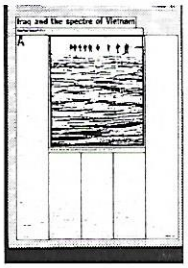

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Iraq and the spectre of Vietnam

Martin Stuart-Fox America's battle plan needs a better sense of history

Almost three weeks into what historians will undoubtedly call the Second Gulf War, it is evident that the opening phase has not gone according to plan. Iraqi troops are putting up more resistance than expected; some are resorting to guerrilla tactics; there has been no popular uprising against Saddam Hussein; and the forces of the "coalition of the willing" have not been widely hailed as liberators.

Various explanations have been offered: the Iraqi population is still cowed and terrified; Saddam's apparatus of terror remains in place; Iraqi army units have been stiffened by fanatical followers of Saddam with orders to shoot any soldier who refuses to fight; the Shia population is cautious because American betrayal of their uprising after the First Gulf War is fresh in their minds.

Another possible reason is that the air war has been less successful than predicted in sapping the will of the regime to resist because coalition pilots are operating under strict rules of engagement to reduce civilian casualties and the Iraqis have cynically placed military installations in civilian areas. Then there is the Turkish perfidy that has prevented the opening of a northern front. One US general has even suggested that the fault may lie with the Pentagon, for failing to program the forms and extent of Iraqi opposition into its war games.

Of course, the delay will be only temporary. The US is sending substantial reinforcements, and George Bush has promised that the war will go on for as long as it takes.

What is remarkable about the extent of Iraqi opposition is not that it is happening, but that this should occasion some surprise. After all, this is a regime with its back to the wall and no alternative but to fight. Since it is massively outgunned, it must resort to whatever tactics will even the balance. If the American leadership did not expect such resistance, why not? Is the experience of Vietnam so distant that the US army failed to take account of the possibility of guerrilla warfare? This seems incredible, now that the first flush of naive optimism has passed, and as the spectre of Vietnam begins to loom over Iraq.

The US took certain lessons from Vietnam, which Colin Powell applied in the First Gulf War. These were, from a military point of view: to amass an overwhelming force and unleash it without political restrictions; to keep US casualties to a minimum; and to limit adverse press reporting. Two corollaries of these lessons were: the value of maximising international support to share the burden of war, both military and financial; and the importance of propaganda in an age of global communications. And the recipe worked – so well that the defeat in Vietnam could be laid to rest.

There were, however, two other lessons that should have been learned from the Vietnam experience, but which did not affect the First Gulf War. These were that nationalism, not communism, provided the most powerful political motivation for the Vietcong; and that, in the face of superior military force, guerrilla warfare was the most effective response. Incredibly, these lessons of Vietnam, both military and political, are precisely the ones that the Bush administration has failed to heed.

Let us look again at the lessons of Vietnam for the Second Gulf War in the light of the First, beginning with political considerations. The Vietnam, or Second Indochina, War was fought in the international context of the Cold War, as a war to contain communism. Yet the US was able to convince remarkably few nations to join it. Apart from Australia and New Zealand, all were client Asian states (South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines). Among the states that refused to join the US, the most significant were Britain and France, both fellow members with America of the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation. Both had fought communist movements in Asia (in the Malayan Emergency and the First Indochina War respectively), and so should have been America's most experienced allies.

What the British and the French clearly understood, and what the US did not appreciate (though it should have, in the light of its own history), was that the wars in Indochina were fought in the name not of communism, but of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism. Communists might be leading that fight, but they did so in the name of nationalism. This the French knew at their cost. Yet the French experience was of slight interest to the American military, for, as one US officer put it, the French had lost.

The lack of international consensus and support from its closest allies weakened the American position in Vietnam. Yet those same allies were steadfast in their support for the US in the Cold War. In retrospect, the US lost the battle in Vietnam, but won the Cold War, in which it led a much broader international coalition.

The First Gulf War drew together most member states of the United Nations, including key Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey. Major states such as Germany and Japan which were not involved militarily made substantial financial contributions. By contrast, the war against Iraq was launched with minimal international backing (one significant military ally, plus Australia, with even more limited support from a few European nations, South Korea and Japan). Most importantly, the "coalition of the willing" has not managed to secure a significant Muslim presence, not even Turkey in any important sense.

The second lesson of Vietnam for this age of instant global communications centres upon propaganda, taken in its broadest sense of rhetoric, interpretation and argument from evidence and information. Unless they are spontaneous conflagrations exploiting pre-existent hatreds, wars have to be well prepared, especially in democracies with a free press. The case for war has to be argued

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convincingly and must rest on clear moral premises. Given that the "body count" eventually became the principal criterion for success in Vietnam, the rationale for that war in the end consisted of little more than killing communists. What eventually forced the US out of Vietnam was not simply military defeat by the Vietcong or "negative" reporting by the American and international media, but a lack of moral legitimacy in the eyes of its own people.

For the First Gulf War, a clear moral argument could be made: one member of the UN had invaded and annexed another. This took precedence in arguments for the war over the strategic and geopolitical need to expel Iraq from Kuwait to prevent the unacceptable concentration of oil wealth in the hands of a regime potentially ill-disposed to both the West and Israel. Thus the argument for the First Gulf War had been won before the war began. All that was necessary was to ensure the propaganda initiative was not lost by keeping the war as short and painless as possible. The longer the war, the greater the likelihood that images of death and destruction would provoke a moral reaction, as in Vietnam.

For the Second Gulf War, the propaganda preparation was a failure. No-one disagreed that Saddam was a monstrous tyrant, but few were convinced by American arguments for getting rid of him. That the US had every right to take revenge for September 11 against the Taliban in Afghanistan was widely accepted, and the brief American-led war was applauded. The attempt to go further and link the secular nationalist regime in Iraq with al-Qaeda was based on the most scant circumstantial evidence. Therefore, linking regime overthrow in Iraq to the war against terrorism was unconvincing. So was the argument that Saddam still had weapons of mass destruction, especially when it was undercut by the US refusal to allow UN weapons inspectors more time to find them.

To then suggest that the real reason for war was that the US wanted to free the Iraqi people and create a democratic model for the Arab world only made matters worse. Most of the world saw only single-minded American determination to occupy Iraq, and sought the "real" reason for this – unfinished business from the First Gulf War, Iraqi oil, protection of Israel, strategic advantage, all denied by the Bush administration. The result was that America and its allies, in the form of governments, not people, signally failed to lay the moral and intellectual foundations for war.

This made it all the more important that the other lessons of Vietnam were heeded, in particular that an overwhelming force should be amassed to ensure a brief war, and that American casualties should be kept to a minimum. The first seems to have been compromised by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's interference in Pentagon planning, notwithstanding his recent denials, specifically to reduce the size of the invasion for political reasons – something I was told about in Washington as early as last August. The second continues to be of concern.

One lesson that *has* been taken to heart, for good political reasons, is the need to limit American casualties. No images from Vietnam sapped civilian morale and support for the war so thoroughly as those of American dead and wounded. The outcry when Americans killed in Iraq were recently shown on Arab television networks demonstrates how sensitive the Bush administration is to such pictures. As the war drags on, however, American casualties are sure to rise, endangering popular support for the war in the US and Bush's chances of re-election.

The American war machine is also concerned about the effect of civilian casualties. Vietnam showed that television viewers are quite properly shocked by the images they see of the impact of war on a civilian population. This is entirely natural. Civil society functions on the basis of moral principles that forbid murder and mayhem, which soldiers have to be conditioned to ignore as part of the job. In the First Gulf War there were relatively few images of civilian dead, except for the terrible missile hit on a civilian air raid shelter in Baghdad. In

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this war, US television networks have so far been reluctant to show images of civilian dead, though journalists "embedded" with coalition forces are reporting incidents as they occur. This brings us to the media and their role in reporting modern wars. The media was blamed by the US conservative right for America's defeat in the Vietnam War, because they exaggerated the impact of the Tet offensive of 1968, because they revealed the brutality of one side and not the other, and because their editorialising was unbalanced. In the First Gulf War, therefore, the press was closely controlled.

What makes the Second Gulf War different from the first is the media coverage of the other side, especially by the Arab television network al-Jazeera. Iraqi television, like Radio Hanoi, can be dismissed as propaganda, but news coverage from the Iraqi side by independent networks and correspondents cannot – or at least not as easily. Moreover serious television coverage of the war is not limited as it was in the Vietnam War mostly to the major networks' evening news. News on the war in Iraq is available 24 hours a day on a variety of channels.

The lessons of Vietnam in this age of instant global communications do not point towards press control or censorship, however. The media is too diverse to be politically managed in any effective way. The real lesson of Vietnam with respect to the media is that information about any conflict is a crucial dimension of the conflict itself. The Vietcong were better tacticians than the Americans in this regard. At first, given the context of the Cold War, there was little opposition to the Vietnam War. That developed later, through interplay between Hanoi and the worldwide Vietnam peace movement. The war in Iraq has had far less support from the beginning, even in the US. That is why those banging the drums of war must have a convincing case that all other avenues have been exhausted.

One of the most powerful early images from the Vietnam War was when CBS showed American marines burning a village after the military had denied it had happened. When words contradict images, people believe their eyes and conclude that authorities have lied. This happened time and again in Vietnam, and it is already happening in Iraq with respect to civilian casualties. On the other hand, if predictions are not borne out by events, authorities seem incompetent or stupid or ill-informed.

Two lessons from Vietnam did not apply to the First Gulf War, but do to the Second. The first has to do with motivation, the second with military tactics. Americans in Vietnam found it difficult to understand what made the Vietcong fight. How often did one hear the question: why do their Vietnamese fight and ours don't? The Vietcong fought because it was their country and they wanted to rid it of foreigners. The very American presence was an affront to Vietnamese nationalism. During the First Gulf War, nationalism was not a factor. The Iraqi army of occupation in Kuwait knew it had no right to be there, and it fled. But Iraqis are fighting now in Iraq, and as we know from history – think of the Soviet Union in World War II – a nation will rally behind even a tyrant in the face of foreign invasion. Many Iraqis fighting the invading coalition are doing so not for Saddam, but for their country, their religion and Arab pride.

Why was this response not foreseen? Perhaps because the Bush administration suffers from some peculiar limitations. Apart from Powell, few in the top levels of the administration have any experience of war. Bush himself avoided going to Vietnam. He has travelled little and has a limited understanding of how the rest of the world lives and thinks. He and his top advisers are ideologically driven, in that they are totally convinced of the superiority of America and its way of life. Such people do not easily imagine themselves in the place of others.

The second lesson of Vietnam that did not apply in the First Gulf War is that in the face of overwhelmingly superior force, the only possible tactic for the weaker side is guerrilla warfare, and that this can be remarkably effective. It seems extraordinary to anyone who remembers Vietnam that coalition planners apparently failed to consider the possibility, indeed the likelihood, of guerrilla action by Iraqi irregular forces, such as the Fedayeen, most of whom would be dressed in civilian clothes and would merge with the general population. Guerrillas do not win wars, but they do prevent peace. Does no-one remember the Vietcong and their black pyjamas?

In the street fighting that lies ahead as coalition forces drive into Baghdad, most of their opponents will not be in army uniforms. The more resolute will fight street by street; the more fanatical will adopt the suicide tactics that have already claimed several Americans and one Australian. The result will inevitably be more coalition and civilian casualties. The Iraqis are keeping a count of their "martyrs". Perhaps we shall end up compiling daily body counts in a war of urban attrition. For even after Baghdad is taken, guerrilla activity is likely to continue.

If the spectre of Vietnam begins once again to haunt America, it will be because, as George Santayana reminded us, those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. Even if Saddam is killed and his regime overthrown, opposition to American control of the Arab heartland is unlikely to evaporate, any more than Palestinian opposition has in response to the Israeli seizure of Arab land. Even Iraqi opponents of Saddam have made it clear they will also oppose any attempt by the US to remain in control of Iraq. And the Shia will not look kindly on infidel occupation of their shrines in Karbala and Najaf. Pacification,

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as opposed to regime change, may yet prove as elusive for the US in Iraq as it was in Vietnam.

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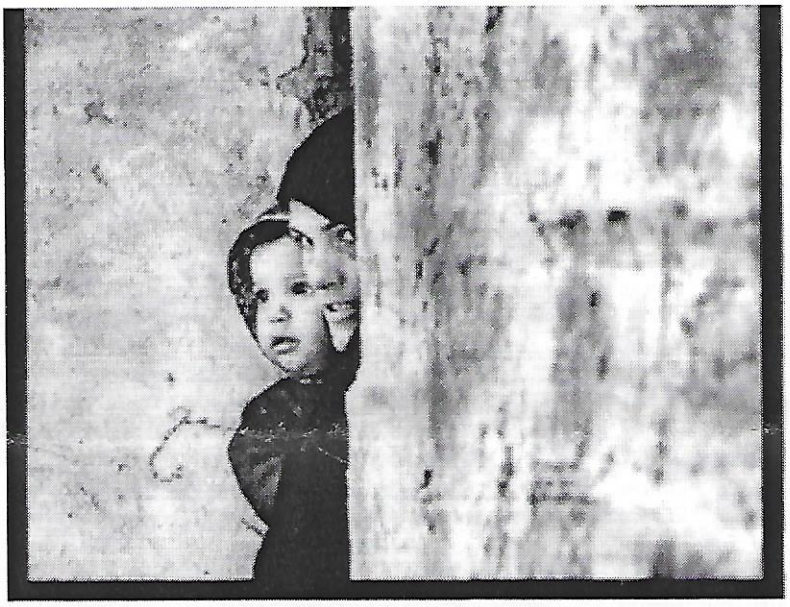

Iraqis are fighting for their country and their religion, not for Saddam. Photograph: REUTERS