

SAIGON LESSON PLAN

ON APRIL 30, 1975, as the last of the helicopters lifted off from the roof of the embassy in Saigon, a myth was laid to rest. After years of claiming that the United States was winning in Vietnam, after claiming that peace was at hand, there was finally no denying the final outcome. The Communists had won.

Many observers familiar with the history of Southeast Asia understand all too clearly that the Far Right doesn't remember the lessons of the war. That is unfortunate. It is made even more unfortunate by the fact that the Far Left doesn't remember those lessons, either.

That we find ourselves mired in an unpopular war in Iraq is evidence that the Right is deaf to the lessons of Indochina. That the Left — or the Far Left, at least — thinks it would be better if we simply abandoned the Iraqis is evidence that they are blind to the consequences of failure.

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The Right: Double Feature Mythology. Call it the Rambo Myth: we lost in Vietnam because we fought with one hand tied behind our back: “*Somebody wouldn't let us win!*” Blame a weak-willed Congress, blame a hostile media, blame a communistic peace movement. Blame somebody. *Somebody* wouldn't let us win.

A realistic evaluation of this myth would admit that, indeed, somebody wouldn't let us win. That “somebody” was the North Vietnamese army.

Before there was Sylvester Stallone, there was John Wayne. The Rambo myth was merely second on the bill: long before Rambo, there was The Green Berets, and the myth of imminent victory. Victory was always just another year off, another 100,000 soldiers away. Just a

few more of those tough-as-nails, good-hearted John Wayne types, and the Commies would be done for.

Pick the cliché of your choice: We always had the upper hand, and we could always see the light at the end of the tunnel. We were always winning... and yet somehow, in the end, we lost.

The Right's view of Vietnam is as simple as that: two movies, two myths, and no explanation of how we went from one to the other.

At the upper levels of government, realistic assessments of the prospects in Vietnam came far too late to matter. The preferred myth of the Vietnam War did not evolve: it did not slowly shift from “we're winning,” to “we're winning, but not by as much,” to “they're winning,” to “somebody wouldn't let us win.” Instead, abruptly, the myth of victory just around the corner was replaced by the myth that traitors in our midst had refused to let us win.

The current war in Iraq demonstrates that conservatives are still having trouble recognizing

history had such power rained down upon an enemy. Had they never heard of “Arc Light”? Americans poured bombs, fire, and fury on the Vietnamese for years, and could not defeat them.

“But that was in the jungle,” the neocons said. “Iraq is a desert. It's not the same.” It was as though they believed that the bombs had simply bounced off the thick jungle canopy. The new enemy, with no leaves overhead, was doomed.

There are myriad reasons for supporting a particular viewpoint, some good, some bad. There were good people who supported the decision to go to war in Vietnam, and there are good people who supported the decision to go to war in Iraq. Similarly, there were good and bad reasons to oppose the war.

Conservatives, however, have focused almost exclusively on refuting the *foolish* reasons for opposing the war. But there is no particular need to refute stupid reasons: it's the good reasons that need to be addressed.

BLINDLEFT DEAFRIGHT & DUMBALLAROUND

ing the difference between rhetoric and reality.

Conservatives do not like to be reminded that the war in Iraq was supposedly about finding weapons of mass destruction. Nor do they like to be reminded of May 2003, when George Bush donned a flight suit and stood in front of a banner reading “Mission Accomplished,” announcing that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended.” The only people who truly believed that it was over were the ones who did not understand the nature of guerrilla warfare.

Deceived by their own sound bites about “shock and awe,” they imagined that never in

During the Vietnam War, conservatives decried the socialist posturing of campus radicals, and ignored the more rational voices of elder statesmen who warned against involvement in Vietnam. It's easy to dismiss the naïve rants of Tom Hayden; it's much more difficult to dismiss George Kennan.

Today's Right still has their attention focused on the wrong critics. The Right needs to stop telling us that Michael Moore doesn't know what he's talking about. Moore is unimportant. It would be far better to address Kennan, or Robert McNamara, or Hans

Morgenthau.

Morgenthau, one of the most influential political scientists of the last century, had argued forcefully against American military involvement in Vietnam. In 1965, describing the confusion and obfuscation which led to the escalation of the war in Indochina, Morgenthau described a phenomenon that could be applied precisely to Iraq:

While normally foreign and military policy is based upon intelligence — that is, the objective assessment of facts — the process is here reversed: a new policy has been decided upon, and intelligence must provide the facts to justify it... The Government fashions an imaginary world that pleases it, and then comes to believe in the reality of that world, and acts as though it were real.

This, Morgenthau argued, was why public officials despised the press. “They resent the confrontation of their policies with the facts. Yet the facts are what they are, and they take a terrible vengeance on those who disregard them.”

Morgenthau had warned against wider involvement even in the 1950s. Others, armed with boundless optimism, charged ahead boldly, only to be confronted by the “terrible vengeance” that Morgenthau had predicted. No individual in the American government exemplifies this better than Robert McNamara.

As Secretary of Defense under Kennedy and Johnson, McNamara was one of the primary authors of the Vietnam disaster. Yet day by day, month by month, year by year, the gulf between myth and reality grew wider. A loyalist at heart, he refrained from public criticism of the war even after his departure from the Cabinet in 1968.

Time has tempered McNamara’s hubris. Looking back decades later, he lists a host of reasons for the American failure. No only did we misjudge the intentions of our adversaries, we misjudged our allies as well: “We saw in them a thirst for — and determination to fight for — freedom and democracy. We totally misjudged the political forces within the country.”

And, he notes, we underestimated the power of nationalism to motivate a people to fight and die. Similarly, our “profound ignorance” of history and culture led us astray. We placed too much faith in high-tech weaponry; we failed to win hearts and minds, failed to maintain public support for the war, failed to recognize our own fallibility... *failed, failed, failed.*

American involvement in Indochina had been based primarily on the doctrine of “containment”: the idea that it was necessary to prevent the spread of Communist influence. Yet the man generally acknowledged as the chief architect of that policy — George Kennan — opposed its application in Vietnam. Speaking in 1968, Kennan argued that after several years of American involvement, “it has been inescapably evident that the entire venture was in several ways grievously unsound. It was unsound in the first place because it was devoid of a plausible, coherent, and realistic object[ive].”

The architects of the Vietnam War were ideologues, not realists: convinced that Communism was evil, they could never understand why the Vietnamese peasants seemed so damn *unappreciative.*

The same holds true for the war in Iraq. If you want to be a savior, you have to ask whether or not you look credible to your flock. Those who supported the invasion of Iraq assured us that we would be met by cheering crowds and greeted as saviors. Conservatives believed that it was simple: we were there with the best of intentions, and thus, we would be welcomed. No one in the Bush administration seems to have considered the possibility that the Iraqis might not see it that way.

For the moment, ignore the assertion by the Far Left that the invasion of Iraq was motivated by crass imperialism. What the Right failed to understand is that good intentions count for nothing. If the Iraqis do not believe that we are there with good intentions, they will not welcome us.

Donald Kirk, a veteran correspondent who reported from Indochina in the Sixties and Seventies, spent several months in Baghdad in the summer and fall of 2004. According to Kirk,

“I can say with certainty that it’s far more dangerous getting around the Iraqi capital than it ever was in Saigon except during offensives that were always of limited duration. And no one considers venturing alone in the Iraqi countryside, as was often possible in Vietnam.”

Are we feeling welcome yet?

Few on the Right are addressing the issues: instead, the response to criticism of the Iraq adventure has been to impugn the motives (or the patriotism) of the critics.

An anthropologist once discussed the difficulty of arguing against a deeply-held belief. If you suggest that perhaps rain dances don’t really cause rain, the true believers will think that you don’t want rain: they will believe that you want their crops to fail, and their people to starve. So it is with today’s conservative pundits: if you suggest that the Iraq war is not going to stabilize the Middle East, they insist that you don’t want stability.

Anyone who does want stability in the Middle East needs to recognize just how dire the current situation really is. Or, alternatively, they need to start deciding who they’ll blame once the extent of the American failure is utterly undeniable.

The Left: Living With What’s Left Behind. The Right can’t understand how to recognize a futile war. The Left, by contrast, can’t seem to understand what happens after such a war.

Perhaps it’s important to distinguish between the Left and the Far Left. Unfortunately, it isn’t easy to determine exactly what the mainstream Left thinks about Iraq. In the period preceding the war, the mainstream Left seemed to be missing in action. Or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that they were missing in *inaction.* In September 2002, in one of his final interviews, 98-year-old George Kennan questioned the Left’s lack of opposition: “I wonder why the Democrats have not asked the president right out, ‘What are you talking about? Are you talking about one war or two wars? And if it’s two wars, have we really faced up to the competing demands of the two?’” The

failure to ask such questions was “a shabby and shameful reaction”.

The loudest voices in opposition to Iraq have consistently come from the extremists. Maybe that should be Lesson One for opponents of the war: if you want to stop looking stupid, stop embracing Michael Moore. Stop pretending that John Pilger is the voice of reason. Stop holding up George Galloway as an honest critic of foreign policy.

The Right’s delusion of choice was that the Iraqi people wanted us to invade. The Left’s delusion is that the world will be a better place if the resistance wins.

Delusions rarely end well. The pseudoscience of Marxism formed the basis for Communism, Maoism, and the decrepit, thuggish regime of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. It also gave birth to the incomprehensible brutality of Cambodia’s killing fields. Yet many on the Left seemed vaguely surprised that the Asian communists turned out to be something other than warm-hearted, selfless societies that the likes of Jan Myrdal had predicted.

Like George Kennan, Donald Kirk also worries that the lessons of Indochina have gone unheeded. In the ’60s and ’70s, Kirk’s articles from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia consistently display a sober realism that contrasted sharply with the rosy assessments of the US military’s official spokesmen. Kirk, however, was equally astute in his view of the enemy. Long before the Khmer Rouge seized power in Cambodia, Kirk interviewed refugees who told horrifying tales of torture and public executions in the areas held by the rebels.

Writing in the *Asian Wall Street Journal* on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of Saigon, Kirk reminds us of the allies we abandoned: “Those who think final defeat was inevitable and the United States could or should have done nothing more for their South Vietnamese allies are guilty of severe memory loss. They have forgotten the panic of millions of South Vietnamese who could not have imagined the U.S. would desert them after having made one do-or-die commitment after another.”



HERO!

tifiable than that so few voices should be raised in protest against the assassination of a people. How many of those who say they are unreservedly in support of the Khmer Rouge would consent to endure one hundredth part of the present sufferings of the Cambodian people?"

Today, few on the Left remember Ponchaud. Ask them who revealed the horrors of the Khmer Rouge to the outside world, and they are probably going to say... John Pilger.

In 2003, for example, Norway's Sophie Foundation awarded Pilger a \$100,000 prize for his work over the last 30 years.

It is critical to remember those commitments, Kirk notes, when opponents of the war in Iraq argue that the U.S. should pull out now. How many on the Left understand that Iraq, like Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, is populated by human beings who will have to live under whatever monstrous regime is left behind?

The selective blindness of the Left was never more apparent than in the mid- and late 1970s, when the Khmer Rouge starved and slaughtered some two million Cambodians. François Ponchaud, one of the first writers to extensively document the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge, was exasperated by the Left's response to the horrifying stories emerging from Cambodia. Ponchaud threw down the gauntlet to his erstwhile colleagues: "Nothing could be more natural than that the press should rise up to denounce violations of human rights in Spain, Latin America, and South Africa. But nothing could be less jus-

FASCIST!



Presenting the award, the head of the prize jury declared that Pilger "was one of the first journalists to alert the world to the agony suffered by the Cambodian people under the Pol Pot regime." This, apparently, was in reference

to a documentary Pilger had made in 1979... after the Khmer Rouge had been overthrown. Pilger's "scoop" had come roughly two years after Ponchaud's book had decried the Left's indifference... and more than five years after Donald Kirk had described, in detail, Khmer Rouge atrocities.

Pilger is now among the most vocal critics of the American presence in Iraq — and if resisting that presence requires the occasional public beheading, well, that's the price you pay. Interviewed by the *Green Left Weekly* in early 2004, Pilger was asked if he thought that the anti-war movement should be supporting the Iraqi resistance. "Yes, I do," Pilger replied. "We cannot afford to be choosy. While we abhor and condemn the continuing loss of innocent life in Iraq, we have no choice now but to support the resistance, for if the resistance fails, the 'Bush gang' will attack another country. If they succeed, a grievous blow will be suffered by the Bush gang."

Perhaps we can all look forward to the moving documentary that Pilger will create about the innocent victims who are murdered by the fundamentalist thugs... after they've been usurped by someone else, of course. No sense in throwing mud at them while they're still useful in the fight against imperialism, is there?

A similar sentiment was voiced by Arundhati Roy:

For these reasons, it is absurd to condemn the resistance to the US occupation in Iraq as being masterminded by terrorists or insurgents or supporters of Saddam Hussein ... The Iraqi resistance is fighting on the frontlines of the battle against Empire. And therefore that battle is our battle.

Like most resistance movements, it combines a motley range of assorted factions. Former Baathists, liberals, Islamists, fed-up collaborationists, communists, etc. Of course, it is riddled with opportunism, local rivalry, demagoguery, and criminality. But if we are only going to support pristine movements, then no resistance will be worthy of our purity.

This is not to say that we shouldn't ever criti-

cize resistance movements. Many of them suffer from a lack of democracy, from the iconization of their "leaders," a lack of transparency, a lack of vision and direction. But most of all they suffer from vilification, repression, and lack of resources.

Those poor Islamic fundamentalists... they're suffering from our vilification. But do they really need our support in order to bomb civilians and decapitate infidels? It seems likely that their holy war will continue, regardless of whether or not it has Roy's seal of approval.

Siding with murderous religious fanatics in the name of humanity is offensive not only for its short-sighted stupidity: it's also offensive for its hypocrisy.

The radical Left views American imperialism as the most repressive, destructive force in the world. In effect, the people who would have to live under regimes led by the likes of Al-Zarqawi are written off: sure, they will be repressed and brutalized, but that's the price you pay. They are pawns in a larger struggle. But isn't this precisely the kind of cynical, callous, war-by-proxy mentality that the Left condemns when it is employed by the Right? In the name of opposing Communism, the Right supported murderous regimes in places like El Salvador and Guatemala, and the Left pointed to the blood on their hands. Decades later, they can see Iraqi blood on Bush's hands, but can't see it on their own... even when they insist that "we have no choice" but to support those who are detonating bombs among the innocent every day.

So, more than thirty years after the fall of Saigon, where are we now? We are not yet at the end: in the near term, no one will be clambering to the embassy roof, and there will not be an armada of helicopters lifting the last of the Americans out of the Green Zone. The war is not over. It is still not too late to bring Iraq back from the brink of disaster. But the Right needs to acknowledge the mess they have made, and the Left needs to understand that cheering for medieval barbarians will not make the world a better place. ■