

Uncomfortable parallels between Iraq and Vietnam

The longer the war in Iraq goes on, the more concerned I get. Here's why.
Back in 1966, just as the Vietnam War was really heating up, I was working in Washington as the chief of staff for a Michigan congressman, Paul H. Todd Jr. I spent a day in July at the White House, much of it talking with President Lyndon Johnson about the war. At the end, I was orally offered a job as a special assistant to the president, with general responsibility of reaching out to young people about the war.

I wound up not taking the job. But I do remember vividly my conversation with President Johnson, and today I am increasingly troubled by the parallels between the wars in Vietnam and Iraq.

The first has to do with the economy. During the war in Vietnam, President Johnson's economic policy was to have both "guns and butter." He rejected tax increases to pay for the rapidly increasing cost of the war. The resulting ballooning federal deficit helped drive inflation into the double digits in 1969.

1970s. The response of the Federal Reserve Board — to push up interest rates to double-digit levels — triggered the devastating recession of the early 1980s.

Today we face much the same situation. The federal budget is already billions in the red, in part because of the recession and in part because of the big tax cut passed by Congress last year. And now President George W. Bush wants another big tax cut, \$720 billion this time, "to stimulate the economy." The administration has also requested a supplemental appropriation of \$75 billion to pay for the war in Iraq so far. Most experts figure the full cost will be at least \$200 billion, not counting the continuing expense of peacekeeping and reconstructing Iraq after the war.

Economists are already warning of a "fiscal train wreck," a compound of current federal deficits, additional tax cuts and rapidly rising war costs that will result in much, much larger deficits. Deficit spending usually results in inflation, and big deficits usually result in big inflation. And the standard way to control inflation — by raising interest rates — usually results in a full-blown recession.

The second parallel concerns persistent disputes within the government about strategy.

In the case of Vietnam, military leaders constantly chided civilian politicians, faced with an increasingly unpopular war, with trying to scrap on committing adequate men and weapons to win the war. In Iraq, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has come under growing criticism from military officers that the initial allied combat force of 180,000 troops is too small and too light on armor to protect a 300-mile supply line and win the battle for Baghdad.

In the case of Vietnam, political leaders worried about rising world opinion against the war resisted military requests to escalate by mining Hanoi harbor or using nuclear weapons. In Iraq, military commanders are already concerned that restrictive rules of engagement are inhibiting our forces

from firing on hospitals, mosques and civilians being used as shields by Iraqi guerrillas. But the administration, alarmed at the prospect of American-deployed mosques being featured on Arab TV, is boxed in, caught between an urge for brutal effectiveness and increasingly hostile world opinion.

The third parallel has to do with our failure to understand the enemy.

After Vietnam, then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara admitted he and other war planners didn't understand Vietnamese history and culture, let alone the political dynamics of colonial French Indochina. The Vietnamese regarded American troops as nothing more than the latest bunch of invaders and were prepared to fight us to the death.

The Iraq war began with an attempt to "decapitate" the regime by killing Saddam Hussein and his entire team in their bunker that, unfortunately, failed. American officers are now saying how surprised they are by the Iraqi will to fight. "We predicted this entire campaign on mass defections and surrender, and that hasn't happened," a senior Pentagon officer told the Associated Press last week. Worse, it's beginning to look as though Iraqis regard us as infidel invaders rather than democratic liberators.

Other parallels come quickly to mind. In Vietnam, the chain of command bypassed the military chiefs and ran right up to President Johnson, who personally made targeting decisions. In Iraq, the chain of command evidently runs straight to Secretary Rumsfeld, who has imposed his ideas about proper strategy and mix of forces on reluctant military chiefs.

In Vietnam, the justifying ideology was the "domino theory," which held that if Vietnam went communist, so too would the rest of southeast Asia. In Iraq, the neoconservative ideology held that "shock and awe" would lead to the quick collapse of Saddam's regime and pave the way for a wholesale realignment of the Middle East — the same domino theory, but in reverse!

Both wars suffered from a confused exit strategy. In Vietnam, the options were either to win the war by going nuclear or suffer the indignity of a forced withdrawal. In Iraq, the options are becoming mutually corrosive. Destroying Saddam's regime requires destroying Baghdad, but winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqis requires not destroying Baghdad.

I have no idea when or how this war will end; I pray we will win it quickly and decisively.

But I am still haunted by the last glimpse I had of President Johnson on that day back in 1966. We were alone. He was sitting at a small desk in a little working office, just off the big ceremonial Oval Office. He looked up at me and asked what I thought was the fundamental problem with the war in Vietnam. I answered, "It's because those little guys in black pajamas just keep coming and coming." He leaped from his chair, took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes hard and looked up at me. "I know, I know," he sighed.

Phil Power is the chairman of the board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734) 953-2047 or at power@hometownlfr.com.

Honor troops by supporting free, open debate about war

We don't have correspondents embedded with troops on the dusty and dangerous road to Baghdad. We don't have retired generals handy to offer minute-by-minute commentary on what all the maneuvering means. We don't have a White House correspondent waiting for President Bush's return from Camp David.

We're community newspapers. We cover local news, but we cannot escape the war. It is the primary focus of everyone we meet. It's the all-consuming topic of conversation, even in the midst of the Oscars and the

NCAA basketball tournament, which would usually dominate early spring conversations.

And sometimes world news becomes local news. When local young men and women are sent off to war, we want to tell everybody who they are, why they decided to join the military and what their families are thinking. And so many of these young people make the ultimate sacrifice, we will tell those stories as well.

This conflict, like most in recent years, is controversial. The people who live in our communities have a wide variety of opinions on the conduct of the war. As a local newspaper, we have an obligation to report on those opinions. If a group of ministers organizes and releases a statement opposing the war, that's a story. If a group of veterans releases a statement supporting the troops, that's a story. If students at a local high school walk out in protest to the war and another group of students counters their protest, that's a story.

Many of our communities have residents with ties to the Middle East. Some of them are supportive of U.S. actions against Saddam Hussein's government, but others are fearful for their friends and relatives. Some have experienced resentment and abuse because of their ethnic background. That's an ongoing and important story in this country of many peoples from many lands.

We will cover those stories. We'll also open our editorial pages to letters to the editor and op-ed columns voicing support and opposition to the current military operations and the political policies that drive them.

That's what a free press is all about. We received a letter recently complaining because we put a story on the front page of one of our Observer newspapers about a lone protester against the war. The story told how he had been greeted with both support and opposition. The letter writer was of the opinion that covering this man's protest was somehow un-American and demoralizing for the troops. He also voiced the opinion that "every American is entitled to express their own freedom of speech," but others shouldn't have to "see it or hear it."

An ex-Marine confronted the protester with the usual "if you were in Iraq, you wouldn't be able to protest." Yes, that's true, but this man was not in Iraq, he was in America doing

what he has an "inalienable" right to do, protest against government policy. The ex-Marine had an equal right to argue with the protester's point of view. In the end the ex-Marine walked away, agreeing to disagree.

What is un-American is to assume that the policies of the current government or any sitting government cannot be challenged. It is in the debate over issues, even issues of war, that we come to a clearer understanding of what's happening and we keep the government honest in its prosecution of its policies.

Many of those who oppose this war, and many pacifists who oppose any war, defend their position as supportive of the troops now engaged in battle. They don't want those troops or the people of Iraq in harm's way. They want to save lives.

Others believe that the only way to support the troops is to drop all opposition to the government policy that has placed them in battle. They believe any opposition undermines morale.

Those are two points of view, among many. As a newspaper, we have an obligation to report on those different points of view. To this editor, the war in Iraq is troubling and complicated. Saddam Hussein is a dangerous dictator who has terrorized his own countrymen. He has used chemical weapons against neighboring Iran and against minority Kurds. He is a destabilizing force in the region. He may have weapons of mass destruction.

The international community is almost unanimous on these points. They differ on the best approach and timetable for dealing with the problem. The U.S. government has failed diplomatically in not making its case to the majority of the world's countries and, with Britain, has created a dubious "coalition of the willing" to go ahead with the war despite world opinion.

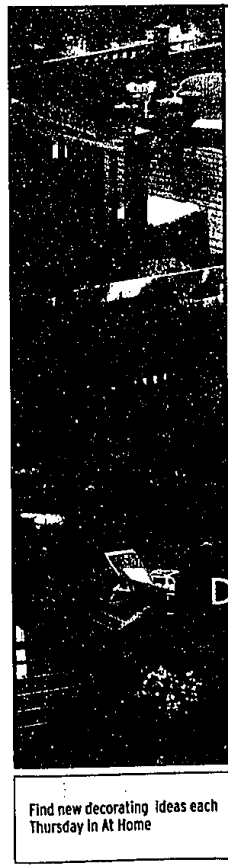
In addition, there are troubling questions about profiting from the war. On these matters, the administration isn't even subtle. The first contract for postwar cleanup was given to a subsidiary of Vice President Cheney's former company, which gave him a multimillion-dollar payout. War rouser Richard Perle has a contract with a telecommunications company that will profit from the war. American oil companies are already in place as a major part of the post-war transition team.

But, yes, American troops are now in harm's way. They have been sent, as soldiers have always been sent, to carry out their nation's bidding. Reports are that the U.S. is taking every precaution to minimize civilian deaths. U.S. troops have experienced fierce fighting and unprecedented dust storms. Some have been killed in battle and by friendly fire. Others are now in captivity.

Their bravery and their dedication to this country cannot be denied. They are carrying out their mission with honor and deserve our respect.

We respect them most fully by continuing to be a free country that welcomes debate.

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