

Q: The portents [of your retelling of the war] are fairly dire – a strategic US involvement degenerating into a bloody slugfest and ending in a messy, chaotic defeat. Are there any hopeful lessons to be drawn from the Vietnam War? Or any lessons at all?

History provides many lessons and the Vietnam War is no exception. But maybe more, it startles us with resonances, with parallels with our present world. Just think about it. You want to understand Wikileaks? Let's go back to the Pentagon Papers. You want to understand about a political campaign reaching out to a foreign power in the midst of a war? It's all over the news today and very much part of the story of Vietnam. What about an epic conflict between the news media and the White House? A disconnect between the politicians who make the policies, the generals who design the military strategy and tactics, and the service members who do the fighting and dying? Vietnam reveals all of this and so much more. To study the Vietnam War is to arm yourself in the best sort of way for how to make sense of our own incredibly fraught moment. It is more relevant than ever. Whether or not we have learned from this history is a question we cannot answer.

Source: "The Vietnam War' co-directors Ken Burns and Lynn Novick explain why Vietnam is relevant to us today," <https://www.csmonitor.com/Books/chapter-and-verse/2017/0912/The-Vietnam-War-co-directors-Ken-Burns-and-Lynn-Novick-explain-why-Vietnam-is-relevant-to-us-today>

Veterans draw comparisons between Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan

Hugh Bassette served in the Army as a clerk and in the infantry in 1969-1970 in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. (Jonathon Gruenke / Daily Press)

Many Vietnam veterans see similarities between their war and those fought in Iraq and Afghanistan – and the comparison is tragic.

Five decades later and still weary from the war that was never officially declared, many of these veterans know all too well how extended fighting, waning public support, and an unrelenting enemy can end.

"We certainly didn't win in Vietnam," said Hugh Bassette, an infantryman during the war in Southeast Asia, "and we're not going to win in Afghanistan and Iraq, either."

Vietnam was America's longest conflict, spanning 12 years between 1961 and 1973, until our involvement in Afghanistan continued into its 13th year in 2014. There are still nearly 10,000 U.S. services members there advising and training a reluctant home force against the [Taliban](#), a fundamentalist Islamic political movement accused of allowing terror groups such as [Al-Qaeda](#) safe haven.

Then there's Iraq, where U.S. troops invaded in 2003 and withdrew, then in 2011 ousting dictator Saddam Hussein but without quashing an insurgency and the sectarian violence that broke out between religious groups. A new foe, Islamic State, emerged last year, renewing hostilities there.

"You can't go to another country and make people do what you want to do. They're going to fight you back," Bassette, a 73-year-old Hampton native, said.

In Vietnam, it was the Viet Cong who fought back. These southern guerrilla fighters supported a northern communist overthrow and blended into the South Vietnamese population by day, then attacked American troops by night.

"The South Vietnamese people, they supported the Viet Cong. They would not have been able to move or operate or function if the people didn't support them," he said. "That's why I look at Afghanistan and Iraq, and say we're not going to win those, either. Because in order to win those types of situations, you've got to stay there to make sure you keep control. ... The Afghan and Iraqi people are kind of like the Vietnamese, they're not going to be controlled by no outside force."

While the battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan have been more urban than the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam, the issue of being able to identify an enemy combatant from civilians remains.

"I think the longer anything runs, and the harder it is to see victory," said Guy Manchester, of Newport News. He received multiple Purple Hearts and was an Army scout pilot during Vietnam. "The harder it is to see, the harder it is to keep people supporting it, both financially and politically. You can't stay highly focused and highly motivated over long periods of time."

Frustrated public

Many Americans at first supported the war in Vietnam, convinced that if the Southeast Asian country fell under communist control so would the rest of the region — it was called the domino theory. The theory turned out to be wrong, and as the war dragged on and winning seemed unlikely, supporters turned into protesters.

When in 2001, Al-Qaeda, led then by Osama bin Laden and supported by the Taliban in Afghanistan, flew two planes into the Twin Towers in New York, a third into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and a fourth that crashed in a field in Pennsylvania, the American people rallied behind a retaliatory effort. Then-President George W. Bush's administration expanded the effort, launching a preemptive invasion into Iraq against the brutal Hussein regime.

Like Vietnam, "people began to get very frustrated that Iraq was dragging on and on," said Pete Fairchild, 70, of Hampton, who received a Purple Heart for wounds sustained in the infantry during Vietnam.

Fairchild added that neither North Vietnam, a communist government which eventually overthrew its southern neighbor, nor the Viet Cong were ever a threat to the American public. At least, not like the extremist groups active in the Middle East, Fairchild said.

Still, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan haven't sparked the same outrage as Vietnam. Part of that can be attributed to the fact that the military's ranks are filled by volunteers rather than draftees. With that change comes more frequent deployments for those who now serve.

The scales of manpower in the war have differed as well. At the war's height, more than 500,000 service members were fighting in Vietnam, a relatively small country. U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan reached their peak in 2008 with less than 300,000 troops spread between the two countries' vast deserts and mountainous countryside.

Counterinsurgency

Chris Garcia, 44, of Virginia Beach, is the education coordinator at the Virginia War Museum in Newport News and gives weekly counterinsurgency briefings at The Joint Forces Staff College in Norfolk. He's an Iraq War veteran who deployed during the invasion in 2003 and again in 2004.

"There is no military solution to counter insurgency," he said. "You can't solve what amounts to a political problem by sheer force. You've got to have political will to stay for the long haul."

It takes decades to stabilize countries such as Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan, he said, and to make democracy work, there also has to be economic solutions. They need schools and hospitals, Garcia said, and "that's not the military's job."

"One reason I got out in 2005 was that I no longer believed in what we were fighting for," he said. "We make so many of the same mistakes over and over."

While the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan haven't been resolved, to Andrew Falk, an associate history professor at Christopher Newport University, their comparison to a defeat like Vietnam doesn't bode well for the outcome.

"To associate any political or military operation with Vietnam is not a compliment by any means," he said. "Often Vietnam is referred to as a quagmire or tragedy. So, to equate or compare Iraq and Afghanistan with Vietnam is to attest that the war is controversial, ambiguous and some would go so far as to say a failure."

Falk said all three countries have long histories of civil unrest and resistance to outside influences that were ignored before U.S. involvement.

"In all cases I think we had flawed partners that we were working within these countries, and our allies were lukewarm about what we were doing in each case. I also think there was a confidence that the American military could compensate for all of these challenges," Falk said. "But most fundamentally ... I think in each case there was too little consideration of the history and the perspectives in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq in terms of their own histories and sense of nationalism. They all have a pretty strong anti-foreign sentiment."

Forgotten lessons

America didn't learn, or forgot, the hard-earned lessons from Vietnam, said Richard St. Peter, an Air Force photographer during the war. America's involvement ended in 1973 after the death of more than 58,000 service members — to compare, about 6,000 have died in Iraq or Afghanistan. It took only two years after U.S. forces left before North Vietnam overtook Saigon, the former capital of South Vietnam.

St. Peter, now 68 living in Carrollton, said the country fell so quickly because the South Vietnamese never showed the will to fight.

"I see the same thing in Iraq and Afghanistan," he said. "If we left those countries, they'd probably go right back to what they were before."

"We're in Iraq and we're in Afghanistan and we'll go somewhere else next," he said. "It really bothers me. You would think we would learn. You would think our leaders would not send off the young to

fight the wars leaders come up with. Old men send young boys to war. You'd think that when they got older they'd stop doing that."

Source: <http://www.dailypress.com/news/military/dp-nws-vietnam-iraq-afghanistan-20151113-story.html>