

Vietnam-Iraq: The unreported parallel

NEW YORK, MAY 2, 2005 – There is a word missing in most of the coverage of Iraq. It's a ghost-laden word that conjures up distressing memories that Washington and most of our media prefer to keep in that proverbial "lock box," hidden away in dusty archives and footage libraries,

The word is Vietnam.

Its absence was never more noticeable than in the coverage this past weekend of the 30th anniversary of the Vietnam war, marked in Vietnam with celebrations, but largely ignored in America where CNN led with the story of a bride who went missing when she had second thoughts.

Is this denial or is it deliberate? Just this past month, the national Smithsonian Museum of American History installed a new patriotically correct permanent war-positive exhibition, "The Price of Freedom: Americans at War."

If you want to know about the pain of the war official America wants you to forget, you have to head a few blocks south on the mall in Washington to the Vietnam memorial with its nearly 60,000 names engraved in black marble. That's where you will see the tears of visitors every day and their lingering memories three decades later.

While American media outlets avoid any parallels – with pundits insisting that none exist – overseas some see what many of us don't or won't. A BBC story by Matt Frei reports, "Thirty years after the end of the war, Vietnam continues to divide and haunt America far more than the country that lost 50 times as many people."

His is one of few Vietnam reports that references Iran even though the Iraq connection is buried in the last paragraph, an association even the journalist seems uncomfortable with:

"Iraq is far from becoming another Vietnam. But today the ghosts of the jungle are busy getting resurrected in the sands around Baghdad."

What are those ghosts? And why do they deserve more than media burial in the jungles of Asia or the sands of Iraq?

Here are some of the largely ignored parallels:

1. Both wars were illegal acts of pre-emptive aggression unsanctioned by international law or world opinion. Earlier, U.S. interventions involved successive US administrations. JFK's CIA helped put Saddam in power, Reagan armed him to fight Iran. George Bush, 41 led the first Gulf War against him. Clinton tightened sanctions. George Bush, 43 invaded again. Five Administrations – Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford fought in Vietnam.

2. Both wars were launched with deception. In Iraq it was the now proven phony WMD threat and contrived Saddam-Osama connection. In Vietnam, it was the fabricated Gulf of Tonkin incident and the elections mandated by the Geneva agreement that were canceled by Washington in 1956 when the US feared Ho Chi Minh would win.

3. The government lied regularly in both wars. Back then, the lies were pronounced a “credibility gap.” Today, they are considered acceptable “information warfare.” In Saigon military briefers conducted discredited “5 O’Clock Follies” press conferences. In this war, the Pentagon spoon-fed info at a Hollywood style briefing center in Doha.

4. The US press was initially an enthusiastic cheerleader in both wars. When Vietnam protest grew and the war seen as a lost cause, the media frame changed. In Iraq today most of the media is trapped in hotel rooms. Only one side is covered now whereas in Vietnam, there was more reporting occasionally from the other. In Vietnam, the accent was on progress and “turned corners.” The same is true in Iraq.

5. In both wars, prisoners were abused. In South Vietnam, thousands of captives were tortured in what were the called “tiger cages.” Vietnamese POWs were often killed; In North Vietnam, some US POWs were abused after bombing civilians. In Iraq, POWs on both sides were also mistreated. It was US soldiers that first leaked major war crimes and abuses. In Vietnam, Ron Ridenour disclosed the My Lai Massacre. In Iraq, it was a soldier who first told investigators about the torture in Abu Ghraib prison. (Seymour Hersh the reporter who exposed My-Lai in Vietnam later exposed illegal abuses in Iraq.)

6. Illegal weapons were “deployed” in both wars. The US dropped napalm, used cluster bombs against civilians and sprayed toxic agent orange in Vietnam. Cluster bombs and updated Mark 77 napalm-like firebombs were

dropped on Iraqis. Depleted uranium was added to the arsenal of prohibited weapons in Iraq.

7. Both wars claimed to be about promoting democracy. Vietnam staged elections and saw a succession of governments controlled by the US. come and go. Iraq has had one election so far in which most voters say they were casting ballots primarily to get the US to leave. The US has stage-managed Iraq's interim government. Exiles were brought back and put in power. Vietnam's Diem came from New Jersey, Iraq's Allawi from Britain.

8. Both wars claimed to be about noble international goals. Vietnam was pictured as a crusade against aggressive communism and falling dominos. Iraq was sold as a front in a global war on terrorism. Neither claim proved true.

9. An imperial drive for resource control and markets helped drive both interventions. Vietnam had rubber and manganese and rare minerals. Iraq has oil. In both wars, any economic agenda was officially denied and ignored by most media outlets.

10. Both wars took place in countries with cultures we never understood or spoke the language. Both involved "insurgents" whose military prowess was underestimated and misrepresented. In Vietnam, we called the "enemy" communists; in Iraq we call them foreign terrorists. (Soldiers had their own terms, "gooks" in Vietnam, "ragheads" in Iraq) In both countries, they were in fact an indigenous resistance that enjoyed popular support. (Both targeted and brutalized people they considered collaborators with the invaders just as our own Revolution went after Americans who backed the British.) In both wars, as in all wars, innocent civilians died in droves.

11. In both countries the US promised to help rebuild the damages caused by US bombing. In Vietnam, a \$2 billion presidential reconstruction pledge was not honored. In Iraq, the electricity and other services are still out in many areas. In both wars US companies and suppliers have profited handsomely: Brown & Root in Vietnam; Halliburton in Iraq, to cite but two.

12. In Vietnam, the Pentagon's counter-insurgency effort failed to "pacify" the countryside even with a half a million US soldiers "in country." The insurgency in Iraq is growing despite the best efforts of US soldiers. More have died since President Bush proclaimed "mission accomplished" than during the invasion.

The Vietnamese forced the US into negotiations for the Paris Peace

Agreement. When the agreement was continually violated, they brilliantly staged a final offensive that surprised and routed a superior million-man Saigon Army. Can the Iraqi resistance do the same?

The BBC is wondering, too, reminding us, “As the casualties mounted so did the questions about how much a threat the Vietcong could really pose. Today another pre-emptive war against an enemy far from home has posed similar questions.”

As the insurgency in Iraq escalates and continues to seize the initiative with the capacity to attack where and when it wants, is it unthinkable to suspect that another April 30th campaign of the kind that “liberated” Saigon is possible in Baghdad?

We have already seen “the fall” of Baghdad. Can it “fall” again?

Of course not!

Repeat after me. We are winning.

Democracy is on the march.

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