven't been taken seriously, the American journalist and author Orville Schell and other voices warned from the very beginning that the US troops could be "entrapped in a guerrilla war" like that in Southeast Asia in China and Indochina in the middle of last century. He stated that the scenario could be repeated in Iraq; all the difference will be "the abyss between quagmire and sand." (Schell, 2) He asserts that the Bush administration neglected the fact that in such guerrilla warfare the weaker forces usually triumph over the powerful ones. They also neglected the history and how Mao Zedong and the Red

Army through such guerrilla technique, and though weaker and less equipped, outlast the Japanese invasion and the Chinese National Government in 1920.

Therefore, the Bush Administration tried deadly to eliminate any use of terminology or lexicon that may remind the defeat of Vietnam, Elliott states. They refused to refer to the resistance as an "insurgency" to avoid arousing the "ghosts of Vietnam" and to remove the sense that Iraq is another defeat for America. In May 2006 they denied semantically the use of term "civil war" but rather used the expression "sectarian conflict" in Iraq. This evoked the denials of Kennedy's Administration that the violence in Vietnam was a "civil conflict" but was, rather an "aggression from the outside." (Elliott, 3-4) Fung Yu-lan, in his study of Chinese philosophy, argues that "the making of unauthorized distinctions between words, and the making of new words, to confuse the correct nomenclature, cause the people to be in doubt, was called great wickedness. It was a crime like that of using false credentials or false measure." (Fung Yu-lan, 152. Cited in Elliott)

However, supporters of Iraq invasion not only did their best in the inversion of image and playing with 'lexicon', but also exaggerated and introduced Vietnam as a military success for the US troops and so it could be a positive model for war in Iraq. Therefore, it's not bizarre to read statements as Laird's "from the Tet offensive in 1968 up to the fall of Saigon in 1975, South Vietnam never lost a major battle. The Tet offensive itself was a victory for South Vietnam and devastated the North Vietnamese army, which lost 289,000 men in 1968 alone". Yet, he asserts that one of the main reasons for US troops' failure in both Vietnam and Iraq is that "the overriding media portrayal of the Tet offensive and the war thereafter was that of defeat for the United States and the Saigon government. Just so, the overriding media portrayal of the Iraq war is one of failure and futility." (Laird, 2,3) It's not bizarre also that Laird attacked Sen. Kennedy after he had declared that "Iraq is Bush's

Vietnam." Laird states that "[Kennedy] is in the camp of doomsayers who are 'doubtful of the value of spreading democracy', and who claim that the Iraq war is 'all about oil'."

While the US administration resists any connection between Iraq and Vietnam, analysts and critics exaggerated the analogies of the two wars. The similarities include the false promise by both US presidents Johnson and Bush of an easy victory. In Vietnam, the Johnson's administration signaled to Hanoi that "the United States hoped not to deepen its involvement in the country –but would, if necessary". In Iraq, only after few weeks of fighting, Bush signaled "Mission Accomplished", "only to regret the implication in the face of a growing insurgency." (Lebovic, 4,5) Critics also couldn't ignore the resemblance between the two US Secretaries of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Robert McNamara: "brash self-confidence, controlling and peripatetic management style, zealous challenge to prevailing military culture." Thus, Korb sees Vietnam as "McNamara's war" and Iraq as "Rumsfeld's Folly." (Cited by Lebovic, 5)

Moreover, Elliott states that one of the common parallels between Vietnam and Iraq wars is that the US and coalition troops didn't have the same desired goal. "By the time indigenization replaced the goal of a solution based on US military victory in both countries, the main US objective had become face saving extrication because of declining American political support." By the time, the US felt that it entered into a conflict that it couldn't win and therefore it searched a 'decent interval'. (Elliott, 7,8) The shift of the stakes in both American wars reveals clearly the parallel. In Vietnam it shifted from stopping the spread of communism in Southeast Asia to guaranteeing a non communist Vietnam. Although it's a "desirable objective", it's not "a life or death concern of the US", as Elliott asserts. Another parallel is the US

deadly desire to overthrow a many-year-standing ally; Ngo Dinh Diem, and Saddam Hussien.

Furthermore, Matt Steinglass argues that “supporters of the American invasion and occupation of Iraq have often argued that it has little in common with the Vietnam War”. But a simple comparison between Bush's "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq," unveiled Nov. 30th, 2005, and Gen. Abrams' strategy in 1968 in Vietnam (Clear and Hold) devastates this argument and shows common parallels. Steinglass notes that the series of recent speeches of Bush's administration reflects that they started to see some parallels between the two strategies as Bush's (Clear, Hold and Build) for fighting the Iraqi insurgency evokes clearly Vietnam's (Clear and Hold.) (Steinglass, 2005) Elliott comments on Bush's strategy and asserts that "in practice, the military has come under fire for too much emphasis on chasing insurgents around the country and not enough on securing areas that have been cleared of enemy fighters. U.S. and Iraqi troops have often had to return to fight in towns where they had fought before. Military commanders have acknowledged lacking sufficient forces to hold some towns previously." (Elliott, 14) Through this document, the Bush's administration tried to convince the Americans that they have a successful plan which can be applied in Iraq. Nevertheless, it counted the achievements and progress in Iraq since 2003, but completely ignored the fatal problems and catastrophic chaos in Bush's "modern Iraq". Although analysts disagree on the immediate US withdrawal from Iraq leaving it to extremists and terrorists, they disagree on Bush's administration's assumptions that US, through its mission in Iraq, has promoted democracy all over the Middle East, and that they have rebuilt Iraq. They argue that, ignoring the violence and daily suicide bombings, Bush's document "depends heavily on viewing the glass half-full rather than half-empty." (Wright, 2005) In his document, Bush stated that the Iraqis were in charge of most of Baghdad but ignored that "Iraqi logistics were in shambles", and although the number of Iraqis

in training was in increase, more Americans were dying and violence was in increase as well, as Lawrence Korb notes. (Cited by Wright).

Hence, Schell, one of those who covered the war in Indochina as analyst, argues that "One of the most important ingredients in Mao's conception of guerrilla warfare was nationalism," and this is the same base for "Fedayeen Saddam" (Saddam's men of sacrifice) (Schell,3) It's for this reason that Brigham notes that the common similarity between the two wars is the enemy that has a large support of majority of the population, and because of the quagmire techniques, this enemy cannot be easily defeated even with superior fire power or conventional strategies. (Brigham, 25)

Therefore, many analysts see a common analogy between what happened in Vietnam and Iraq; as both are asymmetric conflicts. This idea makes one search a suitable definition of this notion. Some define it as "A conflict in which two states with unequal power resources confront each other on the battlefield." (Paul, 1994: 3) Others define it as "Those [battles] in which one side is possessed of overwhelming power with respect to its adversary." (Arreguin-Toft, 2005: xi) These definitions mean that the US-Soviet war for example couldn't be considered asymmetric war as each power was stronger than the other. They also evoke the inequality of military capabilities between the fighting powers whether in Vietnam or in Iraq. This, therefore, explains why the insurgency as the weaker side in the conflict followed the guerrilla warfare technique. "Put simply, the size, strength, flexibility, and adaptability of the US military don't ensure victory in asymmetric conflict: US influence -and success- depend on conditions that the United States cannot easily manipulate," as Lebovic notes. (Lebovic, 3) This drives to a main negative outcome from both wars; the bolstered faith in the US military capabilities as "unlimited power." In both Vietnam and Iraq, "the United States exerted tremendous effort over a long period but eventually had to accept the limits of US

power –on the battlefield, at the negotiating table, and in the offices of host-government officials." Therefore, the result of both wars suggests that the US "despite its best efforts, is vulnerable to unfavorable conflict asymmetries that produce leverage problems." (Lebovic, 3,4)

However, the analogy between the two US wars shifted from phase to another; in the beginning of Iraq war the analogy had been invoked almost entirely around "the limits of American power to shape distant societies." But later and after the outbreak of the insurgency and the increase of US casualties, the critics and detractors of George W. Bush "pounced on Vietnam as a useful weapon with which to attack the administration." (Lawrence, 590) In 2007, after the increase of pressure on the US administration, ironically Bush took advantage of the analogy of the war of Vietnam to justify his refusal of withdrawal from Iraq. He declared that "the U.S. pullout from Indochina had damaged American credibility in a way that invited subsequent communist challenges to U.S. interests around the world." He drew a parallel between this "premature withdrawal from Vietnam" and the catastrophic consequences of withdrawal of US troops from Iraq which would "similarly invite aggression by Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations watching vigilantly for any failure of American will." Bush's declarations urged critics and commentators because it's undoubted that the "catastrophe in Southeast Asia resulted from the fact that U.S. forces had withdrawn from Vietnam too late, not too soon." (Lawrence, 591)

Nevertheless, the US ambitions and expectations in Iraq proved the severe superficiality of policymakers. In an article entitled "*Is Iraq Becoming a New Vietnam?*" Orville Schell argues that "The administration originally expected the U.S.-led coalition to be welcomed with rice and rosewater, traditional Arab greetings." Therefore, following the fall of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad and

showing the celebrations of Iraqis in all world media, the American administration and policy makers took pride in their quick triumph and fall of dictator. Schell views that "The Bush administration didn't recognize that the problem of US in Iraq is not military; the American troops have done everything asked of them. The fundamental problem is political. The US should have won the hearts and minds of Iraqis. US should have increased the viability of Iraqi government. The Iraqi security forces should have helped the Iraqi government to have a political agenda and provide the context for this agenda to take root. Following these steps the US would have more success in nation building in Iraq than it did in Vietnam. (Schell, 2003: 3, 4)

5. Conclusion:

The number of people killed by the sanctions in Iraq is greater than the total number of people killed by all weapons of mass destruction in all of history. (Noam Chomsky, 2008) Moreover, the Bush administration is responsible for the political failures in Iraq. They made absolutely no plans to develop post-Saddam Iraq. They thought democracy alone would transform Iraq, and dismissed the lesson learned from Vietnam that the cornerstone of nation building is socioeconomic progress and social justice. Nevertheless, Bush put the burden of his administration failure in Iraq on the Iraqis themselves. The problem in Iraq all along is that there are many complexities in nation building, and the more serious problem is that the US administration does not understand these complexities nor the many difficulties that the Iraqis face. The worst of US expectations was only "a limited reaction from loyalists of ousted Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. The surprising scope of the insurgency and influx of foreign fighters has forced Washington to repeatedly lower expectations", as U.S. officials state. (Wright and Knickmeyer, 2005) One argues they forgot that "occupying troops in any foreign land initially may be welcomed as liberators, but the longer they remain; they inevitably will become despised as

foreign occupiers." This is not a new phenomenon in Iraq. It has *always* been this way---throughout history. (Scurfield, 2) There are no better examples of resistance to invasions and occupiers in history than the failed invasions of Russia by Napoleon in 1812 and by Hitler in 1941. Both falsely expected an easy victory but the invasion ended by a catastrophic defeat for both leaders.

The debate over the two wars will last for years. Until we learn more about many mistakes happened in the first and had been repeated in the second. It will be an argument without end. Interestingly, evidence suggested that military planners have committed many of the same mistakes in Iraq that their predecessors did in Vietnam. Watching the events of Iraq war, Anthony zinnia, a retired US Marine general, reported "I have seen this movie. It was called Vietnam." (Brigham, 12)

References:

1. Arreguin-Toft, I. *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
2. Barnes, F. "Mohammed Atta was Here and met with Saddam Hussein's Prague." *Weekly Standard*, August 12th, 2002.
3. Barrett D. M, *Uncertain Warrior: Lyndon Johnson and his Vietnam Advisors*. University Press of Kansas, 1993.
4. Brigham, R. *Iraq, Vietnam, and the Limits of American Power*. Public Affairs, USA, 2008.
5. Bush, George W. *The White House: Operation Iraqi Freedom*. 2003.
6. Chomsky, Noam. *Modern-Day American Imperialism: Middle East and Beyond* (2008).
7. Donaldson, G. *America at War since 1945: Politics and Diplomacy in Korea, Vietnam and the Gulf War*. Greenwood Press, USA, 1996.
8. Elliott, D. "Parallel Wars? Can Lessons of Vietnam be Applied to Iraq?" Pomona College, a lecture delivered at the Southeast Asia Forum, May 8th, 2006.
9. Gardner, L. C. *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam*. Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 1995.

10. Herring, G. (a) "America and Vietnam: The Unending War." *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1991/92 issue.
11. Kennedy, E. (a) A Speech Delivered at the Brookings Institution, Washington, D. C., April 5th, 2004.
----- (b) "Iraq is George Bush's Vietnam." CNN, April 6th, 2004.
----- (c) A Speech Delivered at George Washington University, Sep. 27th, 2004.
12. Lawrence, M. A. "Too Late or Too Soon? Debating the Withdrawal from Vietnam in the Age of Iraq." *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 34, No. 3. June 2010.
13. Lebovic, J. *The Limits of U.S. Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq*. Johns Hopkins University Press, USA, 2010.
14. McMaster, H. R. *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*. Harper Collins Books, USA, 1997.
15. Paul, T. V. *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations, Mar. 10th, 1994.
16. Scheer, C., Scheer, R. and Chaudhry, L. *The Five Biggest Lies Bush Told us about Iraq*. Alen & Unwin, Australia, 2003.
17. Schell, O. "Is Iraq Becoming a New Vietnam?" *Yale Global*, July 14th, 2003.
18. Scowcroft, B. "Don't Attack Saddam." *Wall Street Journal*, August 15th, 2002.
19. Scurfield, R. "40 Lessons Unlearned About War & Its Impact: From Vietnam to Iraq." 23rd Annual Meeting of the International Society for Traumatic Stress. Baltimore, MD, November 16th, 2007.
20. Steinglass. M. "Vietnam and Victory." *Boston Globe*, December 18th, 2005.
21. Wong, E. "Saddam Charged with Genocide of Kurds." *New York Times*, April 5th, 2006.
22. Woodward, B. *Plan of Attack*. New York, Simon and Shuster, 2004.
23. Wright, R. and Knickmeyer, E. "U.S. Lowers Sights on What Can Be Achieved in Iraq." *Washington Post*, August 14th, 2005.
24. Wright, R. "President's 'Strategy for Victory' Does Not Address Problems." *Washington Post*, December 1st, 2005.
25. Young M.B. *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*. HarperCollins, New York, 1991.

Websites:

- <http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/kurds/alliance.html>, CBC News, March 26th, 2003.
- WWW.CBC.CA/News