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The quagmire of denouncing a 'quagmire'

When I hear pundits warn that Iraq is becoming a "quagmire," I wince. "Quagmire" is a word made famous during the Vietnam War. The current conflict in Iraq comes out of a very different history, but there are some chilling parallels. One of them has scarcely been mentioned: These days, the editorial positions of major U.S. newspapers have an echo like a dirge.

Of course, the nation's mainstream press does not speak with a monolithic editorial voice. At one end of the limited spectrum, the strident and influential Wall Street Journal cannot abide any doubts. Its editorials explain, tirelessly, that the war was Good and the occupation is Good – and those who doubt are fools and knaves. (LBJ called such dissenters "Nervous Nellies.")

The Journal editorial writers fervently promote what used to be called the domino theory. The day after the U.N. headquarters in Baghdad blew up last month, the paper closed its gung-ho editorial by touting a quote from Centcom commander Gen. John Abizaid: "If we can't be successful here, then we won't be successful in the global war on terror. It is going to be hard. It is going to be long and sometimes bloody, but we just have to stick with it."

As the summer of 2003 nears its end, most newspaper editorials are decidedly less complacent about the occupation of Iraq. Some lambast the Bush administration for deceptive spin, poor planning and go-it-alone arrogance. A big worry is that the U.S. government now faces a quagmire.

During the late 1960s, that kind of concern grew at powerful media institutions. After several years of assurances from the Johnson administration about the Vietnam War, rosy scenarios for military success were in disrepute.

But here's a revealing fact: In early 1968, the Boston Globe conducted a survey of 39 major U.S. daily newspapers and found that not a single one had editorialized in favor of U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. While millions of Americans were demanding an immediate pullout, such a concept was still viewed as extremely unrealistic by the editorial boards of big daily papers – including the liberal New York Times and

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Washington Post. Yes, some editorials fretted about a quagmire. But the emphasis was on developing a winnable strategy – not ending the war. Pull out the U.S. troops? The idea was unthinkable.

And so it is today. Consider the lead editorial that appeared in The New York Times on the same day that The Wall Street Journal was giving Gen. Abizaid the last word. "The Bush administration has to commit sufficient additional resources, and, if necessary, additional troops," the Times editorialized. The newspaper went on to describe efforts in Iraq as "now the most important American foreign policy endeavor." In other words, the occupation that resulted from an entirely illegitimate war should be seen as entirely legitimate.

A week later, the Times followed up with a similar tone — reminiscent of the can't-back-down resolve that propelled countless entreaties for more effective "pacification" during the Vietnam War. Articulating what passes for dissent among elite U.S. media, the Aug. 27 editorial cautioned that "the United States will pay a high price in blood and treasure if the Bush administration persists in its misguided effort to pacify and rebuild Iraq without extensive international support."

Troops from other nations are being imported. But that does little to make the occupation of Iraq less of a U.S. operation. The Vietnam War had its multilateral fig leaves too; the war was supposedly an "allied" effort because it included participation from Filipino, Australian and South Korean troops.

When the Bush administration was striving to use the United Nations last fall, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman applauded the attempt to manipulate the world body. For a while in November, he was happy: "The Bush team discovered that the best way to legitimize its overwhelming might – in a war of choice – was not by simply imposing it, but by channeling it through the U.N."

Current media appeals for multilateral policies rarely go beyond nostrums like giving the handpicked Iraqi leaders more prominent roles, recruiting compliant natives and foreigners for security functions, and getting the United Nations more involved. But whatever the U.N. role in Iraq turns out to be, the U.S. government still insists on remaining in charge.

Despite the compromises, that's the bottom line. The Bush administration is not letting go of a country that has so many attractive features to offer — including a central geopolitical foothold in the Middle East, access to extensive military bases for the Pentagon, and ... oh yes ... about 112 billion barrels of known oil reserves under the sand. ■