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Leaving Vietnam: Insights for Iraq?

Are there insights for the United States in Iraq to be gained from the American military departure from Vietnam from 1969 to 1973? Specifically, what should the administration of President Barack Obama know about the Vietnam withdrawal to better serve American national security interests as well as those of the region and Iraq itself? What were the causes and consequences of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, and do they have a bearing on possible withdrawal outcomes in Iraq?

The Vietnam War has figured prominently in commentary on the Iraq War, with critics contending that Iraq has become another Vietnam. Indeed, both sides of the debate over the Iraq War have invoked historical analogies to bolster their respective cases. The Bush administration invoked the Munich analogy, comparing Saddam Hussein to Adolf Hitler; it argued that war was inevitable (a self-fulfilling prophecy if there ever was one), and that it was better to fight Saddam Hussein before he acquired nuclear weapons than after. Administration spokesmen also cited the Allied liberation of France in 1944 as reassurance of the popular welcome U.S. forces would receive from an Iraqi people grateful for their new freedom. As the years passed and the war continued with no end in sight, the White House emphatically rejected the possibility of a Vietnam-like defeat. It preferred instead the analogy of Korea, where the United States, having saved South Korea from a Communist takeover, retained powerful military forces in the country and provided the security framework for South Korea's evolution into an economic powerhouse and political democracy.

The Munich analogy was never applicable to Baathist Iraq and has been thoroughly discredited by the course of events in that country since the U.S. invasion.[1] Saddam Hussein may have resembled Adolf Hitler in his brutality and recklessness, but the Iraqi dictator never had at his disposal even a small fraction of Nazi Germany's industrial might and military prowess. The Vietnam analogy seems more relevant to Iraq. Iraq War opponents and critics point out that, as in Vietnam, the United States has stumbled into a bloody, protracted, and unpopular war against an elusive, irregular enemy. There is also the similarity of U.S. security challenges: as in Vietnam, success in Iraq will depend upon fostering the

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1. See Jeffrey Record, "The Use and Abuse of History: Munich, Vietnam, and Iraq," *Survival* (Spring 2007): 163–80, and "Retiring Hitler and 'Appeasement' from the National Security Debate," *Parameters* (Summer 2008): 91–101.

creation of both a politically viable indigenous government and professionally effective military and police forces. In Vietnam, the United States backed a client regime that mustered neither the political legitimacy nor the military skill necessary to survive the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from the country.

The presence of *some* parallels between the Iraq and Vietnam wars should not obscure the fact that differences greatly outnumber similarities.[2] The profound disparities between the two wars and the countries in which they were fought are worth remembering. The countries themselves could not be more opposite. Vietnam is an ancient and relatively homogenous East Asian nation-state with a lineage of powerful nationalism stretching back over two millennia; Iraq is a Middle Eastern state of recent creation distinguished by explosive ethno-sectarian divisions. The U.S. objective in Vietnam was counterrevolutionary (regime preservation in the South), whereas in Iraq it is revolutionary (replacement of Saddam by a model democracy). The scale of the Vietnam War dwarfs that of the Iraq War. The United States deployed a peak strength of 543,000 troops against Vietnamese Communist forces that totaled over 900,000 troops.[3] Peak strength U.S. forces in Iraq numbered 180,000 against estimated enemy forces of 20,000–50,000. Over 58,000 U.S. troops died in Vietnam, compared to a little over 4,000 so far in Iraq.[4]

The insurgent organizations are also quite dissimilar. The Communist insurgency in Vietnam was a highly centralized, politically disciplined, rural-based movement that fielded battalion-size military units. The Iraqi insurgency is a largely urban-based, decentralized coalition of disparate groups with competing political agendas that relies heavily on terrorism. In Iraq, moreover, there is no enemy analog to North Vietnam (to say nothing of the costly U.S. air war against that country) and the massive external support supplied by the Soviet Union and China. Additionally, in the Communist government in Hanoi the United States had a unitary agency with which it could (and did) negotiate the termination of U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam War. In Iraq, the very nature of the insurgency probably precludes the possibility of such an agency.

The Vietnam War also engaged American society far more intensely than the Iraq War, primarily because it was waged largely with conscripted U.S. troops who died in far greater numbers than their all-volunteer counterparts in Iraq. A total of 2,850,000 U.S. military personnel served in Southeast Asia, 2,135,000 of them in Vietnam. Of that number, 1,600,000 served in combat.[5] In contrast, the

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2. See Jeffrey Record and W. Andrew Terrill, *Iraq and Vietnam: Differences, Similarities, and Insights* (Carlisle, PA, May 2004). See also the author's *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD, 1998) and *Dark Victory: America's Second War against Iraq* (Annapolis, MD, 2004).

3. Record and Terrill, *Iraq and Vietnam*, 9–10.

4. Communist military dead alone in Vietnam totaled a staggering 1.1 million. Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (New York, 1998), 64.

5. Lawrence M. Baksir and William A. Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, the War, and the Vietnam Generation* (New York, 1978), 5, 53.

number of U.S. military personnel who had served in Iraq by April 2008 was
794,000.[6] These conditions, coupled with the profound inequities of the Selec-
tive Service System and the countercultural revolution in the United States,
generated a large, vocal, campus-based domestic antiwar movement that has no
analog in America today.

When Richard M. Nixon was sworn in as president on January 20, 1969, he
inherited an unpopular, stalemated war in which prospects for a politically
decisive military victory at an acceptable strategic and domestic political cost
seemed remote. The Johnson administration, encouraged by optimistic report-
ing from U.S. military headquarters in Saigon, had sought such a victory, at least
until the massive Communist Tet Offensive of early 1968, which, though a major
military defeat for Hanoi, shocked the American foreign policy elite and
changed the political calculus in Washington, convincing much of the media and
the Democratic party establishment that the war was not militarily winnable.
The Johnson administration accordingly lowered its objective in Vietnam, from
defeating Hanoi to extricating the United States from the war and negotiating
a compromise settlement. Johnson halted the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam
and opened formal peace negotiations with the Communist regime.

Nixon was politically sensitive to the war's unpopularity and regarded
Vietnam as a strategic impediment to his desire to forge détente with the Soviet
Union and a new relationship to China. He did not believe the war was militarily
winnable. On March 29, 1968, he told his assembled speechwriters, "I've come
to the conclusion that there is no way to win the war. But we can't say that, of
course. In fact, we have to seem to say the opposite, just to keep some bargaining
leverage."[7] Had Nixon believed otherwise, he almost certainly would have lifted
the political restrictions on the Pentagon that he inherited from his predecessor.
He stood pat, however, on Johnson's refusal to mobilize the U.S. Army's reserve
components, suspension of the bombing of North Vietnam, and ban on deploy-
ment of U.S. ground troops into Laos. Only in 1972, in response to a major
North Vietnamese offensive, did he resume large-scale bombing of North
Vietnam.

But Nixon went much further down the path of de-escalating U.S. military
intervention in Indochina. In 1969, he authorized the first of fourteen unilateral
U.S. troop withdrawals that culminated, by the end of 1972, in the complete
evacuation of all U.S. combat forces from Vietnam.[8] Nixon wanted the United
States out of Indochina but not, however, at the cost of sacrificing the goal of

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6. Based on data appearing in Thom Shanker, "Army's Worried by Rising Stress of Return
Tours," *New York Times*, April 6, 2007.

7. Quoted in Richard J. Whalen, *Catch the Falling Flag: A Republican's Challenge to His Party*
(Boston, 1972), 137.

8. For a profile of each of the fourteen U.S. troop redeployments from Vietnam, see
Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Indochina Monographs: Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire* (Washington, DC,
1980), 27; Larry A. Niksch, *Vietnamization: The Program and Its Problems* (Washington, DC,
January 1972), A-1.

preserving an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam. If he could not win the war, he certainly wanted to avoid losing it. The centerpiece of his administration's strategy was "Vietnamization," a policy Nixon announced on June 8, 1969. Its aim was to shift the burden of ground combat from U.S. to South Vietnamese forces and in the process enable an American withdrawal from Vietnam and an attendant reduction in U.S. casualties. Historian Jeffrey Kimball believes that "Nixon was not so foolish to think that Vietnamization alone could win the war, but because of the domestic political pressures upon him to withdraw American troops, he needed Vietnamization to succeed, and because he did, he wanted to believe it could."[9] An expanded and modernized South Vietnamese military (formally the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, or RVNAF), backed by American air power and logistics support, would replace withdrawing U.S. forces and, it was hoped, suffice to defeat an attempted Communist conventional military conquest of South Vietnam. During Nixon's first term, the RVNAF and its supporting regional and provincial forces were completely reequipped and expanded from a total of 820,000 to 1,048,000 personnel.[10]

Nixon sought to condition U.S. troop withdrawals on progress in Vietnamization, progress at the Paris peace talks, and the level of enemy activity, but the American pullout took on a momentum of its own. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger recalled that the "appetite for withdrawals was insatiable; retreat became an end in itself."[11] Pushing especially hard was Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, a veteran of Congress who was acutely sensitive to the national mood and to the deteriorating morale of U.S. Army forces in Vietnam. For historian Lewis Sorley, "It is arguable that Laird . . . had the more perceptive view of the rapidly waning patience of the American public, and that, through skilled bureaucratic maneuvering, he did eventually win out on the key issue in contention, the pace and magnitude of the American withdrawal."[12]

Despite internal administration divisions over how much and how fast, the staged withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam effectively served Nixon's goal of reducing American casualties. Predictably, as U.S. force levels declined, so too did the number of dead. From 1969, when the first troop withdrawal was announced, to 1972, the last year of the war for the United States, U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam dropped from 543,400 to 24,200 (and to just 240 by

9. Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS, 1998), 182.

10. Data derived from statistics appearing in James L. Collins, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army* (Washington, DC, 1975), 151.

11. Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement and Extrication from the Vietnam War* (New York, 2003), 236.

12. Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York, 1999), 116. For a comprehensive assessment of Laird's role in accelerating America's military withdrawal from Iraq, see Dale Van Atta, *With Honor: Melvin Laird in War, Peace, and Politics* (Madison, WI, 2008).

March 30, 1973);[13] during the same period, the number of U.S. troops annually killed in action dropped from 9,414 to 300.[14] The dramatic decline in American casualties, coupled with the Nixon administration termination of draft calls in 1972 and establishment of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973, greatly weakened the student protest that had been the heart of the antiwar movement.

But did Vietnamization serve the U.S. objective of preserving an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam? Obviously not. Two years after the Paris Peace Agreement of January 1973, North Vietnamese conventional military forces conquered all of South Vietnam in a fifty-five-day military campaign. The military root of the destruction of the South Vietnamese state was the *unilateral* withdrawal of U.S. ground forces. Bowing to the reality that negotiations could not accomplish what over a half-decade of massive U.S. military intervention had failed to accomplish—the expulsion of the North Vietnamese from South Vietnam[15]—Nixon did not tie the U.S. military evacuation of South Vietnam to a reciprocal withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces.[16] Indeed, the Paris Agreement, which called for a cease-fire in place and required the withdrawal of all U.S. troops and an exchange of prisoners, remained silent on the North Vietnamese presence while explicitly prohibiting the reintroduction of U.S. ground forces. In January 1973, Hanoi's Peoples Army of Vietnam (PAVN) total strength inside South Vietnam, including irregular forces and administrative and rear service units, totaled 293,000 personnel, of which 167,000 were in combat units.[17] The fate of South Vietnam was thus left up to the RVNAF, a well-equipped but, relative to the PAVN, poorly led and motivated army, and a U.S. willingness to reenter the war with its air power. The official history of the PAVN declares as follows:

> The Paris Agreement allowed us to achieve our objective of keeping our forces and positions in South Vietnam intact so that we could continue to attack the enemy. Because the American expeditionary military forces and all satellite [third-country] troops were forced to withdraw, our army and

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13. Data derived from statistics appearing in David L. Anderson, *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War* (New York, 2002), 286.

14. Data derived from Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years* (Washington, DC, 1988), 275.

15. As Nixon later put it, "It is an axiom of diplomacy that one cannot win at the conference table what one could not win on the battlefield. . . . If we had stood firm in demanding North Vietnam's withdrawal, there would have been no peace agreement." Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York 1985), 152.

16. As early as October 1970, Nixon had publicly proposed a cease-fire in place, dropping U.S. insistence on a mutual withdrawal of U.S. and PAVN forces from South Vietnam as a precondition to a cease-fire. Kissinger subsequently explained the importance of the proposal: "The decision to propose a standstill ceasefire in 1970 thus implied the solution of 1972. That North Vietnamese forces would remain in the South was implicit in the standstill proposal; no negotiations would be able to remove them if we had not been able to expel them with force of arms." Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, 1979), 971.

17. Hinh, *Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire*, 153.

civilian population had a tremendous opportunity "to topple the puppets," liberate South Vietnam, and win total victory in our resistance to oppose the Americans and save the nation.[18]

Did Nixon and Kissinger really believe that the RVNAF could provide an effective substitute for departed U.S. ground combat forces, which Communist forces had fought to a stalemate? Did they also believe that a U.S. electorate and Congress thoroughly disgusted with Vietnam would permit the White House to reenter the war? Or did they regard the Paris Agreement (and the two ferocious Linebacker bombing campaigns that preceded it) as simply purchasing a "decent interval" between the U.S. military withdrawal from Indochina and the inevitable Communist conquest of South Vietnam?[19] Was Vietnamization just a screen for cutting U.S. losses in Vietnam? Larry Berman believes that Nixon planned "to use the peace agreement as a pretext for continued American involvement in the war," albeit an involvement restricted to the use of U.S. air power to "enforce" the agreement.[20] If so, then Nixon not only overestimated the RVNAF's will and skill, even when supported by U.S. air power, but also grossly underestimated public and congressional intolerance for continued American involvement in the war.

Unlike the Korea armistice of 1953, which terminated another exceptionally unpopular war but left U.S. military forces in place south of the Thirty-Eighth Parallel, the Paris Agreement prohibited any residual U.S. force presence (other than a few dozen logistical experts to handle continued U.S. military assistance to Saigon). It was also widely recognized by 1973 that the RVNAF, though large and bristling with modern weapons and equipment, was a poor match for the PAVN in motivation and leadership quality.

The South Vietnamese government certainly had little confidence that it could survive without a U.S. combat presence. RVNAF Chief of Staff Cao Van Vien said that the Paris Agreement was "served on South Vietnam like a death warrant,"[21] and indeed it was: Nixon had to force South Vietnamese President

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18. *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam. 1954–1975*, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence, KS, 2002), 333.

19. Linebacker I was launched in March 1972 in response to the PAVN's attempted conventional military invasion and conquest of Quang Tri Province, Kontum, Pleiku, and the northwestern approaches to Saigon. Massive U.S. bombing ultimately defeated what became known as the "Easter Offensive," destroying many PAVN units. Linebacker II was launched in December against heretofore prohibited targets in the Hanoi and Haiphong areas. It was rooted in the diplomatic impasse caused by Saigon's refusal to accept key provisions of what became the Paris Agreement and Hanoi's attempt to leverage more concessions from the United States by walking out of the negotiations at the last minute. The cumulative effects of the two bombing campaigns on Hanoi's military capacity were substantial; it took the PAVN two years to reconstitute the forces lost to the bombing, thus ensuring an interval, "decent" or not, between the U.S. departure from Vietnam and the communist conquest of South Vietnam.

20. Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York, 2001), 228.

21. Cao Van Vien, *The Final Collapse* (Washington, DC, 1983), 6.

Nguyen Van Thieu to accept the agreement by threatening a separate U.S. peace with Hanoi and a complete cessation of U.S. military and economic assistance.[22] Though the Linebacker bombing campaigns of 1972 had destroyed many PAVN units and much equipment, time was on Hanoi's side. With continued massive Soviet military assistance, the PAVN was sure to reconstitute itself and launch another invasion—which it did in March 1975. At one point Thieu sarcastically questioned White House emissary Alexander Haig Jr.: "Have you ever seen any peace accord in the history of the world in which the invaders had been permitted to stay in the territories they had invaded? Would you permit Russian troops to stay in the United States and say you have reached a peace accord with Russia?"[23]

Nixon went to his grave claiming that "We had won the war in Vietnam [in 1973]. We had attained the one goal for which we had fought the war. The South Vietnamese people would have the right to determine their own political future."[24] In fact, as Kimball argues,

> What Nixon had won in his four years of war was a decent interval. It was not a decent interval for Thieu, whose government would be driven from power in two years, but it was a long enough interval to permit Nixon and Kissinger to claim that they had provided Thieu with a chance to survive—if, however, Congress would continue supporting him, if only the American people possessed the will to continue bombing.[25]

The "ifs" never materialized, of course. In June 1973, five months after the Paris Agreement was signed, Congress prohibited appropriations for any further U.S. air operations in Indochina, effective August 15; and when the final North Vietnamese onslaught came in March 1975, neither Congress nor the American electorate was prepared to support any last-ditch defense of South Vietnam.

Kissinger had reservations about Vietnamization from the beginning.[26] In October 1969, he wrote a memorandum to President Nixon citing "the pace of public opposition in the U.S. to our continuing to fight in any form" and presciently questioning "the actual ability of the South Vietnamese Government and armed forces to replace American withdrawals—both physically and psychologically."[27] In Paris, when North Vietnamese negotiator Le Duc Tho asked Kissinger the obvious question—if the United States could not win with half a million of its own troops, "how can you expect to succeed when you let your puppet troops do the fighting?"—Kissinger admitted that it was a question that

22. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1996), 281–82.
23. Quoted in Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 185.
24. Nixon, *No More Vietnams*, 97.
25. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 370.
26. Ibid., 161.
27. Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 94.

"also torments me."[28] In July 1971, Kissinger told Chinese premier Zhou Enlai that "what we require [in Vietnam] is a transition period between the [U.S.] military withdrawal and the political evolution. . . . If after a complete American withdrawal, the Indochinese people change their government, the U.S. will not interfere."[29] In May 1972, Kissinger told Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko that "if [North Vietnam] were creative, it would have great possibilities. All we ask is a degree of time so as to leave Vietnam for Americans in better perspective. . . . We are prepared to leave so that a communist victory is not excluded."[30]

The U.S. military leadership in Saigon also had little confidence in Vietnamization. The commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, General Creighton Abrams, citing the RVNAF's corruption, poor leadership, and high desertion rates, believed that "South Vietnamese forces could not be improved either quantitatively or qualitatively to the extent necessary to deal with a combined threat [of insurgent Viet Cong and regular PAVN forces]."[31] Abrams called Vietnamization a "slow surrender" and protested the size and pace of U.S. troop withdrawals.[32]

Because the provisions of the Paris Agreement virtually guaranteed a subsequent Communist victory in South Vietnam, it is hard not to conclude that the agreement, coming as it did on the heels of four years of steady unilateral U.S. troop withdrawals from the war, was nothing more than a confession of defeat clothed as a diplomatic success. It was a negotiated stay of execution that permitted Nixon, Kissinger, and other defenders of the agreement to blame Congress, a Watergate-weakened White House, and even the Thieu regime for the fall of Saigon when it came. When it was all over, Nixon, predictably, declared that

> Congress proceeded to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Once our troops were out of Vietnam, Congress initiated a total retreat from our commitments to the South Vietnamese people. First, it destroyed our ability to enforce the peace agreement, through legislation prohibiting the use of American military power in Indochina. Then it undercut South Vietnam's ability to defend itself, by drastically reducing our military aid.[33]

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28. Quoted in Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York, 1992), 253.
29. Quoted in Jussi Hanhimaki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York, 2004), 139.
30. Quoted in ibid., 225. Kissinger may have thought the Vietnam War was a lost cause from the beginning. In 1968, he told Hans Morgenthau that "In 1965 when I first visited Vietnam, I became convinced that what we're doing there was hopeless. I decided to work *within* the government to attempt to get the war ended." Quoted in Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 188.
31. James H. Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence, KS, 2004), 28.
32. Quoted in Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 235–36.
33. Nixon, *No More Vietnams*, 165–66.

Kissinger, also predictably, blamed Congress, but he also cited the effects of Watergate. "None of us could imagine that a collapse of presidential authority would follow the expected sweeping electoral victory [of 1972]," Kissinger claimed. "We were convinced that we were working on an agreement that could be sustained by our South Vietnamese allies with American help against an all-out invasion."[34]

In sum, in 1973 the United States cut its losses in an unpopular war it could not win at any acceptable price even though withdrawal meant the near-certain loss of South Vietnam.

Does the U.S. military departure from the Vietnam War contain insights for the termination of American involvement in the Iraq War? Public and congressional pressures to terminate the Iraq War pale in comparison to those the Nixon administration faced as it backed out of Vietnam. That said, this author assumes the likelihood of a substantial, even total evacuation of U.S. military forces from Iraq over the next several years. The war's persistent unpopularity, growing fiscal damage, and corrosive effects on long-term U.S. military readiness—as well as the sharp decline in insurgent violence in Iraq—all strongly encourage U.S. force reductions in Iraq, even at the expense of abandoning such desirable political objectives in that country as stability and democratic governance.

Momentum for a U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq seems irresistible. The election, on November 4, 2008, of Senator Barack Obama as the forty-fourth president of the United States was followed, on November 17, by the conclusion of a status of forces agreement between the United States and Iraq—the Agreement on the Withdrawal of United States Forces and the Organization of Their Activities during Their Temporary Presence in Iraq. Article 24 of the agreement mandates the evacuation of U.S. combat forces from Iraqi cities, towns, and villages no later than June 30, 2009, and *all U.S. military forces from Iraqi territory altogether no later than December 31, 2011*. Presidential candidate Obama had called for a complete withdrawal by the summer of 2010, and the Bush administration, though initially opposed to any unconditional deadline for a U.S. military evacuation from Iraq, eventually acceded to Iraq's insistence on just such a departure date.

The consequences for Iraq of America's military withdrawal by the end of 2011 remain unclear. Though the Paris Accord of 1973 doomed South Vietnam to eventual conquest by North Vietnam, there is no analog in Iraq to the formidable PAVN and its great power patron, the Soviet Union. Al Qaeda mistakes and U.S. adoption of an effective counterinsurgency program have significantly weakened the Iraqi insurgency, though an enduring reconciliation of competing Kurdish and Arab, and Sunni and Shiite Arab political interests remains elusive. What happens in Iraq after 2011? Will a post-American Iraq

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34. Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 551.

survive as a unitary state or disintegrate along ethno-sectarian lines? Can the Sunni Arab community be reconciled to Shiite governance in Iraq? Will democracy take hold, or will Iraq revert to an autocracy? To what degree and at what pace can and will Iraqi military forces assume the combat burden now borne by U.S. forces in Iraq? Will "Iraqization" succeed where Vietnamization failed? Will events conspire to cause a renegotiation of the status of forces agreement with Iraq?

Withdrawal from Vietnam was staged in increments over a four-year period. In the status of forces agreement with Iraq, the United States pledged to withdraw all its troops from Iraq within three years. The U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam was also complete; there was no residual force presence, except for military assistance personnel. This will also be the case in Iraq; unless the 2008 agreement is supplanted by a new settlement, there will be no permanent U.S. force presence of any kind—undoubtedly a bitter disappointment to neoconservatives who fantasized about converting Iraq into a pro-Israel, anti-OPEC, American military outpost in the Persian Gulf.

Vietnam and Iraq underscore the American electorate's intolerance of protracted wars against enemies who fight in a manner that neutralizes the potential decisiveness of America's conventional military superiority. Richard Nixon once observed that, "When a president sends American troops to war, a hidden timer starts to run. He has a finite period of time to win the war before the people grow weary of it."[35] In Vietnam, of course, Nixon sought not to win, but to get out with the least damage to America's prestige. In Iraq, George W. Bush sought to win and then get out, but ultimately agreed to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq amidst great confusion over what, if anything, the United States, after six years of war and a botched occupation, had actually "won" by launching a preventive war against a country that had no connection to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and posed no undeterrable or uncontainable military threat to either the United States or U.S. allies in the Middle East.

35. Nixon, *No More Vietnams*, 88.