

Introduction

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*The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever
in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula.*

—George H.W. Bush, 1991

In the first week of August 2006, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld came to Capitol Hill to testify in open session before the Senate Armed Services Committee. The war in Iraq, now in its third year, had become a desperate struggle against myriad forces unleashed by the American invasion. It was not supposed to be this way, of course. Once Saddam Hussein had been eliminated, Iraqis were supposed to lead the way to a new Middle East. That had not happened. Instead, Iraq verged on complete chaos and civil war. Rumsfeld faced a hostile committee, with both Democrats and Republicans challenging the way the war had been conducted. Once the administration's media superstar in the days of "mission accomplished," the defense secretary, with his clever witticisms and sarcastic put-downs, no longer charmed his audiences.

"We need to be realistic about the consequences," Rumsfeld said in his opening statement. "If we left Iraq prematurely, as the terrorists demand, the enemy would tell us to leave Afghanistan and then withdraw from the Middle East. And if we left the Middle East, they'd order us and all those who don't share their militant ideology to leave what they call the occupied Muslim lands from Spain to the Philippines." Then he reached back in American folklore for some note that would resonate with angry legislators and turn the war into a new chapter in the national epic. "Americans didn't cross oceans and settle a wilderness and build history's greatest democracy only to run away from a bunch of murderers and extremists who try to kill everyone that they cannot convert and to tear down what they could never build."

Editorialists suddenly awoke to what they heard in Rumsfeld's statement. It was the domino thesis from the beginning of the Vietnam War! And now here it was again, only this time coming after the Iraq War (also sometimes known as Gulf War II) had already claimed 2,500 American lives and perhaps more than 80,000 Iraqis in a conflict that now appeared endless. *The New York Times* declared that Rumsfeld was "stuck in a time warp."

“You could practically hear the dominoes falling as he told the Senate Armed Services Committee yesterday that it was dangerous for Americans to even talk about how to end the war in Iraq.”¹

The increasingly skeptical *Times* editorialists, who had originally supported the war—as they had Vietnam in its early and middle years—were not the only ones to voice criticism of Rumsfeld. As might be expected, the neoconservative phalanx that had pushed for war felt they had been deceived, too, but not, of course, by the objective. As conservative critics had hammered McNamara in Vietnam, the current generation of neoconservatives is already ready for the history battles that will inevitably accompany the Iraq “syndrome.” “Successful counterinsurgencies,” argues one prominent neocon, Reuel Marc Gerecht, “are always ugly and morally challenging. What is so sad in Iraq is that the civilian losses caused by the U.S. are not compensated by a larger American military effort to secure the country from holy warriors, insurgents and sectarian militiamen who live to slaughter innocent civilians and Iraq’s chance for a more humane, democratic future.”²

Treating the Iraq War as a mismanaged effort with tragic consequences is stunningly like the conservative revisionist argument about Vietnam, only this time it is associated not only with neoconservatives but with liberals as well. Thomas Friedman, for example, who writes that his heart is with the “Democratic mainstream,” not the dovish elements of the party too ready to abandon the mission, sets out the main postulate for a historical critique that will preserve dangerous illusions about both Vietnam and Iraq. Accusing the Bush administration of massive errors of judgment, he asks, “Why did you ‘tough guys’ fight the Iraq war with the Rumsfeld Doctrine—just enough troops to lose—and not the Powell Doctrine of overwhelming force to create the necessary foundations of any democracy-building project, which is security?”³ While neither liberals nor neoconservatives can find anything good these days to say about the way the war was managed, the truly significant lessons of Vietnam for Iraq—and for the future—remain largely obscured in current political debates in Congress and among the punditry.

What can’t be obscured is that thirty years and more after the fall of Saigon, the United States finds itself bogged down once again in a war against an enemy whose low-grade weapons defy the technological superiority of the world’s greatest military power. Why did this happen? The lessons of Vietnam had supposedly been learned. “Shock and awe” had replaced the graduated escalation that failed in Vietnam. Never again, the nation was told, would American soldiers be called upon to fight a war political leaders in Washington lacked the will to win. And yet here we are, seemingly back where we left off (or rather where we began, with the domino thesis) in Southeast Asia. The specter of Vietnam looms darkly over Baghdad and the



Green Zone, and its shadow spreads far to the east across Iran to the resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan.

What should have been learned instead? If nothing else, Vietnam taught that advanced technology and military force cannot solve political problems that arose during and before the old colonial era when Europe ruled the world. The ambitions that produced the colonial empires and the opposing forces that broke them down are little changed today. Indeed, if anything, the search for energy resources and global outlets is more pressing in the twenty-first century than it was at any time during the original Age of Imperialism, when the quest took explorers and exploiters into faraway lands. Today, the stakes are higher, the rivalries greater, the faraway lands uncomfortably “closer”—and the future more clouded than at any time in the past. Vietnam was often called the last of the colonial wars, but Iraq is most certainly the greatest so far of the neocolonial wars as the great powers seek out spheres of influence and special advantages in the oil-rich areas bordering the Persian Gulf.