

## Washington's Wars and Occupations:

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#### TODAY'S ANTIWAR DILEMMAS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In March 1965, before ordering the first deployment of U.S. ground troops to Vietnam (U.S. "advisers" had been there for years) President Lyndon Johnson told Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara: "I don't think anything is gonna be as bad as losing, and I don't see any way of winning."

Johnson had just received a classified briefing saying that the U.S. client regime in South Vietnam was about to collapse. Military experts informed the President that only a huge U.S. military commitment could avert defeat in the short run. They said that looking ahead even "warfare of any design, scale or duration" could not assure lasting success. Maxwell Taylor, then the country's most famous active-duty general and Ambassador to South Vietnam, warned against sending U.S. troops, arguing that Vietnamese civilians would turn to patriotic resistance against the "white-faced soldier, armed, equipped and trained as he is" as a successor to the hated French colonialists.

A few days later Johnson commiserated about Vietnam with his old friend Richard Russell of Georgia, chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "I guess we got no choice, but it scares the death out of me," Johnson said. "Those marines, they'll be killing a whole lot of friendly Vietnamese," Russell responded.

"Airplanes ain't worth as damn, Dick" Johnson continued. Bombing only "lets you get your hopes up...A man can fight if he can see daylight down the road somewhere, but there ain't no daylight in Vietnam."

The heartbreaking truth is that officials at the top level of the U.S. government **KNEW** they could not win in Vietnam (and **WHY** they couldn't win) even before the first bombing runs and deployments of U.S. ground troops. And they were right. Ten years later the Vietnam War ended exactly the way it would have in 1965 if Washington not massively intervened: U.S. troops fled the country under enemy fire, and Vietnam was reunified under the leadership of the communist revolutionaries who had been anchoring the fight for Vietnamese Independence for 50-plus years.

The cost between 1965 and 1975 was more than two million Vietnamese and 50,000 U.S. dead; uncounted wounded and innumerable lives ravaged on all sides, much of Vietnam poisoned by Agent Orange for two generations.

All this carnage because of U.S. leaders' calculations about the damage to empire if Washington was forced out of Vietnam, as well as fear of being politically destroyed at home by the charge of "losing Vietnam." It took a decade, but in the end the combination of Vietnamese tenacity, international isolation and protest, and antiwar resistance at home forced the guardians of empire to confront the fact that they would pay a bigger political price for staying than leaving. At a huge cost in lives and anguish, the U.S. was finally forced to withdraw.

## AND NOW IRAQ

George Bush and a few ideology-based neocons may still believe that the U.S. can “win” in Iraq. But all the reality-based sectors of the U.S. elite – from the top generals in the Pentagon and Baghdad to the authors of the Baker-Hamilton report to the Democratic and (most) Republican leaders on Capitol Hill – know this is a fantasy. But just like Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara and Richard Russell in 1965, the imperatives of being Imperial Guardians prevent them from ending the carnage.

In fact, some of the imperatives to stay in Iraq are stronger than those which produced a decade of senseless slaughter in Vietnam.

Vietnam after all was important to Washington only as a “domino” in the Cold War. In itself the “loss” of Vietnam didn’t deprive the U.S. of any crucial resources or endanger some area “vital to national defense.” But Iraq sits on huge oil fields right in the center of a region absolutely central to the world’s energy supply. Control over the Middle East has been a central concern of Washington for decades and if anything it acquired heightened importance after the end of the Cold War. The strategic alliance between the U.S. and Israel, and the influence of blank-check-for-Israel advocates in U.S. political life, is also a big factor pressing for a U.S.-stay-forever policy in the Middle East that was nonexistent regarding Southeast Asia.

Also complicating matters: The Vietnamese struggle was led by a left-wing party with overwhelming support among the Vietnamese population. The Vietnamese revolutionaries received sympathy and solidarity from people of conscience across the globe and were backed by the then-powerful Soviet bloc, China and the international left. While the Iraqi people likewise have the sympathy of most of humanity, Iraq has no unified political force commanding the allegiance of a majority or the solidarity of a broad-based international movement. On the contrary, even as most Iraqis oppose the U.S. occupation, competing Iraqi factions are engaged in a bloody civil war.

Inside the U.S., the anti-Vietnam War movement emerged out of a period of progressive advance and was infused with near-utopian optimism. First and foremost, the Black freedom struggle had become a powerful force which every other opposition movement drew on for lessons, inspiration and strength. There was a direct line from the African-American upsurge to the revolt within the military itself, as Black soldiers spearheaded the G.I. rebellion which rendered the U.S. occupation force virtually unusable by 1971.

Today’s antiwar movement, in contrast, follows 30-plus years of right-wing rollback, which has weakened the Black community and the other social sectors that provided the base for the antiwar, anti-racist and progressive motion of the 1960s.

Last, for all the anticommunist hysteria of the Vietnam era, no one from the International Communist Conspiracy (and certainly no Vietnamese) ever actually attacked the U.S. But the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 was an all-too-real crime against humanity which traumatized the country. It provided Washington with a perfect excuse to justify its military adventures, and with a powerful ideological weapon for manipulating popular fears, demonizing Arabs and Muslims, and intimidating critics.

## **WHAT IS SURPRISING AND WHAT IS NOT**

Given these – and many other – realities, it should come as no surprise that those who hold power in Washington are not yet ready to quit Iraq. No surprise that the Bush administration still talks about “making progress” while spinning out one lie after another. No surprise that top Democrats bash George Bush and talk the antiwar talk but won’t cut off funds for the killing. No surprise that even many politicians who realize that the occupation is futile are too scared of being charged with “surrendering-Iraq-to-the-terrorists” to take a firm stand. No surprise that Democratic presidential hopeful Hilary Clinton, as the New York Times put it, “has been practicing her salute...cultivating relationships with generals and admirals, prepping herself on wartime needs and strategy.” No surprise that there is a huge gap between the sentiments of the U.S. people – the majority of whom now favor a strict timeline for getting out of Iraq – and a policy-making elite that is still stuck in Lyndon Johnson’s belief that nothing “is gonna be as bad as losing.”

All this is even more immoral than it is futile. But it is how an imperial government works.

Indeed, more remarkable than Washington’s persistence is how badly (from an imperialist point of view) the Bush administration has bungled its Iraq adventure; how many bitter divisions have emerged within the camp of those who initially hailed the war as righteous and successful; how large a section of the U.S. people have seen through the lies and fear-mongering to take an antiwar stance. In March 2003 not a single Neocon, barely a handful of realists and liberals, and not even a majority of the antiwar left anticipated that four years later the administration would be so much on the defensive and ruling class ideologues from William Buckley to Zbigniew Brzezinski would be publicly saying the war is lost.

## **KEEP ON PUSHIN’**

Such hard-nosed political assessments must be added to our outrage over each day the Iraq occupation continues. The antiwar movement has worked hard for four years; we must dig in for another round. Much has been accomplished in terms of changing public opinion, hurting the military’s ability to recruit, supporting G.I. resisters, exerting pressure on Congress, and exposing administration lies. Now stepped-up efforts are needed on all these fronts and more.

The time is ripe for an uptick in civil disobedience and direct action so that no institution conducting this war can escape exposure and protest. Broader educational efforts are needed to reach sectors of the population who dislike the war but have not had direct human contact with individuals pressing a progressive case for immediate withdrawal. Special responsibilities fall on the anti-racist, anti-empire wing of the antiwar movement to expose “occupation lite” schemes while building unity of action with even the most vacillating groups to the maximum extent possible. In a long and complicated fight like this one, our task is not to burn bridges but to keep them up so that people now distant from us can walk over them to join our ranks. There really is no daylight for the U.S. war-makers at the end of their Iraq tunnel. Sooner or later they will be forced out as they were in Vietnam. Our responsibility is to hasten that day.

Of course we wanted and demanded more from the post-mid-term election Congress. The meager result is a useful lesson in how U.S. politics works. The older folks among us learned from parallel experiences during the agony of Vietnam; the younger folks among us are learning ever faster. Together we can all appreciate – and try to practice – the sentiment in Curtis Mayfield’s heartfelt anthem of the sixties struggle:

I’ve got to keep on pushing  
I can’t stop now  
Move up a little higher  
Some way, somehow

‘Cause I’ve got my strength  
And it don’t make sense  
Not to keep on pushin’

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