

CHAPTER 13

U.S. Militarism, Past and Present: Talking Peace, Making War



THE IMPREGNABLE COUNTRY

The USA is by no means unique in fomenting aggression while talking peace. In the histories of Western countries in the past several centuries, it is difficult to find even one instance of any nation going to war that did not, in one way or another, spin its aggression by talking *peace*—before, during, and after.

Because we as a people are almost entirely ignorant of that part of our own history, what follows includes lengthy summaries of it—with the additional benefit of providing perspective on our current war against Iraq.

The USA has been unique in one respect; namely, it has lacked *any* rationale for attacking others. We have always been more than self-sufficient in natural resources, in our agricultural and mineral resources of all kinds. Plus our great rivers, lakes, and seashores have provided us with abundant water (and fish), cheap transportation, and many trading ports. The USA *has had it all*—or more properly, *took it all away* from the Natives.

Once our so-called “Manifest Destiny” led us to complete what was also euphemistically termed “Westward Expansion,” not only were we easily able to move toward becoming the strongest economy in the world, but the vast seas surrounding us—7,000 miles wide to the West, 3,000 to the East—protected us *from all enemies*.

We barely broke sweat to kick out (or buy out) the French, British, Dutch, Spanish, Mexicans, and Russians—who had deigned to occupy “American” soil and who, in fact, had just as much and just as little right to “America” as we did. But, just as we achieved our independence in large part because the British were simply too far away to fight a prolonged war against us, so it was for the other Europeans; they, too, were too distant to raise a ruckus. And the Mexicans never had a chance.

The total security of the USA has been intruded upon only twice: during World

War II when the Japanese bombed the distant U.S. colony of Hawai'i (nearly 2,500 miles from the mainland) and, of course, the 9/11 attack (2001-09-11).

In the 150 years of our existence as a nation *before* those two attacks, our impregnability notwithstanding, the USA had been involved in *dozens* of declared and undeclared wars in North, Central, and South America and in North Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands. (Williams, 1980)

In sum, whether for purposes of resources or safety, except for World War II, the USA has never had *any supportable reason* for going to war. Despite that, our citizenry has always been enthusiastically in support of, or at least indifferent to, our many wars. There was one exception to this acquiescence: the U.S. war in Vietnam. And (as will be discussed) that resistance took hold only after many years of our unsuccessful military involvement there.

Coming out of the Vietnam antiwar movement was Pete Seeger's 1961 song "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" The poignant tag line to each verse was "When will they ever learn? When will they ever learn?" What we should have learned was not what was depicted by the U.S. government and the toadying media. The objections of the citizenry to U.S. aggression were spun as "the Vietnam syndrome"—as though being against war were a social disease.

The power elite's cure for that disease was administered in the 1970s and was effectively accomplished during the Reagan years. It was accompanied by what Du Boff called the *corporate counterattack*, whose aim was to undo the modest but important socioeconomic reforms from the 1930s into the 1960s. It succeeded.

Those who led and supported Reaganism were not only against peaceniks, unions, civil rights, high taxes (or any taxes) on the rich, governmental social security and health care, and all regulations; they were also for, most especially, high (and rising) military expenditures ("misex").

The main corporations involved in the counterattack were among the top beneficiaries of the "military-industrial complex." (This was Eisenhower's well-known 1961 designation, as he left the presidency.)

The military suppliers (and many of their workers) wanted the U.S. public to *unlearn* about war, so that the dollars could continue to flow. And the record shows it was no small amount at stake: The USA spent \$12 trillion on military expenditures and their cost-plus contracts, 1946–1999. (*Economic Reports of the President*)

This is how some of that misex was put to use.

U.S. MILITARY INTERVENTIONS SINCE WORLD WAR II

World War II had barely ended when the USA resumed the military interventions that began with the birth of the nation and have never ceased. Here are only some of the best known since 1945 (with others before that noted later). This is, by no means, an exhaustive list:

- *1945–1954 Through 1975* The financing and arming of the French in Vietnam, followed soon after by our secret military interventions in Vietnam, later made “legal” by the spurious Tonkin Gulf Resolution (August 1964). (Kahin; Young)
- *1948–2004* The financing and arming of Israel (Oz)
- *1950–1953* The Korean war (Cumings; Matray)
- *1953–Now* The CIA overthrow of democratically elected leaders:
 - *1953* Mossadegh in Iran (Draper; Kinzer)
 - *1954* Arbenz in Guatemala (Jonas)
 - *1961* Lumumba in the Congo (Hochschild)
 - *1961–Now* Numerous attempts to overthrow Castro (Chang and Kornbuhl)
 - *1965* Sukarno in Indonesia (Blum)
 - *1973* Allende in Chile (Powers; Uribe)
- *Ongoing* The payment for and delivery of weapons to right-wing armies to undo or prevent democratic governments through Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador (Bonner)
- *Late 1970s* The arming and financing of the Taliban in Afghanistan to provoke the Soviet Union (Brzezinski; *Le Nouvel Observateur*); plus a substantial number of known, suspected, and likely events on every continent (Blum)

CHARACTERISTICS OF CONTEMPORARY WARS

All wars have their special qualities, but they also have much in common. What follows will focus upon the meaning of both the differences and the similarities between U.S. and other nations’ wars, especially as regards the fear and morale of our troops—keeping in mind the twisted nature of the war in Iraq, and what are likely to be its unintended and disastrous consequences for all concerned.

Among wars’ many common features most relevant for today are:

1. Their generally dubious rationales
2. The influence of the involved nations’ previous wars

3. The distortions by the adversaries of each other's character and their misguided beliefs concerning each other's weaknesses
4. Especially for the USA since 1950, unrealistic expectations for advanced military technologies

The interaction of these common features largely determines domestic support for any given war and, of course, the morale of the front line soldiers, as they undergo the swirling mix of boredom, confusion, fear, and demoralization of combat duty. We begin our discussion of these four salient characteristics with a brief analysis of the striking divergence between the costs and benefits of twentieth century wars set against those of earlier times.

WE HAVEN'T LEARNED TO HATE WAR ENOUGH

The Arithmetic of Slaughter

An examination of our wars since 1917 will show that the Iraqi war will be unique in our military history—not because (as with Korea and Vietnam) we have bitten off more than we can chew, but because this time it will be both more difficult to remain (as we have done in Korea) or to leave (as with Vietnam). And there is much more at stake both at home and abroad no matter *which* we do.

Of the many elements relevant to that judgment, the most important is perhaps the least obvious; namely, our very limited experience with war's suffering compared with almost all other nations. The only exception to that was the Civil War. In that conflict more than 6 percent (more than 600,000) of our entire white male population were killed and at least twice that number were wounded.

The numbers of dead and wounded from our twentieth century wars as measured in absolute terms were of course substantial; but unlike other countries' experiences, as a percentage of our population, U.S. combatant casualties have always been minimal (coupled with virtually no civilian casualties).

The comparative numbers tell the story.

U.S. War Losses and Population

<i>War</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Dead</i>	<i>Wounded</i>
World War I	>100 million	110,000*	200,000
World War II	>145 million	400,000	670,000
Korean War	>151 million	36,000	103,000
Vietnam War	205 million	58,000	153,000

*(one-half from combat)

Those were terrible numbers for the killed and wounded and their families, but they were slight when compared with those of Europe in the two world wars. The aggregated relevant European populations were three to four times that of the USA but their dead were at least fifteen times ours in World War I and over one hundred times ours in World War II:

In World War I, 8 million European soldiers were killed and more than 15 million were wounded, plus the first large numbers of civilian dead (about 2 million). In World War II, 60 million were killed in Europe (almost half of them in the Soviet Union alone, mostly civilians). Countless more were wounded and geographically uprooted. All that was worsened by the substantial destruction of cities, farms, factories, and all transportation. Then note that the Pacific war had its beginnings in the early 1930s, so that for the Chinese and Japanese and, later, the peoples of Southeast Asia, death and destruction were also great. (Frumkin)

The tens of thousands of U.S. dead and wounded in the Korean and Vietnam wars were also relatively mild.

The combined populations of all of Korea, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam were well under half of ours, but at least 3 million Koreans and 1 million Chinese died in that war, and at least another 3 million died in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—plus many millions civilians wounded, seriously injured, or killed by napalm and Agent Orange. And, as in Europe, there was the destruction of agriculture, cities, and forests, and the continuing existence of millions of lethal land mines in their countries. (There are injuries and deaths in Vietnam *to this day* from U.S. land mines.)

None of that devastation has occurred in the United States—ever. Apart from all else, then, the relevance of those numbers is that in the affected countries of Europe and of Asia, almost every family has suffered deep pain and losses from

war; whereas, except for our Civil War, well under 1 percent of U.S. families have ever had reason to know that war is hell.

The above numbers alone go far to explain why, as has been said, “The people of the United States have not learned to hate war enough.” This attitude (or lack of it) is also strengthened by our long-standing view that we are invulnerable—as indeed we *were*, until modern technology narrowed those oceans and allowed both Pearl Harbor and 9/11 to happen. Both were tragedies, but with a total death toll less than 6,000. While the rest of the world rightly sympathized in both cases, to them—based on their experiences—6,000 is not a large number.

Now, even though we have finally found ourselves to be vulnerable, we continue to lack a realistic view of war. Fear of possible terrorist attacks here is of course high. Paradoxically (for the rest of the world, at least), instead of increasing our opposition to war, our newfound vulnerability has made war and U.S. aggression even more acceptable than earlier. Even to go to war *preemptively* has been all too easily accepted—with, as usual, the enduring belief that, somehow, our extraordinary weaponry will prevail and renew our invulnerability.

We continue (accurately) to expect relatively low casualties for our own; while, at the same time, we continue to show little concern for the very high casualties of others from our weapons of mass destruction. We have even learned to euphemize—to dismiss—the destruction we inflict as *collateral damage*. Observe: The USA provides little or no information on Iraqi civilian casualties. But a British medical agency has determined that Iraqi civilian deaths had reached over 100,000 by the end of 2005—as compared with the 7,000 maximum one finds in U.S. reports. (See below.)

In sum, our war history has spoiled us rotten (or worse). Vital to our perverse learning process were the numerous and almost effortless little wars we fought before 1917. With misplaced admiration and rampant misinformation, we made heroes out of “Indian remover” Andrew Jackson and others like him. Today, however, what those “heroes” did (and how and why and to whom) would be (or at least *should be*) seen as war crimes.

Early U.S. Undeclared Wars

The late and esteemed U.S. historian W. A. Williams described the more than 150 mostly little and mostly undeclared wars noted above, from our beginnings as a nation. Until Pearl Harbor None could be seen as defensive. We tracked down, pushed aside, rounded up, or killed all the “natives” and the soldiers of nations

that stood in our way on this continent; that done, we began to flex our muscles abroad. (Williams, 1980)

Until the end of the nineteenth century, our population was widely scattered, largely illiterate, uninformed, and only rarely involved in national politics. Before our 1898–99 aggressions into Cuba and the Philippines, there was no need to provide the public with a reason why for military exploits: Why, we were simply moving west into what was “ours.”

But the construction of such a rationale for Cuba was seen as necessary by William Randolph Hearst—and, for him, profitable. So it was that, clumsily but effectively, he put forth his sensationalistic deceptions (yellow journalism being his trademark) about “the sinking of the Maine.” (See the surprisingly critical novel of Elmore Leonard, *Cuba Libre*.) For both patriotic and economic reasons, support came easily for such imperialist maneuvers—especially from the then politically important farmers, who hoped that our geographic expansion would give health to their sagging markets. (Williams, 1969)

From Cuba to the Philippines was geographically, but not politically, a giant step. We invaded and then annexed the islands in 1899—“in order to liberate the Filipinos from colonial rule”—and occupied them until after World War II. Having taken over almost all the islands between San Francisco and China, we then marched southward, slicing Panama out of Colombia, and making Nicaragua and Guatemala safe for U.S. companies.

For the countries the USA invaded, these were major wars. In the Philippines, to take just one example, there were 200,000 to 300,000 killed. For the folks back home in the USA, however, these invasions were (if anything) merely juicy items in the news.

These were the last of our small and easy wars. To get us into our first big one, World War I, it was necessary somehow to develop and refine the media art now called *spin*. The first invention mothered by that necessity was public relations. We have become so accustomed to the honeyed assaults of PR that it now seems it has always existed. It has not; it was born in its present form in 1916, as our pacifist internationalist President Woodrow Wilson was running for re-election.

WORLD WAR I: THE END OF INNOCENCE

Propaganda: Getting the USA into the War

That war had been going for 2 years in Europe when Wilson sought re-election. With his left hand he campaigned to keep us out of the war—“It is a war with

which we have nothing to do,” he said. With his right hand he quietly hired Edward L. Bernays, the grandfather of PR and modern advertising (and, curiously, the nephew of Sigmund Freud) to sell the war. Bernays’s task was made easier by what had been a lagging economy since 1912, but which from the war’s onset had been boosted by rising exports to the British and the French.

In November 1916, Wilson was duly re-elected. Bernays had begun his first campaign months before. He sent paid speakers around the country to civic clubs (Elks, Rotary, etc.), providing the press with ample incentive and opportunity to learn its lines. (See Tye.)

Edward Bernays later combined radio with large propaganda posters (the first use of which had been to promote support for the war) most popularly and successfully for the American Tobacco Company with his famous campaign “Reach for a Lucky Instead of a Sweet,” as the nation was going on its first, but not its last “Slim is beautiful” campaign—now become the anorexic “Skinny is beautiful.” (Ibid.)

The mass media of today were then unknown. World War I saw the use of radio for the first time, as means of military communication, but home radio didn’t begin the mid-1920s, and TV awaited the cash flow of the 1950s. Bernays’s PR campaign meant providing the speakers and newspapers with a steady supply of lurid (and invented) stories about “the Hun”: German soldiers’ sexual abuse of Belgian nuns...Germans machine-gunning of innocent civilians in French villages...Germans forcing of children to serve as decoys on the front lines.

This was disturbing news, all right. So when something tangible occurred, when the deadly German attack submarines (called *U-boats*) really did begin to sink U.S. ships carrying military provisions to the British, Uncle Sam easily slid into war.

Europe Takes the Hit

When the USA declared war against Germany in April 1917, President Wilson proclaimed that sheer decency required the United States to do so (in his words) “In order to make the world safe for democracy.” Well, we won the war but, somehow, between that victory for democracy and World War II half a dozen nations became totalitarian. None had been before. And in case you have forgotten, World War II was another go at the “war to end all wars.”

Although millions were drafted in the USA in 1917, but the war was sold well enough so that many eagerly lined up to enlist. Ultimately, 2 million of our 5 million new soldiers went to France to prance through Páree shouting “Lafayette,

we are here!” and other fun and games. Then, in the spring of 1918 war became serious for them and the fun stopped.

World War I was the nastiest war ever—at least up to then. It was marked by the extensive use of mass killers: murderous trench warfare, machine guns, tanks, and poison gas. It also featured aerial bombing, then a novel feature—but by today’s standards, quaint. The war’s most haunting memory for surviving participants was that of being trapped for weeks at a time in stinking corpse- and mud-filled trenches—as battle lines staggered back and forth a few yards...day after day...month after month...year after year. (Fussell)

Numbing fear, utter demoralization, insanity, searing wounds, and sudden or lingering death soon became the war’s trademarks for those in the trenches.

The war’s horrors were portrayed in fiction for the Germans in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, for the British in the poems of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, for the front-line Yanks in the trilogy *U.S.A.* of Dos Passos and, most recently, by the brilliant trilogy of Pat Barker, of Britain. Read ’em and weep.

The effects (and the aftereffects) of the war hit the European soldiers exponentially harder than those from the USA. Although passionate nationalism may once have let the Europeans believe in the war, by the time the Yanks landed, the Europeans had been killing each other for almost 3 years. Both sides were worn to a frazzle.

Our troops, fresh and well armed, were engaged in combat for a total of only 8 months, beginning April 1918 and ending that same November. U.S. troops were engaged mostly in the relatively less lethal *rolling offensives* (as compared with those earlier that went back-and-forth). With few exceptions, the U.S. divisions simply plunged ahead, and the war ended.

Peace—And All That Jazz

The immediate postwar years in the USA were very different from those in Europe. The ‘20s were called *the prosperity decade* and *the jazz age* in the USA. Although such terms were applicable to much less than a majority of the population, overall things were much more favorable here, compared with the social and political upheaval throughout Europe. There was revolution in Russia (during the war) and counterrevolution in Italy. Then, to one degree or another, came jolting politics in virtually all of Europe, China, and Japan. And almost everywhere—economic desperation.

The world economy had been precariously situated before 1914, so much so that its crises may be seen as fueling the war. But the war pushed Europe over

the precipice and into the depths of a depression as unprecedented as the war itself. (Lewis)

World War I officially ended with the *armistice* of 1918; essentially a ceasefire. It turned out to be only that, an all-too-brief hiatus. It was followed by intermittent wars in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia and, in Spain in 1936, a civil war. It was more than a civil—that is, an internal—war. To one serious degree or another, it involved all of the major powers and was effectively both the testing ground for World War II and its first set of battles.

WORLD WAR II: “THE GOOD WAR”

The good war—what an oxymoronic phrase. It is also the title of an excellent 1984 book of oral histories about World War II, written by Studs Terkel, the Chicago-based writer, actor, radio announcer, disk jockey, and historian. The book tells first-person stories from around the world, detailing the horror that overtook much of the earth.

Since the focus here is on the United States, little attention will be given to the other nations involved in this *good war*; but keep in mind the massive war casualties, infrastructural destruction, and sociopolitical collapse that were suffered *outside the USA*.

The relatively limited casualties of the USA have been noted. In all other respects, the economic, political and social consequences of the war were as *positive* for us as they were devastating for the Europeans. World War II was more strengthening for our economy and health-giving for our society than *any other period in our history*. (Du Boff)

Item Except for World War II, my knowledge of the wars discussed here has been second-hand. I was in the army for 4 years, in New Guinea and the Philippines (air-sea rescue, with the 309th Bomb Group) and as well, with the infantry (on loan) for several months for an invasion in New Britain.

I was with the Regimental Combat Team of the 112th Cavalry, in which Norman Mailer was a rifleman, and whose Commanding General—a brigadier from Texas—slung twin Colt revolvers on his hips (with a naked woman pictured on their handles). We were called *cavalry*, but we had no horses. Or tanks, either, for that matter.

I note the foregoing in connection with the following generalization. Although combat conditions in the Pacific war were notably different from those in Europe, what I observed directly in the Pacific and learned indirectly persuaded me that the fear and morale of the troops in both Europe and the Pacific—especially

when compared with Vietnam and Iraq—were similar. Succinctly put, there was relatively very little demoralization in the Pacific war.

Since the USA was attacked by the Japanese, the U.S. public needed no (manufactured) rationale for a declared war against them. And it was the Germans who declared war on us, not we on them.

Although many in the USA volunteered, most who served in the war were drafted. Whether in the Pacific or in Europe, it was virtually unnecessary to discuss the character of the enemy; with some accuracy, our enemies were seen by us as villainous and brutal. In my experience, with some accuracy, we could also be seen as brutal by them, *with or without* Hiroshima...Nagasaki...Dresden.

For at least 2 years after Pearl Harbor, the USA was very much on the defensive (how unusual!). Not only had we been attacked on U.S. soil, but for the first time ever, our actual military strength was noticeably inferior. The Japanese ruled on land and sea and in the air. From late 1941 until early 1944, for those in combat, it seemed clear that we were losing the war. Rather than cause demoralization, that perception tended to stiffen spines and to counter at least some of our fears.

Item The infantry fighting almost always began with a landing and continued into a jungle. It was carried out in an atmosphere of high uncertainty and fear. But unlike Vietnam and even more unlike Iraq, those of us doing the fighting could identify the source and reasonably predict the timing of assaults. In 3 years under those conditions, I observed no significant demoralization, let alone (as became common in Vietnam) any desertion—or the killing of officers.

Understandably, there were indeed some who suffered a breakdown (and were given a Section 8 discharge—mental illness). I came close to it myself. But on my part that was occasioned not by anger or the indignation of having been betrayed by a deceptive government, but by the sheer horror of combat, by the belief that most of us would not survive that war.

Of course, as always in the military, there was constant wry and inconsequential grumbling. Already, before the war began, GIs had characterized military life rather pithily:

SNAFU

(Situation Normal, All Fucked Up)

By 1943, that had become

*TARFU**(Things Are Really Fucked Up)*

By 1945, matters had escalated to

*FUBAR**(Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition)*

This was not fantasizing. It was the way things were. In fact, the states of SNAFU, TARFU, and FUBAR are virtual trademarks of the military, even—perhaps *especially*—in wartime.

By late 1944 our military strength in both the Pacific and Europe had become quantitatively and qualitatively superior to anything the enemy might use against us—and this even before the atomic bomb.

Attitudes then changed. Despair tended to disappear and, sensibly enough, hope began to rise. But, because of the war's clear rationale, at any time during the war morale was only rarely an issue. Then it became just a matter of time and a little luck and we'd be home. Studs Terkel's *The Good War* is only about World War II. We have had no such "good" war since then.

THE COLD WAR GETS HOT: KOREA AND INDOCHINA

The U.S. wars in Korea and Indochina were discussed at great length in Chapters 8 and 9. Here are presented just a few more comments linking them to the overall subject of U.S. wars.

Two Frauds: WMD, The Domino Effect

The excuse of *weapons of mass destruction* for our invasion of Iraq had its functional precedents in Korea and Vietnam. Our pretense for landing in Korea was that the North Koreans, said to be inspired by the Soviet Union, had invaded South Korea. Similarly, in Vietnam, the Viet Minh of the North, and subsequently, the NLF (National Liberation Front) of the South were depicted—absurdly so, as will be seen—as pawns of Communist China.

The United States had to stop the Communists then and there, the "reasoning" went, or Korea would be followed by Japan. Vietnam—where our secret involvement had begun even before our Korean commitment—we were told, would be but the first in the row of dominoes extending to the Mediterranean that, one after another, would be toppled by the Soviet Union or China or both. (Young)

Before going on, it is worth pointing out that the most would say the

Vietnamese defeated us. Yet, mysteriously, *not a single domino fell*. In fact, by 1979 the Chinese had invaded Vietnam—thus resuming an enmity going back a thousand years. Details, details. (For some, mere facts don't matter.)

The Source of Our Defeat

There was essentially no opposition to the Korean War. The Vietnam War was different. Belatedly, but slowly and surely, a substantial opposition to U.S. involvement in Vietnam did arise, even as the Cold War's virulence was still ascending. How and why that occurred is distinctly relevant to the war in Iraq.

As remarked earlier, with Iraq a work in progress, to date, the Korean and Vietnam wars are the only wars the USA has ever lost. But the fact of the U.S. losses are not generally admitted. Of great interest, therefore, is the sharp contrast between the Korea and Vietnam wars, not only in domestic support, but as well, in the morale and behavior of U.S. troops.

Many readers will be familiar with a whimsical film and TV show placed in the Korean war: *M.A.S.H.* There has not been, nor will there ever be, any such a comic portrayal of the Vietnam war or of the war in Iraq. The troops in Korea were, to a significant degree, veterans of World War II. That might well have led many of them to be bitter, but if so they were serving in a context where such feelings remained private.

During the U.S. war on Korea, few indeed, either in combat or at home, would even dare to think, let alone act, against it. World War II had led the people of the United States to believe that it was *we*—not the enduring resistance of the British or the victories of the Soviets, not the *maquis* of France, not the *partigiani* of Italy, not the *andartes* of Greece—yes, it was the USA who had just about single-handedly won that “good war.” *Now we had to stand fast* against two unutterably sinister nations (which in reality were only two weak little countries far, far from our shores). Then and only then could—*or anyone*—live in a peaceful and democratic world.

And the whys and wherefores for the war in Indochina (as shown earlier) were just as dishonest—utterly, completely, and fatally dishonest. By the time we left Vietnam, about 3.5 million GIs had served 1-year hitches there. Almost from the moment of their arrival, most were caught up in an endless and nameless fear. Now, in Iraq, under quite different but potentially even worse conditions, those on the ground are again possessed by the same fear. Vietnam was the first such war for us; setting aside our adventures in Afghanistan, Iraq is the second.

As in all our post-World War II wars, in Vietnam we possessed what seemed to

be unquestionable supremacy in every category of weaponry: guns and grenades, artillery, tanks, and in all the craft and weaponry in the air and on the sea. We also could dangle the prospect of the most delusory of all, nuclear weapons.

But for those doing the fighting in Vietnam, all that weaponry paled when set against their first-hand knowledge that *they were never safe*. That nightmare is being played out once again, in Iraq. As will be seen later, it is but one of several other obstacles frustrating the will of the United States—all of them arising from our persistent inability to comprehend why the peoples of such countries cannot see the United State as we see ourselves: We are a liberator, benignly interested only in the welfare and freedom of the occupied peoples' societies. Others see us for what we are. To them, we are invaders. Conquerors. *Barbarians*.

What our troops did not possess was the secret weapon of the Vietnamese: the insuperable outrage at having one's turf overrun by foreigners. (Closer to home, suppose Turkey or Israel or China were to invade [*Your State's Name Here*]...) Our strategists never come close to comprehending the sources or the nature of the strengths of our created enemy. Something under 60,000 U.S. soldiers died in Vietnam. Millions of Vietnamese died. Most of them were civilians—peasants, farmers *just in the way*, or just being taught a lesson. We were simply unable (or unwilling) to consider what *we* would have done in similar circumstances, if we were occupied by a foreign power. Let us hope we would behave as the Vietnamese did.

That was the source of our defeat in Vietnam. With differences and adjustments, it has happened again in Iraq.

We never saw the Vietnamese as human beings, never understood or even tried to understand that almost all Vietnamese would hate, and many would fight against, our occupation. As the war went on and on, we came to fear, despise, and speak of all Vietnamese as “gooks.” In Iraq, after less than 1 year, our soldiers had already found an equally derisive—and much resented—term for the occupied Iraqis: *hajis*. (“For GIs, Pride in War Efforts but Doubts About Iraq's Future.” *NYT*, 2004-01-04)

THE QUAGMIRE OF IRAQ: DEATH AND DEMORALIZATION

Lies and Betrayal

However fraudulent the reasons given for previous wars, not even those given for Vietnam could match the dizzying justifications for invading Iraq: weapons of mass destruction, Osama bin Laden, democracy, freedom—anything and

everything except the real reasons, which were regional strategy and oil. (See Everest.)

As each new fabrication became, to use a phrase from the Nixon era, “no longer operative”—which is to say a casualty of truth—much of the U.S. public and, indeed, most of the world moved toward skepticism and disgust. Because, like Vietnam, the war in Iraq has been (at least sometimes) reported on the field of battle as well as at home, the continuing bad news undermines troop morale. It also feeds fears in ways and to degrees that are new—because there *is* something new about this war.

GIs in Iraq must deal with the endless confusion as to why they are there (and for how long) and try to survive amid ongoing and daily horrors (some of which, being soldiers, they create). For the GIs, everything is a matter, not of politics, but of life and death—and of betrayal. The realization of the betrayal of Iraq differs greatly from that felt in Korea and Vietnam.

It seems years now since the disgracefully costumed Bush strode across that carrier’s deck, in front of the idiot sign:

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Tell it to the marines. Tell it all the GIs in Iraq.

Strangers in a Strange Land

So there they are, surrounded 24/7 by people with whom they cannot communicate *at all*, whose strange clothing might conceal various lethal weapons. There they are, trying 24/7 to work with and live beside people many of whom may well have feared and despised Hussein, but now despise the U.S. occupation at least as much. So there they are, well-fed GIs facing people enduring shortages of all kinds and suffering even more from U.S. errors of omission and commission. There they are, both fearful and arrogant, heavily-armed, grotesquely attired soldiers walking with weapons at the ready—all that for power in the region and for access to and control of Iraq’s biggest natural resource. Which is *oil*.

It makes one shudder even to *think* of having to be one of those GIs or one of those newly-freed Iraqis. The status of the troops in Iraq is of great importance in terms of their morale. There are no draftees in Iraq, only volunteers. They are of three types:

1. Career soldiers
2. Those who enlisted for long enough to get an education and training

for a civilian job (One recent antiwar button in California reads: “KILL FOR COLLEGE.”)

3. Now an always increasing number of (reluctant) called-up reservists

The reservists never expected to be in harm’s way at all. The others expected a quick and easy win, with maybe 3-to-6 months in Iraq. (Wrong.) In Vietnam it was a 1-year ordeal for most. In Iraq all face being in Iraq for 1 year, then back home, then back again to Iraq in a process that has no predictable end (although the British Foreign Office in January 2004 predicted 5-to-7 years of what it called “peaceful occupation”).

And this says nothing about the disgraceful and systematic lying regarding our treatment of Iraqi prisoners—many of whom have committed only petty crimes, or none at all; some of whom may or may not be what we call *insurgents*. Our war crimes are bad for the humanity of everyone involved, and if they’re later discovered, bad for morale, too.

But in Iraq, who wouldn’t be demoralized?

How This War Is Different

Combat always produces emotional as well as physical damage, and governments always stretch to conceal rather than admit the truth about casualties. That’s the war business. *But this particular war is breaking new ground in every way.* There are half a dozen ways this war is different.

1. The war in Iraq, like that in Vietnam, is not the kind of war for which the United States is, or given our history, ever would be prepared. Yet our military strength is incomparably superior to that of any other in the world in every way. The United States can certainly prevail in a conventional, non-nuclear war. (In a nuclear war none would prevail, with a huge initial loss of life and a portion—perhaps even much—of the planet becoming instantly and permanently uninhabitable.)

2. Few of our armed forces ever expected to become casualties in Iraq. Our easy victory was assumed from the start. Even fewer GIs, it may be assumed, expected anything like the always changing mix of deadly forces and tactics against them as is now common: In the first 9 months in Iraq the 500 U.S. dead exceeded the number of U.S. deaths in our *first 3 years* in Vietnam. As of the summer of 2006, the number of U.S. dead exceeds 2,500.

3. This war was expected to be easier and shorter than its regional predecessor, the Gulf War. The fantasy held by at least the reigning Rumsfeld coterie was simple (and simple-minded): Our troops would invade...be greeted with

flowers...mop-up (quickly and easily)...and leave. Or, the thinking may well have gone (in and around the White House), the troops could stay, but they would remain there on our own terms.

4. Although fear is intrinsic to all combat, the fear in Iraq is very different from that of the European and Pacific wars, even including Vietnam. We have usually known the *who* and the *where*—and often the *when*—of the battles and the opposition. Now our troops in Iraq never know what to expect, or from whom... or when...or where. That kind of fear of someone or something coming at you from out of nowhere can easily become unbearable. Day after stressful day, a surprise assault, grenades, a bomb, a firefight, and whoosh!—the attackers recede back into *nowhere*. Here's how one platoon leader saw it, after 10 months (as reported in "U.S. military doctors brace for the aftershocks of war; Army expects a flood of troubled soldiers," *NYT*, 2004-12-16):

In the urban terrain, the enemy is everywhere, across the street, in that window, up that alley; it's a fishbowl. You never feel safe. You never relax.

And, the same article reports:

[A]n army study shows that about one in six soldiers in Iraq report symptoms of major depression, serious anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder, a proportion some experts believe could climb to one in three....I have a very strong sense that the mental health consequences are going to be the medical story of this war, said Stephen Joseph [assistant secretary for health affairs, 1994–97].

5. Even before the invasion, the justification for the war in Iraq was doubted, questioned, and refuted—by a sizeable minority in the USA and internationally by a substantial majority among our normal allies. This outright rejection is in contrast with the broad and after Pearl Harbor unquestioned support for World War II. After the Japanese attack on our Hawaiian colony, predictably, almost all "rallied 'round the flag," as usual—at least for a while. Today, doubts inexorably spread and deepen, most perilously among the U.S. troops in or likely to be sent to Iraq. As a result, a growing number of U.S. politicians might, *just might*, begin to look for ways to be courageous, or as activists put it, "get a spine transplant"—as they finally did after many years of Vietnam.

6. Given the manifold problems described above, the appropriate question is not why demoralization and suicides rise among U.S. troops, but how much more is to be expected? And further—what could plausibly reverse such processes? The problems will not be reversed by Pentagon spin mongers, or by such shameful efforts as, to rally support of the war, the Pentagon's conveniently

providing GIs with hundreds of identical letters—written by the Pentagon (October 2003).

The U.S. Media Spectacle vs. Real International Reporting

Nor should we ignore what the conduct of this war is doing to the morale and behavior of the Iraqis. From the very beginning, the USA has treated the war as a media spectacle:

- *Item* Recall the phony pulling down of Saddam’s statue, to the cheering non-multitudes.

- *Item* Observe the creation of this or that version of a “free and democratic government.” Marvel to the much-publicized 2-1/2-hour visit with 600 troops at the Baghdad Airport by Bush on the 2003 U.S. Thanksgiving Day—complete with a photogenic, but phony and inedible, turkey. (Not being on camera themselves, the troops had to be content with steam table food.)

- *Item* Iraqis themselves can thrill to the U.S. president’s next and real, albeit nearly invisible, visit to Iraq, when he met with the head of the Iraqi government. Of course, at the same time, Iraqis might want to ignore the concomitant display of U.S. arrogance. The titular Iraqi leader was informed of the pending presidential visit only 5 minutes before it was to take place.

And so it goes. Perhaps a good portion of the U.S. public has been taken in by the staging, the spectacle, the spin. It is unlikely that any but a small percentage of Iraqis have been conned by them. That is, by us.

If the media covering Vietnam finally did become more of a burden than a tool for the White House, that calculation may be multiplied for today’s media—internationally. While U.S. media are embedded (reportorially in bed) with the U.S. military, hard at work in the field are also the media of the Middle East, especially Al Jazeera, on radio and TV.

That’s a dangerous state of affairs for U.S. military propaganda and the lies and distortions behind U.S. war effort. Hence, the U.S. military has deliberately targeted the Al Jazeera news organization, destroying its offices and murdering its reporters in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Giving fearless first-hand reports from their hotel rooms in the Green Zone (the U.S. fortress in Baghdad), the U.S. media never give an accurate accounting of Iraqi casualties. In fact, they almost never even bother to mention the Iraqi dead and wounded. The subtext: Who cares about mere Iraqis?

Well, the Iraqis care and they want the figures. They know to pay little or no attention to announcements from the U.S. government, media, or military.

Instead, they pay a great deal of attention to the reporters of their own country—and of neighboring Iran, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt.

Item Insofar as they report it at all, the U.S. corporate media note a total of 2,000-to-7,000 civilian deaths in Iraq. Others internationally are more forthcoming. *The Daily Star* (of Beirut) cites an article from *Lancet*, the leading British medical journal, noting at least 100,000 civilian deaths (“Iraq’s civilian dead get no hearing in the United States,” written by the U.S. economist Jeffrey Sachs, a one-time enthusiast of globalization, and once a regular contributor to the *New York Times*). That’s for the first 18 months of the U.S.-led invasion. (“An excess mortality of nearly 100,000 deaths was reported in Iraq for the period March 2003–September 2004, attributed to the invasion of Iraq.”—*Lancet* 2006-10-11)

Item A new study, published again in *Lancet* (2006-10-11), puts the current death toll at 650,000. “We estimate that as of July 2006, there have been 654,965 (392–979–942,636) excess Iraqi deaths as a consequence of the war, which corresponds to 2.5% of the population...” The reigning U.S. expert on Iraqi deaths, G. W. Bush, whose own published estimates *are lower by more than an order of magnitude*, whined from the faith-based White House that *Lancet* “is not a credible source.”

Iraq: The Most Dangerous Country on Earth

The White House congratulated itself on its November-December 2004 victory in (destroying) Fallujah—wherein, meanwhile, burst water mains have caused flooding above hip-levels, and a variety of difficult to deadly illnesses have spread because of poisoned water...and so on. And, meanwhile, uprisings spread throughout the rest of Iraq, as unemployment passes 60 percent, and for the majority, life becomes a combination of difficulty, danger, and outright terror. Death is everywhere. Iraq is now the most dangerous country on earth.

As I write in June 2006, Iraqi elections have been held and a government is living and functioning—but only within the U.S.-controlled Green Zone. A great sense of relief showed itself in the White House and environs when the election proceeded without the diverse disasters that had been (with reason) feared; plus the election even had a respectably large turnout (except for the Sunni).

Now the struggles among Shia and Sunni and Kurds have taken hold. There are many dimensions to these, including the conflicting desires of the Kurds to maintain or, evidently, to increase their present degree of independence and take control of the substantial Kirkuk oil fields. In addition, there is the struggle

between those who wish a secular government and those who wish a religious government (as in Shiite Iran).

Getting Out of the Quagmire

The differences between the war in Vietnam and that in Iraq are, of course, numerous and important. But so are the similarities. In addition to those noted earlier, and specifically as regards the Iraqi election, the following quotation from the British newspaper the *Guardian* (2005-02-01) seems eerily relevant:

On September 4, 1967, the New York Times published an upbeat story on presidential elections held by the South Vietnamese puppet regime at the height of the Vietnam war. Under the heading 'US encouraged by Vietnam vote: Officials cite 83% turnout despite Vietcong terror' the paper reported that the Americans had been 'surprised and heartened' by the size of the turnout 'despite a Vietcong terrorist campaign to disrupt the voting.' A successful election, it went on, 'has long been seen as the keystone in President Johnson's policy of encouraging the growth of constitutional processes in South Vietnam.'

Given that the Iraq war and its tragedies up to this point cannot be undone, one can see the election as having a positive side to it—but if and only if the USA will cease its occupation (if and) when we are asked to leave.

Will we be asked to do so? Just before the election, the leader of the Shiite majority (of 60 percent) made it clear that his group wants the occupation to end. But we surely will not leave unless "free Iraq" grants us the right to gain and retain control over Iraq's great oil resources. We may, or more likely, may not be granted that control. Given U.S. interests, control of oil may well be a sticking point.

What all this portends for the future cannot be known. *Quagmire* has ceased to be a four-letter word, and references to Vietnam are becoming always more numerous. But Vietnam—or more accurately, Indochina—was a very different war. It is to be hoped that the USA will not sustain the 60,000 deaths of Vietnam and that Iraqi deaths will not match the millions lost in Indochina *before we find some way to leave*.

But who can say what will happen? Current strategic thinking in the White House threatens to become even be more mindless and ideology- (or theology-) driven than it was for Vietnam. The outcomes of our latest criminal lunacy could well be worse than with Vietnam, and in more ways than one. We were able to get out of Vietnam with "nothing lost save honor." To that should be added:

1. Tens of thousands GI's dead

2. More than twice that number of GI's wounded
3. For the people of Indochina, millions dead and wounded
4. Who knows how many lives turned into a chamber of horrors

Nor is it unimportant that to this day there has never been as much as a *whisper* of apology or repentance from any administration for the war.

Nauseating Statements

No. 1 In refusing to apologize or pay reparations for our war in Indochina, President Jimmy Carter made the preposterous claim that *both sides had been victims*.

No. 2 A few years later at the SS cemetery at Bitburg, the next U.S. president, R. W. Reagan, made a similar, astounding, and ultimately horrifying, pronouncement: *The SS, too, had been victims*. (The *Schutzstaffel*, the notorious Nazi military and political terrorists, overseers of the extermination camps, perpetrators of unimaginable brutality, committing countless war crimes, murdering millions—*they were victims?*)

No. 3 If that isn't enough (and it's more than enough to make one retch), reflect on the *next* U.S. president's defiance: "I will never apologize for the United States of America. I don't care what the facts are." (Speaking is, of course, George H. W. Bush.) As he correctly points out, for some people, facts don't matter.

The Dilemma

As veteran foreign correspondent Robert Fisk has noted, The White House has to confront an emerging dilemma:

Proposition 1: We cannot stay in Iraq.

Proposition 2: We cannot leave Iraq.

The problem is that we can neither leave nor stay in Iraq without calamitous consequences both at home and abroad—lasting indefinitely.

As noted much earlier, the USA originally became tangled up in Vietnam in

1945 almost by accident. Until then, Vietnam possessed little or no importance for either resources or strategic location. (And in that regard, nothing has changed.) But Iraq has both resources and a pivotal location. Oil is more important now than ever in history (as global reserves lessen and global demand rises). Then there's the matter of real estate. Iraq not only possesses major resources, but it is a close neighbor to all of the hotspots of the Middle East: Israel-Palestine, Iran, and Central Asia, with its promising oil reserves. Naturally, both China and Russia are playing close attention. (See Everest.)

Chris Hedges, an experienced foreign correspondent (who has reported on our several recent wars for the *NYT* and the *New Yorker*), seems now to have had enough, given his review of two books on the USA and Iraq. Among many other perceptive observations concerning the political and human distortions of our wars as presented in the media, already in late 2004, Hedges had this to say:

We are losing the war. There has been a steady increase in the assaults carried out by the insurgents against coalition forces, from 20 to 120 a day in the past year. We are an isolated and reviled nation....If we do not confront our hubris and the lies told to justify the killing and the mass destruction carried out in our name in Iraq, if we do not grasp the moral corrosiveness of empire and occupation, if we continue to allow force and violence to our form of communication, we will not so much destroy dictators like Saddam Hussein as become them. (Chris Hedges, "On War," *New York Review of Books*, 2004-12-16)

At the same time, also early on, CBS's *Sixty Minutes* reported that a growing number of GIs in or ordered to go to Iraq have also had enough: "Since the war in Iraq began, more than 5,500 U.S. troops have deserted." (November 2004)

NEXT VICTIM: IRAN?

As that war goes on, those who have to fight it, more than 40 percent of whom are now National Guard reservists, are increasingly beginning to resemble the draftees of Vietnam—with at least one very big difference. As that earlier war became more and more hopeless and tragic, the USA was not even whispering about, let alone planning, a new war against Indochina's neighbors. Now there are too many announcements and finger-pointings about using military force—including *small nukes*—to bring yet another country to its knees. The next designated enemy is Iran.

The pretexts for war with Iran are already accumulating, and the possibility of war with Iran continues to build (along with much comforting rhetoric soften it).

Consider: It's election time in the USA in November 2006. Just before that would be a good time submit the call to rally 'round the flag, which means support the new war effort of the present (and currently unpopular) administration.

Persians should appreciate the sacrifice they may be called upon to make to keep the U.S. Republican Party in power. Of course, they probably won't. Instead, they will feel the way people who are bombed or invaded usually feel. Their loss.

Even if it somehow becomes politically unfeasible to attack Iran, it should be all too clear that, come hell or high water, no matter what, *those who rule the USA will never learn.*

But will *we*?

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