



## From the Standards Blog:

□ □ April 28, 2004

**#15 Is Iraq "Another Vietnam?"** As I have previously observed, the earliest "standards" were undoubtedly verbal reference points -- shorthand descriptions capable of conjuring up a picture or concept in the listener's mind. Often, such a concept may involve complex nuances and symbolic connotations. In a simple example, when someone says "It's as clear as the nose on your face", we understand that the speaker is not talking about the size of someone's olfactory equipment or the clarity of their complexion, but that the speaker believes that something is incontrovertibly obvious. Similarly, we understand a woman who says "He's as hunky as Ben Affleck" to mean one thing, and "He has as much sex appeal as Bill Gates" to mean something quite different, even though each gentleman is both rich as well as famous.

So what does someone mean when they say that the situation in Iraq has become "another Vietnam" for America? And what, precisely, is Donald Rumsfeld denying when he emphatically states that it has not? Finally, with tomorrow [April 30] being the 29th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, have we remembered anything of what we learned from our experience in Vietnam?

**Required Elements:** Those who are active in standard setting are familiar with the concept of "required" or "essential" elements. One does not have a "compliant implementation" if all of those "required elements" are not found in the implementation. The same applies, in a somewhat less exact fashion, to a verbal standard. What, we must therefore ask, are the "required elements" of "another Vietnam?"

When we say that something is "another Vietnam" we are conveying that the situation is even more dire than a "quagmire" (another verbal standard much in use today). While a "quagmire" implies a subset of the characteristics of "another Vietnam," I believe that it leaves out several important attributes of "another Vietnam." A "quagmire" does not necessarily imply pain and suffering, for example, or military action (although it often does).

I would posit that in order for Iraq to qualify as "another Vietnam," it must display the following required elements of the Vietnam experience. Let us see whether it does.

**Perceived Deception:** While the factors that gave rise to America's direct involvement in the Vietnam War were complex, the proximate event cited by the Johnson administration to gain the permission of Congress to engage aggressively with the enemy was the so-called "Gulf of Tonkin" incident of 1964. In the naval skirmish to which that name applies, North Vietnamese gunboats were alleged to have twice attacked a U.S. vessel without provocation. To this day, some of the crucial facts of that incident remain in dispute. But it is commonly accepted that (at least) the specifics of the skirmish were misrepresented by the administration in order to gain authority to react decisively, and that in fact North Vietnam may not have been the aggressor at all.

It is also commonly accepted that the Johnson administration was already internally committed to military intervention, but did not yet have popular support to embark upon that path. The affirmative vote of Congress in response to the Gulf of Tonkin incident provided the authorization for the actions that committed the country to a course of conduct from which it could not later easily withdraw.

In later years, the Nixon administration maintained significant military activities in Laos and Cambodia, including a punishing bombing campaign, while consistently denying to the American people that it had

any combatants outside of Vietnam. Before long, the administration was no longer trusted by the youth of America, and many of their elders as well.

***Does Iraq meet this test? Yes.*** I believe that the crucial aspect of the Gulf of Tonkin incident is not in fact whether the facts were accurately presented to Congress, but that many Americans came to believe that they had not. Certainly, the current administration's pre-war emphasis on the existence of Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) to Congress to gain authorization to make war is reminiscent of the role of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. And just as certainly, the continuing failure to find WMDs after the fall of the Hussein regime has inspired profound doubt and suspicion among many Americans. As was the case with the Vietnam War, such doubts cause many Americans to doubt whether new statements, purporting to be factual, can be relied upon.

***Why are we there?*** One of the disturbing aspects of the Vietnam War was its ambiguous moral justification, independent of the Tonkin incident. Principally, the national interest at stake was the threat posed by the so-called "domino effect," a theory first propounded under the Eisenhower administration, that posited that the leaders of the communist bloc would take over one nation after another until Fortress America stood alone against a sea of red. While it is true that communist cant actually did embrace world domination as a goal, and that communist insurgents were supported on a global basis by the U.S.S.R, many Americans could not help feeling uneasy about the justification of destroying Vietnam in order to save it. Even if the domino effect did pose a true threat to America, did we have the right to visit millions of casualties on the Vietnamese people in order to protect ourselves?

***Does Iraq meet this test? Yes.*** Certainly, and especially with the apparent non-existence of WMDs, it is difficult to state why America needed to incur hundreds of billions of dollars of expense and an as-yet unknown number of American lives to bring down Saddam Hussein. The rest of the world was unconvinced that he presented a clear and present danger, and even if he had possessed the alleged WMDs, he lacked the means to deliver them to American shores. In contrast, there have been ample numbers of dictators around the world that have visited as much, and often more, death and exploitation on their own peoples. With rare exceptions (e.g., Kosovo), we have not intervened.

***Damage to America's Reputation Abroad:*** The Vietnam war was the first major American military engagement in the 20th century that was not strongly supported by its historical allies. While it enjoyed military support from a few allies early on, it soon found itself fighting alone. Some western nations first distanced themselves from America, and even became staunch detractors. A few (notably) Sweden and Canada, willingly acted as havens for Americans of draft age seeking to avoid military service.

America also lost its moral luster in the eyes of the people of many countries around the world. The legitimacy of James Winthrop's vision of America as a model society for the world, "as a City on a Hill," was dimmed, and the moral justification of American positions on other issues therefore became more subject to doubt and suspicion.

***Does Iraq meet this test? Yes.*** America has not only lost the support of some of its most staunch allies in recent weeks, it did not have the support of many of its traditional allies even before invading. The failure of forces in the field to find any meaningful indications of WMDs has also seriously damaged the credibility of the Bush administration, at best, and America itself, at worst. Who will follow us the next time we seek to convince the world of a clear and present danger, and should we blame them if they do not?

***Is this a War we can Win?*** Ultimately, what turned many pragmatic conservatives against the Vietnam War was the blunt reality that America did not have the will, and perhaps not the appropriate means, to defeat the North Vietnamese. It is a commonplace that generals are often the most reluctant advisors to support a President wishing to wage war, not only because they know of the horrors of the battlefield, but also because they understand the difficulty of pacifying invaded peoples. America ultimately withdrew from Vietnam not because it had defeated the enemy, but because it knew that it could not.

***Does Iraq meet this test? Yes.*** The disturbing reality is that America cannot win the peace in Iraq by force of arms or television broadcasts. Military might and exhortations will have no effect in winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people any more than they were capable of converting the Vietnamese to

espouse American democratic values. Colin Powell, a Vietnam veteran, knew this well. Whether or not the violence that is building in Iraq today can be reigned in and a united country created lies not with American arms, but with the wavering will of the disparate ethnic groups that comprise geographic Iraq. Occupation Administrator L. Paul Bremer stated this clearly in a sober broadcast to the Iraqi people four days ago,

**A Living Room War:** The Vietnam war was famous for being America's first "living room war." Previously, American conflicts since the Civil War had been fought at a safe distance, with military censors filtering all information and images that reached the American people from the front lines. In the 1960s, for the first time, the brave words and speeches of the government appeared in stark, real time contrast to the nightly television images of body bags, firefights and grieving families.

Since the Vietnam War, our military conflicts have been more brief, our casualties far lower, and the access of the press to the front lines relatively restricted. In the first Gulf War, there were no "embedded" correspondents, the war ended in a matter of days, and American casualties were in the dozens rather than the hundreds. An enormous amount of the war was fought from the air, with thousands of sorties delivering by far the greatest part of the damage to the enemy. Detailed pictures of the horrible carnage suffered by the retreating Iraqi army on the "highway of death" never reached the American public, until only recently.

**Does Iraq meet this test? Yes.** To the current administration and the Pentagon's credit, press access during the early stages of the war was extensive. True, embedded correspondents could still only report on what they saw, but their access to the action was significant. Whether or not the press is now everywhere that it should be in order to provide a complete picture, ample images of the death, destruction, pain and suffering being endured by American military personnel -- and now contractors as well -- greet Americans on a daily basis.

**What have we done? What are we doing?** The Vietnam War was also the first war that caused a significant number of Americans to ask themselves whether the means being wielded in their names justified the ends that they were told must be achieved. The nightly news presented searing images of curtains of napalm enveloping the jungle, incinerating whatever lay beneath, and "pattern bombing" by B-52s rained down on North Vietnamese cities (and, secretly, on Cambodia and Laos as well). A number of horrible magazine photographs and episodes are still etched in the memory of all who were alive at that time -- the naked, screaming young girl fleeing unknown horrors on a dirt road -- the point-blank execution of a fettered, wailing man by the Chief of the Saigon Police. The talk of "fragging gooks," and "torching Hootches." And finally, the disclosure of the horrors of the My Lai massacre. All of these images forcefully brought home that we could no longer automatically think of ourselves as white knights, sent out to protect the world from evil, with a God-given right and duty to remake it in our own image.

**Does Iraq meet this test? Yes and No.** Happily, there have been no reports yet of atrocities being performed by American service personnel, although there have been some tales of mistreatment of prisoners that were promptly punished. But the devastation visited on the Iraqi people has none the less been very great, as well as the ongoing post-war misery born of joblessness, lawlessness, bad water, insufficient power, lack of sanitary services, and, increasingly, susceptibility to terrorist attacks.

While modern technology has allowed us to target our munitions with far greater accuracy, America's understandable reticence to risk casualties in its own ranks has led to accepting greater casualties among Iraqis. Rather than confront suspected enemies on the ground, they are taken out from the air -- sometimes after false identification. Perhaps more disturbingly, the administration has exhibited a chilling indifference to human rights, sequestering captured combatants (some of whom were children) indefinitely in Guantanamo Bay, without legal charges being brought, without access to legal assistance, and without visitors or even an indication for how long they will remain incarcerated.

How can this be? Because the administration claims that, unique in the world, no laws apply on this patch of land. It would appear that this administration believes that there is no such thing as innate human rights, only legally bestowed rights. Take away the law, and the individual stands naked and defenseless before the power of the state.

***Divisiveness?*** A hallmark of the Vietnam era was the deep divisions that the conflict brought to American society, between generations, between family members, and between America and its historic allies. Not only were these divisions deep, but they were also traumatic. Protestors were reviled, returning veterans were sometimes jeered, and a handful of demonstrators at Kent State even died before the guns of the National Guard (spawning another indelible image -- this time of a college student bending with horror over a fallen classmate).

The political system came to revolve around the war as well. Presidential elections hinged on a candidate's position on the conflict, and Lyndon Johnson gave up his own hopes for a second elected term largely in reaction to the Vietnam situation.

Although to my knowledge it has never been reported publicly, the day of the Kent State shootings, a number of Senators stood up in Congress to say that the Ohio National Guard should receive medals for their valor, and that more demonstrators should have been shot. I know. I was there that day and heard it. The networks that covered Nixon's second inaugural also, I am told, did not show the army sharpshooters that stood at the ready along the tops of every building with a view of the portico of the Capitol. I saw that, too. Nixon ran for a second term on a promise to "Bring us Together," but that was an impossible task, due to the ongoing reality of the war.

***Does Iraq meet this test? Not Yet.*** To date, protests against the Iraqi war, and the earlier Afghanistan campaign, have been far more limited, by Vietnam War standards. Even if the current situation lasts as long as the Vietnam conflict (a horror to be avoided at all costs), it cannot yet be known if the degree of divisiveness that the Iraqi situation engenders will ever be as deep. Perhaps that does not speak very well for America as a people, if the suffering of the Iraqi people is very great. But already we are rolling towards what is likely to be the most hotly contested election in a generation, with greater, and equally heated, conviction being shown by the supporters of each candidate. If the flag-draped caskets continue to fan out across the nation as the months pass, the divisiveness among Americans spawned by the war is likely to increase.

***And finally, is Iraq a "Quagmire"?*** Perhaps the most significant aspect of what "another Vietnam" represents is its unquestioned status as the epitome of a "Quagmire." What that verbal standard implies has subtleties as well as overt connotations. Most obviously, a quagmire implies a tar baby-like situation that, once embraced, cannot be escaped for years to come. Once America entered into a military protector relationship with its proxy government in South Vietnam, it became very difficult to abandon our weak ally to the certain fate of defeat. Thus, a quagmire has at least two clear elements: it is inescapable, and it is obvious even while it is ongoing that there is no known, acceptable escape route.

More subtly, though, a "quagmire" in the Vietnam sense is also a situation that has the potential to expose America as a "helpless giant," or "an impotent superpower." These are two more verbal standards that were much in vogue during the Vietnam years. Strangely enough, they were employed to justify further military effort, rather than to justify a prudent disengagement. To many, the quagmire aspects of Vietnam raised the prospect of an eventual, ignominious defeat, resulting in Richard Nixon vowing that he would not be the first American president to preside over a lost war. Peace alone was not deemed by many Americans to be an adequate goal, but "Peace with Honor" was, regardless of whether our stated goals were reliably secured. Even at the time it was signed, the final Armistice entered into with North Vietnam was clearly a cosmetic agreement that permitted a face-saving exit. So long as a sufficient time elapsed before Vietnam fell, our military withdrawal would be politically viable.

***Does Iraq meet this test? Not yet - but the situation does not look good.*** There are still reasons to hope that the pain and suffering of Iraq will gradually lessen. But as I write this, with a decision over whether to stage a final assault of Fallujah under debate and a seemingly endless supply of avid suicide bombers infiltrating Iraq from the surrounding Islamic countries, the situation is at best bleak. One can hope that most Iraqis will put aside their animosity against the United States in an effort to rebuild their own country. But Mid Eastern peoples have of late shown an unfortunate propensity for self-immolation over religious and ethnic issues, and the historical divisions between Kurds, Sunnis and Sufis lie just below the surface.

**Final Conclusion: Is Iraq "another Vietnam?"** Based on the analysis above, this writer about standards must conclude that the answer is "yes." While some aspects of the two situations naturally differ, verbal standards are not precise instruments. Some aspects of the Vietnam experience are lacking (only time will tell whether the Iraq situation drags on as interminably as did the Vietnam tragedy). And one must hope that the death toll in Iraq will never approach the levels of carnage experienced in Vietnam. But on the other hand, serious concerns over government deception have arisen much earlier in this war, and new and more serious impositions on human rights have been visited on the enemy by the current administration than ever occurred under either the Democratic or the Republican administrations that presided over the Vietnam conflict.

I believe that any reasonable review of the situation must therefore find that the Iraqi situation demonstrates the "required elements" of the verbal standard, "another Vietnam."

In the end, perhaps the best test for whether a given situation measures up to a verbal standard is the test offered by Justice Potter Stewart. In 1964, the Supreme Court was tasked with deriving a legal definition of what pornography is. Stewart famously opined: "You know it when you see it."

I believe that anyone who lived through the Vietnam era would conclude that the current Iraq situation meets Justice Stewart's test. Iraq is indeed "another Vietnam," with its final duration, cost and suffering being the sole attributes remaining to be defined

We can only hope that the situation in Iraq does not set a new standard for needless, endless, fruitless tragedy, born under suspicions of deception, perpetuated out of blind conviction in our own right to remake the world, and tolerated domestically out of complacency and blind deference to authority. We have been here before. It is more than tragic that we find ourselves here again.

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#### **Useful Links and Information:**

*For a detailed timeline of Vietnam, from the May 7, 1954 victory of Vietnamese forces against the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, to the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, see:*  
<http://www.pbs.org/battlefieldvietnam/timeline/index4.html>

*For a comparison of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident to Congressional approval of the Iraq War, see:*  
Gar Alperovitz, "Remember the Gulf of Tonkin," *Washington Post*, September 22, 2002  
<http://www.bsos.umd.edu/pgsd/people/staffpubs/Gar-Tonkin.htm>

*For an overview of the secret bombing of Laos and Cambodia, see:*  
WGBH Boston: *VIETNAM: a Television History - Laos and Cambodia*  
(Transcript)  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/109ts.html>

*For a brief overview of the "Domino Theory" and whether or not it is applicable to the current situation in the Mid East, see: Wikipedia entry, "Domino Theory": [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domino\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domino_theory)*

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