Lessons of Vietnam for Iraq:  
On the Thirtieth Anniversary of the End of the Vietnam War  

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As Professor Graff has mentioned, I am just back from Vietnam. In Hanoi I found—unexpectedly—my recollections of the French Indochina War were very much in demand by newspapers and the electronic media. A synopsis of my book *Fatal Crossroads, A Novel of Vietnam 1945* had been read online. Its historical background had stirred considerable interest.  

This, despite the fact that the Vietnam government has been diverting public attention from brooding about the past to the promise of a happy future. The government focuses on consolidation of economic and strategic ties with the United States. America has become Vietnam’s number one export market and Washington’s help is urgently needed for entry into the World Trade Organization. The United States is tacitly cultivated as a counterweight to China. However, with the thirtieth anniversary this month of the end of the war with the United States, irresistibly the Vietnamese are drawn to reexamining the violent past. They are asking, Why the invasion, which cost almost four million Vietnamese lives? And, Could the war with the United States have been averted?  

In the last months of World War II, Truman stood, as my book terms it, at a fatal crossroads. He was deciding whether to pursue President Roosevelt's intention of rescuing Indochina from colonialism through a UN trusteeship leading to independence or yield to Charles de Gaulle. The French leader was insisting on restoration of French suzerainty over Indochina as a precondition for his cooperation in Europe against Stalin's expansionism. Roosevelt, up to his death in April, was unalterably opposed to the resumption of French colonial control. Truman began to waver on the Roosevelt policy under relentless pressure by de Gaulle who had the backing of Winston Churchill. Dean Acheson, who later became Truman's secretary of state, recalled: whenever American officials met with the French to discuss European cooperation, Indochina became their bargaining ploy. Acheson termed it blackmail. At this time Ho Chi Minh was, in fact, an ally of the United States, providing crucial field intelligence about Japanese operations in Indochina. American agents of the OSS—the Office of Strategic Services, forerunner of the CIA—were living with him in his jungle camp, training and arming his Vietminh guerrilla cadre. One of them, Paul Hoagland, a medic, saved his life by injecting him with quinine and sulfa drugs when he was near death with dysentery and malaria. The agents later accompanied Ho Chi Minh to Hanoi and were present on September 2, 1945, when, in a speech in which he quoted from the American Declaration of Independence, he established a provisional government.
Nevertheless, Truman yielded to de Gaulle. He did not reply to some ten appeals from Ho Chi Minh, several transmitted through the OSS, for support of Vietnam independence on the Philippines model. His administration ignored OSS assessments of the broad, militant nationalist support for Ho Chi Minh. French army divisions outfitted with weapons, vehicles, and uniforms provided by the United States were transported to Vietnam where they reoccupied its cities.

My book encapsulates my perceptions of the engagement of the OSS agents with the Vietnamese, the conflicting roles of the French, Chinese, British, and Japanese, and the events which put the United States on the road to its Vietnam War. I chose the novel form as the best way to recall the episode in human terms, weaving together the many threads dating back to 1932, and evoking the voices of actors in the tragedy who spoke to me during the two years I covered the French Indochina War. The book’s political framework is completely factual.

And what happened after the events portrayed in my novel? Historically, it is best summarized in a single sentence in Robert McNamara’s book Argument Without End: "U.S. involvement began absentmindedly, almost as a kind of a ‘throwaway’ in a grand bargain for the heart of Europe to appease its defeated, temperamental, and proud French ally."

Let me speak to my own experience as to just how absentminded was the plunge into the French quagmire. I arrived in Saigon in February 1950. Shortly after my arrival, President Truman announced recognition of the French puppet Bao Dai government and acceleration of aid to the French Army. As the usual paraphernalia of an American military advisory group began to assemble in Saigon, I called on the American consul-general, Edmund Gullion, fresh out of Washington. He told me American correspondents like myself, who had covered the China civil war, were defeatists in their view of the anticommunist struggle in Asia. Vietnam was not China and the French army was not the Chiang Kai-shek army and Washington projections showed that the Bao Dai government with American material help could defeat the Vietminh. Most important, the French army would be an effective weapon for containment of China. It was from Gullion that I first heard of what in the State Department had been dubbed the domino theory. Four years later, President Eisenhower articulated it publicly—that loss of Vietnam would lead to the loss of other Asian countries like a row of dominos. This had become the rationale for U.S. intervention in Vietnam at the side of France.

By early 1951, Gullion told me privately he no longer believed in a French military solution. I learned that night that Lang Son, the main French fort on the China border, had fallen. I had ridden convoy with the French Foreign Legion along what was known as the Rue du Mort to Lang Son. I knew that loss of the fort spelled the total collapse of French frontier defenses. I reported that the border was now open to Chinese, and eventually Russian, supply to the Vietminh. From then, I was convinced that the French—and later the American war—could not be won.
In the sixties, when I returned to Vietnam as a reporter for the New York Times, I talked to American generals about the French experience. I was brushed off. "We have more firepower," was the retort. In a last interview before I left Vietnam in 1966, General Westmoreland alluded to his "meat grinder strategy." The North Vietnamese, given the size of their population, would not be able to sustain the day-to-day casualties they were suffering in close combat with American forces. The United States suffered 58,000 dead in Vietnam. In their wars against the French and the Americans, the North Vietnamese and their Vietcong allies in the South, suffered an estimated 900,000 dead. So why didn't the meat-grinder strategy work?

On my return last month to Vietnam, I asked war veterans what was the single most important factor that enabled them to sustain their resistance to American forces and finally defeat them. I put that question in Hue to Nguyen Van Luong, a member of the National Assembly, who commanded a force of one thousand Vietminh in the assaults on the U.S. Marines at the Dong Ha firebase in the Central Highlands. In a typical reply, Luong said his men were fighting for independence and freedom from invaders in the strong tradition of their ancestors who fought Chinese invaders for a thousand years. He said the troops did not think of themselves as fighting for any political party or the government. In a country where ancestor worship is the dominant faith, Luong's remarks did much to explain the spirit of self-sacrifice and the willingness of many Vietnamese soldiers to undertake suicidal combat missions. Luong had no sympathy for Saddam Hussein but he was critical of the American invasion of Iraq. He saw the invasion as a battle for oil and predicted that the United States would be forced to withdraw.

The Iraq invasion has summoned up memories for the Vietnamese of the big power incursions they've suffered, first by the Chinese and then the French and Americans, and then once again by the Chinese in 1949. As a member of the National Assembly put it, the general reaction of war veterans has been, There they go again; a big power invading a small country.

Vu Xuan Hong, a prominent member of the National Assembly and president of the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations, spent a considerable time with me extolling the development of closer relations with the United States: Vietnam is cooperating in counter-terrorism, U.S. naval vessels are calling at Vietnamese ports, more than $6 billion in annual two-way trade, American nongovernmental organizations are at work all over the country. But when asked about the invasion of Iraq, he darkened and had this to say: "The Vietnamese people are very negative about the invasion. We are a small country and we know the consequences of war—what it is like to be bombed. We are against a big power invading a small country. The Iraqi people should solve their own problems. They have their own culture and religion, and their own dreams—perhaps democracy—or maybe they will continue to fight among themselves. The Americans better heed the resistance. Sooner or later they will have to withdraw."
Listening to the Vietnamese, I wondered: What are the parallels between our Vietnam experience and the Iraq policy? Like Truman, President Bush invaded a country without adequate knowledge of the underlying attitudes of the people. Nothing illustrates that more than the expectation that Iraqis would be out on the streets welcoming American troops. Instead Iraqis danced around burning American vehicles.

What about the domino theory? Vo Nguyen Giap, architect of the Vietnamese military success, called it pure illusion. The communist victory in Vietnam had no influence on other nations of Southeast Asia. If anything, Vietnam became isolated, save for Laos. One, therefore, wonders about the validity of the Bush premise that democracy in Iraq will lead to regime change in other Middle Eastern countries. The fallacy of the domino theory is that nations tend to evolve in terms of their own culture, history, and internal problems rather than through the infection of neighboring societies.

Bush policymakers have been surprised by the strength of the insurgency in Iraq. Vietnam demonstrated that nationalism blended with religious fervor produces effective resistance to any invader no matter how superior in weaponry. When American troops had been fought to an impasse in Vietnam in 1968, the strategy evolved into what was called Vietnamization of the war effort. The South Vietnamese army was asked to take up the military defense burden. It failed, not due to any lack of arms. In Iraq, American frustration in quelling the insurgency has produced the strategy of Iraqization. The strategy may have the same fatal flaw as Vietnamization: identification with a foreign occupying force engendering nationalist opposition.

When the United States finally withdrew from Vietnam on April 30, 1975, it left behind chaos and rule by a despotic regime. We must hope for a better outcome after the American withdrawal from Iraq. The outcome will turn in great part on how profoundly the occupant of the White House has come to understand the history, culture, and motivations of the Iraqi people.

In my novel, the protagonist, Travis Duncan, agonizes as he sees President Truman stumbling into the Vietnam quagmire. And he poses the question, which lingers today: What if Roosevelt had lived a little longer?