Forty-Five Years of Frustration

America's Enduring Dilemma of Fighting Insurgents with Airpower

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Analogies are popular among strategists, and the Vietnam War is a favorite target for comparisons. Pundits, policy makers, journalists, and historians have raised the specter of a Vietnam-like quagmire in virtually every conflict that the American military has fought since the fall of Saigon, and the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are no exceptions. As America's involvement in Iraq deepened, the cover of the 22 November 2003 issue of *National Journal* displayed the headline "Iraq as Vietnam"; one year later, the cover headline in *Newsweek* read, "Crisis in Iraq: The Vietnam Factor"; and one year after that, the cover of *Foreign Affairs* highlighted its lead article "Iraq: Learning the Lessons of Vietnam" by former secretary of defense Melvin Laird.[1] Similarly, the 9 February 2009 cover of *Newsweek* read, "Obama's Vietnam: How to Salvage Afghanistan."[2] Bob Woodward's recent book *Obama's Wars* recounts that Vietnam "ghosts" affected Pres. Barack Obama's decisions to increase troop totals in Afghanistan and relates a November 2009 warning that Vice Pres. Joe Biden gave to the president on the need for firm direction in dealing with the Afghan War: without strong guidance, Biden insisted, "we're locked into Vietnam."[3]

Despite such seemingly specious pronouncements, parallels between Vietnam

and the current conflicts *do* exist, although to say that Vietnam provides an exact template for gauging military actions today is naïve. All wars are unique; disparate variables mix together to form the specific context of each; and what works in one may be a prescription for failure in another. In many respects, the conflict in Vietnam has far more dissimilarity than congruence to the wars in either Iraq or Afghanistan. Yet, for strategists to dismiss the example of Vietnam when evaluating America's actions in Iraq and Afghanistan would be a mistake. Although the enemies that the United States faced in Vietnam differ in many ways from those confronted in Iraq and Afghanistan, the type of war waged by current foes reflects the intermittent guerrilla struggle waged by the Vietcong and their North Vietnamese allies for most of Lyndon Johnson's presidency. Likewise, President Johnson's goal of a stable, independent, noncommunist South Vietnam, which proved extremely difficult to translate into viable military objectives, mirrors the political goals now sought by President Obama in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, President Obama, much like Johnson, must consider the global ramifications of his actions in choosing the instruments of American military power best suited to achieving his political aims.

President Johnson concluded that airpower was a key military instrument that could limit the ability—and will—of enemy forces to overthrow the American-backed regime in Saigon. President Obama has also turned to airpower to help preserve nascent governments in Baghdad and Kabul. The Vietnam example presents an intriguing comparison to current airpower efforts, given the similarities between America's political objectives and the type of war waged by the opposition. Collectively, those episodes illustrate the inherent difficulty of using bombs to help attain broad-based political goals against determined enemies who eschew conventional combat and who have substantial backing on the stage of world public opinion. Although the Vietnam experience may not produce any definitive answers for Iraq or Afghanistan, it does provide, as B. H. Liddell Hart pointed out regarding the value of history, "the opportunity to profit by the stumbles and tumbles of our forerunners."[4]

Cultural Comparisons

One significant difference between Vietnam and the current conflicts is the composition of the belligerents. In Vietnam, religious and ethnic distinctions were minimal among the local combatants, and political/ideological goals dominated the fight for control of the South.[5] National Liberation Front insurgents, known by their moniker "Vietcong" or "VC," received manpower and material support from their North Vietnamese partners to help overthrow the American-backed Saigon government. Indeed, Ho Chi Minh sent increasing numbers of North Vietnamese troops south until by August 1967 the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) comprised 45,000 out of a total estimated enemy force of 300,000, the remainder of whom were Vietcong.[6] South Vietnam ultimately raised a substantial ground force of almost a million men, and many received American training.[7] That force proved inconsistent in battle, however, causing President Johnson to increase American troop totals from 16,000 advisers in 1963 to an active force of more than 500,000 men by the time he left office in 1969. He also secured limited assistance from America's Asian allies, including 50,000 South Korean troops.[8] Yet, to numerous South Vietnamese—including many who supported the Saigon regime—the ethnically distinctive Americans and their allies appeared as occupiers.[9]

The ethnic and religious homogeneity of the Vietnamese stands in stark contrast to the disparity among the local combatants in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq the Shiite-Sunni split has produced considerable sectarian violence, and in 2010 fighting still claimed hundreds of civilian lives a month.[10] Many religious leaders, such as Moqtada al-Sadr, have formed militia armies

that, on occasion, have clashed with government forces as well as those of opposing sects. Ethnic differences also abound. The Kurdish minority in the northern part of the country has long harbored hopes of independence, yet Kurds—along with Shiites—comprise significant segments of Iraq's security forces. As of September 2010, those forces consisted of more than 660,000 men although their reliability has been inconsistent despite intensive training efforts by American troops.[11] Besides the militias, indigenous criminal elements have gained periodic footholds in some parts of the country, extremist groups and Baathists still conduct frequent attacks, and a smattering of bombers continues to arrive from Syria.[12] Technically, the United States has ended its combat role in Iraq but maintains almost 50,000 troops there, and in 2010 hostile fire had claimed 20 American lives by November.[13]

In Afghanistan a disparate assortment of tribal clans prone to waging internecine warfare makes the prospect of a unified war effort against Taliban and al-Qaeda elements a thorny proposition. Sectarian differences abound as well: the largest clan, the Pashtun, contains predominantly Sunni Muslims with a smattering of Shiites though it is itself divided into two major tribes, the Ghalji and the Durrani; the Tajiks, another large clan, are a mix of Sunni and Shiites; the Farsiwans are Shiites; the Hazaras are a blend of Sunnis and Shiites; and the Uzbeks and Turkmen are Sunni.[14] More clans exist, with a corresponding blend of sectarian loyalties, and the territory of many spans across borders into Pakistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In September 2010, the Afghan National Army totaled 138,200 men, comprised of troops from multiple clans trained by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) advisers.[15] NATO's own 140,000-man International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which now includes nearly 100,000 Americans, heightens the ethnic disparities in the country as those troops work to bolster the government of Hamid Karzai, a Durrani Pashtun who has often criticized NATO and American efforts.[16]

Policy Comparisons

In Vietnam President Johnson also worked to keep a fledgling government viable. He defined America's war aim in Southeast Asia as a stable, secure, noncommunist South Vietnam—a goal that defied quantifiable measures of progress—and he saw the struggle there as a key episode in the broader effort to contain worldwide communist aggression.[17] Accordingly, he viewed Ho as a minion of the Soviet Union and China, and gauged American actions to preserve a noncommunist South Vietnam in terms of how they might trigger responses from Moscow or Beijing. Johnson was further concerned about how American actions might be viewed on the stage of world public opinion, where the image of an American Goliath pounding a hapless North Vietnamese David would undercut not only American efforts to bolster the South, but also the support needed to thwart communist advances elsewhere in the world. Finally, the president sought to minimize the amount of attention that Vietnam garnered from the American public because Johnson wanted that public focused on funding his Great Society programs at home, not on paying for a war 8,000 miles away.

America's objectives in Iraq mirror the expansive goals sought in Vietnam. Pres. George W. Bush initially sought a specific objective—the removal of Saddam Hussein from power to prevent him from obtaining weapons of mass destruction. After realizing that goal, the president expanded the aim to fostering democracy as well as bringing security and stability to the country.[18] Much like President Johnson in Vietnam, with Cold War superpowers China and the Soviet Union hovering in the background, President Bush had to consider the backdrop of the war against global terror in deciding what actions to take in Iraq. Applying too much force could spur enemy recruiting, either from radical fundamentalists outside the country, such as al-Qaeda, or from factions within the country who viewed the excess force as a direct assault on their par-

ticular ethnic or religious group. President Obama has continued to work for Iraqi security and stability.[19] Although the level of violence has lessened, compared to that faced by his predecessor, Americans and Iraqis continue to die from violent acts, and the nation remains insecure.

President Obama faces similar challenges in Afghanistan, where goals of security and stability have also dominated American efforts since the initial focus on eliminating the Taliban regime. In Afghanistan, though, the president must blend his objectives with those of NATO and its multinational force, and those aims do not always mesh well. In addition, disparate Afghan clans provide varying degrees of support to the al-Qaeda and Taliban enemies, some elements of which reside across the border in Pakistan—a nuclear state that has its own problems of security and stability—which has, on occasion, assisted the Afghan Taliban.[20] In both Afghanistan and Iraq, the lofty goal of democracy that once guided American efforts has slowly morphed into "accommodation," but achieving that objective has proved no less daunting a task, given the abundance of ethnic and sectarian differences plaguing the two nations.[21]

During his speech at West Point in December 2009, President Obama outlined American objectives in Afghanistan in more specific terms as denying al-Qaeda a safe haven, reversing the Taliban's momentum and preventing it from overthrowing the government, and strengthening Afghanistan's security forces and government so that they could "take the lead responsibility for Afghanistan's future."[22] To help attain those objectives, he authorized the deployment of an additional 30,000 American troops and stated that American forces would begin withdrawing from Afghanistan in July 2011. The Afghan troops would then begin to assume a larger role in providing security, an approach similar to the "Vietnamization" plan that was the cornerstone of America's strategy in Vietnam during the last years of that conflict.

Following Similar Paths

Besides the broad American political goals that have accompanied the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the *type* of conflict that has emerged in those two nations bears an eerie similarity to the type of war that confronted the United States in Southeast Asia during the bulk of the Johnson presidency. In contrast to Vietnam, both Iraq and Afghanistan began as conventional conflicts and rapidly evolved into sporadically waged guerrilla wars, while Vietnam was predominantly an insurgency when America intervened with active force in 1965 and stayed that way until the 1968 Tet offensive, which decimated the Vietcong. Like President Johnson, President Obama has spent much of his presidency trying to defeat insurgents adept in guerrilla tactics; President Bush did so as well. Also like Johnson, both Bush and Obama turned to airpower—bombing in particular—to play a substantial role in defeating the insurgent enemies. Given the combination of America's expansive political goals and the enemy's method of waging war, airpower's ability to achieve positive results has proved problematic.

Lyndon Johnson turned to bombing as his first military option to halt the Vietcong insurgency. Believing that the VC could not fight without the support of the North Vietnamese, Johnson aimed to stop the flow of military supplies and men from Hanoi to South Vietnam. Airpower seemed ideally suited to the task—the president could carefully control the intensity of the bombing, thus avoiding an outcry from the Chinese or Soviets, or the world public at large, and preventing the American public from diverting its focus from the Great Society. Moreover, airpower was a "cheap" alternative to ground troops in terms of risking American lives, and its use was likely to bolster the resolve of the Saigon government and its armed forces. Finally, a bombing effort of gradually increasing intensity would signal Ho that his country faced ultimate destruction from the air and persuade him to call off the Vietcong insurgency to avoid his

country's ruin. Those fundamental assumptions guided Johnson's "Rolling Thunder" air campaign against North Vietnam when it began in March 1965.[23]

Unfortunately, the assumptions proved incorrect. The Vietcong (and their North Vietnamese allies) fought an average of only one day a month and hence needed a meager 34 tons of supplies each day from sources outside South Vietnam—an amount that just seven two-and-a-half-ton trucks could deliver.[24] As long as the enemy chose to fight such a sporadic war, no amount of bombing could stop the paucity of supplies it needed. The morale boost that the Saigon regime received from Rolling Thunder soon ebbed, while Ho gradually increased the numbers of NVA troops heading south. He appreciated the constraints that limited Johnson's bombing and knew that he had little to fear from it. President Johnson turned to additional American ground forces to confront the VC and the NVA, and Rolling Thunder continued with gradually increasing intensity for the next three years—the rationale now was that it would limit the magnitude of the war that the enemy could wage in the South. The surprisingly large scale of the 1968 Tet offensive shattered that myth.

Despite the three-and-a-half-year duration of Rolling Thunder, it accounted for only a fraction of the bombs that fell on Southeast Asia during America's eight-year struggle there. The United States ultimately dropped eight *million* tons of bombs, with one million of those falling on North Vietnam, three million on Laos and Cambodia, and *four million tons* falling on its *ally*, South Vietnam.[25] In contrast to the highly constrained bombing of the North—which killed an estimated 52,000 civilians during Rolling Thunder—attacks on Southern targets had relatively few restrictions.[26] To bolster security, American commanders created "free-fire zones," hostile areas in which American or South Vietnamese troops removed all inhabitants and deemed anyone who then ventured into the zones an enemy combatant. Air strikes frequently occurred in such areas once people appeared in them, but they were just as likely to be innocent peasants returning to their ancestral homes as they were to be Vietcong. Both the VC and NVA took advantage of the American propensity to rely on airpower when it was available. A favorite tactic involved placing one or two snipers in a hamlet and hoping that the Americans would respond with an air strike that destroyed the village.[27] In a war purportedly waged for "hearts and minds," indiscriminate firepower was the insurgents' best friend, and many of the four million tons of bombs that fell on South Vietnam were anything but discriminate.

Indiscriminate firepower has *not* been a staple of bombing in either Iraq or Afghanistan. Truly remarkable advances in "smart" munitions have occurred since their first widespread use over North Vietnam in 1972, and pilots today—whether in the air overhead or in ground control facilities half a world away—can launch bombs many miles from a target and have satellites guide them to within a few feet of the bull's eye, regardless of weather conditions. Of the 18,000 bombs dropped in Iraq by the US Air Force during the first month of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, 11,000 were guided munitions, compared to only 15 percent of the 227,000 bombs and missiles delivered by allied air forces during the 43 days of Operation Desert Storm in 1991.[28] Similarly, in Afghanistan during the first five weeks of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, 2,300 of the roughly 6,000 bombs and missiles delivered were satellite-guided 2,000-pound Joint Direct Attack Munitions.[29]

Regrettably, the overwhelming emphasis on smart bombs has not eliminated the prospect of civilian casualties. In October 2001, five villages near Kandahar collectively reported more than 100 victims of US air strikes; local commanders and Afghan officials corroborated the claims.[30] In the spring of 2003, bombing killed an estimated 1,500–2,000 Iraqi civilians during the first six weeks of Iraqi Freedom.[31] Those deaths occurred during the periods in Afghanistan and Iraq dominated by conventional combat, in which American forces pursued the

"finite" objectives of wrecking the Taliban regime and eliminating its safe haven for al-Qaeda, and ousting Saddam—thus removing the perceived threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. The fast-paced start of the two conflicts, with tangible war aims rapidly achieved, tended to downplay the effects of civilian casualties.

Enemies Changing Tactics

The episodic fighting that has since occurred in Afghanistan and Iraq not only has heightened the impact of civilian losses but also has revealed a fundamental change in initiative that bears a striking resemblance to Vietnam. The Vietcong and their NVA allies determined when and where they would fight, as well as how they would do so. During 1967 and 1968, the two years of peak combat activity in Vietnam for American troops, only 1 percent of American patrols made contact with the enemy; adding South Vietnamese patrols to the mix dropped the number to 0.1 percent.[32] Yet, 1967 and 1968 were also the bloodiest years for American forces, claiming 10,000 and 15,000 American lives, respectively—of which 23.7 percent were lost to mines and booby traps.[33] During the frequent lulls in open combat, the unseen ordnance could produce 40 percent or more of American deaths.[34] Airpower and artillery provided a steady supply of booby-trap explosives since the dud rate for bombs dropped by B-52s was 5 percent, and that from artillery shells 2 percent, which together equated to more than 800 tons of ordnance *a month* available to the enemy.[35]

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the insurgents have also frequently dictated the war's tenor and tactics. In both locales, the percentage of American lives lost to improvised explosive devices (IED) has eclipsed those lost to unseen munitions in Vietnam. As of 10 November 2010, IEDs had caused nearly two-thirds of the 3,483 American combat deaths in the Iraq war and had wounded 21,583 American military personnel.[36] Relying on roadside bombs instead of open combat, Iraqi insurgents have minimized their exposure to American firepower in ways that require few external supplies; the disbandment of Saddam's army in 2003 produced an array of ordnance scattered throughout the country. Such tactics have become the norm in Afghanistan as well, where Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters increasingly rely on hidden munitions to employ against American and NATO troops. By mid-November 2010, US forces had suffered 1,058 combat deaths in Afghanistan; of those, IEDs were responsible for 583.[37] From October 2009 to October 2010, rates of effective IED attacks increased 30 percent in Afghanistan.[38]

Attempts to thwart this sporadic enemy combat activity with airpower have produced mixed results. In concert with the 2007 "surge" of an additional 30,000 American Soldiers in Iraq, five times as many air strikes occurred that year compared to 2006.[39] Air Force leaders said that the added troops had pushed insurgents out of urban areas and into places easier to target and that better intelligence had provided a clearer picture of the battlefield. Still, the bombing that occurred since the beginning of April 2007 had produced more than 200 civilian deaths by the end of the year. Hellfire missile attacks by Apache helicopters and Predator drones also significantly increased, with more than 200 Hellfire strikes occurring in Baghdad during a two-month span in spring 2008.[40] Many of those raids targeted enemy elements in the heart of the city, and despite intense efforts to avoid civilians, such losses still occurred. "It's not Hollywood and it's not 110 percent perfect," commented an aviation brigade commander. "It is as precise as very hardworking soldiers and commanders can make it. These criminals do not operate in a clean battle space. It is occupied by civilians, [including] law-abiding Iraqis."[41]

In Afghanistan, American and NATO aircraft conducted 3,572 air strikes in 2007, more than double the total for 2006 and 20 times the number for 2005. That bombing caused an estimated 300 civilian casualties in 2007,

triple the number reported for 2006.[42] An air strike by B-1 bombers in May 2009 against insurgents in Farah province may have killed as many as 86 civilians.[43] In response to such losses, Gen Stanley McChrystal, who took command of American forces in Afghanistan a month later, ordered his troops to break off combat with insurgents who hid among villagers. He further restricted the use of airpower and artillery in such situations. "Air power contains the seeds of our own destruction if we do not use it responsibly," he stated in June 2009. "We can lose this fight."[44]

The ramifications of such civilian deaths loom large for the prospects of realizing the overarching goals of security, stability, and a semblance of democracy. After a 12 October 2007 air strike on an insurgent stronghold near Baghdad killed nine children and six women, Rear Adm Greg Smith stated that the killings were "absolutely regrettable" but then blamed the insurgents for using civilians as a shield when they shot at a nearby American unit. "A ground element came under fire from that building that we had to neutralize," he remarked. "The enemy has a vote here . . . and when he chooses to surround himself with civilians and then fire upon U.S. forces, our forces have *no choice* but to return a commensurate amount of fire" (emphasis added).[45] In all likelihood, the "vote" went just the way the enemy wanted, and a Vietcong sniper team 45 years ago would have appreciated the technique. The civilian death toll from the bombing was one of the highest to result from a single American military action thus far during the Iraq war, and it received extensive media coverage.

In trying to take the initiative with airpower in Iraq and Afghanistan, American commanders actually risk undermining indigenous support for the new governments in Baghdad and Kabul. On 10 January 2008, two B-1s and four F-16s dropped a combined 20 tons of bombs on suspected militant hideouts, storehouses, and defensive positions in central Iraq. Americans had warned residents to leave the area, and most did, resulting in no civilian casualties.[46] Yet, such attempts to create "secure" areas analogous to Vietnam's free-fire zones have not always met with success. Ten days earlier, American bombs meant for al-Qaeda instead killed three women and two children in the same area.[47] To limit collateral damage, the Air Force has resorted to dropping concrete-filled bombs to detonate IED sites and often relies on 250-pound GBU-39 "small-diameter bombs" to minimize blast effects. The key, though, is determining when civilians might be present near a potential target, and the Vietnam practice, now used in Iraq and Afghanistan, of "doing a show of force to get civilians out of the area" is no guarantee of positive results.[48]

In July 2010, Gen David Petraeus replaced General McChrystal as American commander in Afghanistan, and soon afterward the number of air strikes began to increase significantly. From November 2009 through May 2010, US and NATO aircraft expended ordnance an average of 207 times a month; from June through October 2010 that monthly average increased to 517.[49] General Petraeus, who had commanded in Iraq during the "surge," had intensified bombing there in concert with the increase in American troops; the increased Afghanistan bombing has coincided with the arrival of the additional 30,000 troops that President Obama authorized in his December 2009 speech at West Point. The greater volume of air strikes has also produced increased civilian casualties although the "incident rate of causing civilian casualties has actually decreased," according to NATO.[50] Still, coalition forces killed 49 civilians in October 2010, compared to 38 the previous October, an increase of 30 percent. In contrast, insurgent forces killed or wounded 322 civilians in October 2010, a similar percentage increase from a year ago.[51]

Despite the greater number of insurgent-caused civilian deaths, those caused by coalition forces are the ones most likely to generate violent reactions from the Afghan populace. A July 2010 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research on the effect of civilian casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq found that "counterinsurgent-generated

civilian casualties from a typical incident are responsible for 6 additional violent incidents [against ISAF forces] in an average sized district in the following 6 weeks."[52] The study further noted that "the data are consistent with the claim that civilian casualties are affecting future violence through increased recruitment into insurgent groups after a civilian casualty incident."[53] In short, "when ISAF units kill civilians, this increases the number of willing combatants, leading to an increase in insurgent attacks."[54] The study cited revenge as a primary motive for the violent reactions (observing that similar reactions did *not* occur in Iraq) and noted that violence was more likely to occur in response to ISAF-caused civilian casualties than in response to insurgent-caused civilian deaths.[55]

The war against the Afghan Taliban has also spilled across the border into Pakistan, which has served as a Taliban sanctuary in much the same way that Laos and Cambodia served as sanctuaries in Southeast Asia for the VC and NVA. In Pakistan, though, American air strikes have been far more discriminate than those in either Laos or Cambodia, which together ultimately received more than three million tons of American bombs. The American bombing of Pakistan began slowly, with only one air strike occurring in 2004 and again in 2005, three raids transpiring in 2006, and five in 2007. In 2008 the number jumped to 35; in 2009 to 53; and, as of 19 November, the 2010 total was 101.[56] Those numbers primarily consist of drone missions, controlled by the Central Intelligence Agency, though they do include some Air Force strikes and a limited number of helicopter attacks.[57] Since 2006 the *Long War Journal* estimates that air strikes in Pakistan have killed 1,606 Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters (including 57 senior leaders) and 108 civilians, with 662 enemy combatants dying in 2010 compared to only 14 civilians.[58] Pakistani sources, however, claim that between 2007 and 2009, drone strikes killed 700 civilians and only 14 terrorist leaders; the perceived civilian losses have produced outrage in Punjab and Sindh, Pakistan's two most populous provinces.[59]

With increased bombing in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the United States—despite all of its high-tech wizardry—has significantly increased the probability of collateral damage, and every occurrence of it diminishes the prospects of stability and security. Such episodes attract media attention and serve as excellent recruiting tools for opposition forces. In the final analysis, bombs cannot have a significant impact against a determined enemy who chooses to fight an infrequent guerrilla war. The crafty insurgent will rely on his asymmetric approach not only to negate America's airpower advantage but also to transform it into an instrument that furthers *his* cause. As long as the United States uses bombing to help attain such amorphous political objectives as "security" and "stability," much less "democracy," the insurgent is likely to thwart those efforts by waging a sporadic guerrilla war. Indeed, bombing can do little to negate the greatest threat to the civilian populace of both Afghanistan and Iraq—suicide terrorism—and evidence mounts that continued episodes of civilian deaths from airpower spur more suicide attacks.[60]

In many respects, America's enemies in Iraq and Afghanistan (and Pakistan) face easier tasks than their Vietcong predecessors. The United States pursues goals in both of the current wars that are difficult to achieve and parallel those sought in Vietnam; moreover, it faces an array of disparate opponents in Iraq and Afghanistan compared to the homogeneous foes confronted in Southeast Asia. Facing these disparate opponents further complicates American strategy. In addition, whereas Lyndon Johnson and his advisers had to deal with the impact of media coverage that ultimately revealed bombing mistakes to the world at large, they did not have to grapple with the constant, instantaneous television coverage provided by such media giants as CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera. That news, as well as the slant it receives from outlets like Al Jazeera, has a tremendous impact on molding the opinions of many in the Middle East, where 38 percent of the populace is illiterate.[61]

Final Observations

In so-called wars for hearts and minds, perceptions count more than reality—indeed, perceptions *are* reality. The skilled insurgent, whether motivated by political, ideological, ethnic, or religious concerns, will do everything he can to fight in a way that offers him the greatest chance of success. He will work hard to paint his cause in a positive light and to cast his enemy's efforts as evil. Open-ended American political goals, reliant on bombing as a key means to help realize them, play directly into the insurgent's hand and intensify the likelihood that he will wage a sporadic guerrilla war that American airpower is ill equipped to obstruct.

Airpower *can* play a role in defeating such an enemy, but bombing is not the answer. Lethal airpower against insurgents works well *only* when they can be isolated from the "sea" of population in which they prefer to "swim." Against such a savvy opponent, those instances of isolation will be rarities. The nonlethal applications of airpower—specifically, airlift and reconnaissance—greatly enhance America's ability to fight insurgent enemies, as demonstrated numerous times in Vietnam. The problem for American air chiefs—and political leaders—is that their default position for applying airpower is often its kinetic aspect. American air commanders today cannot be expected to forgo the bombing option when insurgents attack US troops or when intelligence pinpoints "high-value" targets. Yet, those commanders—and their political leaders—must have a complete appreciation for the potential costs of such bombing and for whether the potential long-term price is worth the desired short-term gain. In certain cases, the costs may appear justified. For most, though, restraint is probably the prudent course of action. The emphasis on kinetic airpower helped doom America's pursuit of broad-based political goals against an insurgent enemy in Vietnam and may well to do the same as America follows those footsteps in Iraq and Afghanistan. ✪

Notes

1. *National Journal* 25, nos. 47–48 (22 November 2003); *Newsweek* 143, no. 16 (19 April 2004); and *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 6 (November–December 2005).
2. *Newsweek* 153, no. 6 (9 February 2009).
3. Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 97, 279, 324.
4. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Why Don't We Learn from History?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1971), 16.
5. Out of a total population of 40 million Vietnamese at the end of the war, an estimated 2.9 million were Roman Catholics. The remainder subscribed to a blend of Buddhism, animism, and astrology; Confucian principles also held sway for many. See Delia Pergande, "Roman Catholicism in Vietnam," in *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, ed. Spencer Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 360.
6. "Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Vietnam," 18 August 1967, Meeting Notes File, box 1, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas.
7. Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 455.
8. Terrence Maitland and Peter McInerney, *A Contagion of War* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1983), 91.
9. That view is reflected throughout *A Vietcong Memoir*, written by former Vietcong minister of justice Truong Nhu Tang with David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai (New York: Vintage Books, 1985).
10. Larry Kaplow, "Think Again: Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, 15 November 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/11/15/think_again_iraq.
11. Brig Gen Jeffrey S. Buchanan and Brig Gen Kendall P. Cox, press conference, 7 September 2010, *Operation New Dawn: Official Website of United States Forces-Iraq*, http://www.usf-iraq.com/news/press-briefings/brig-gen-jeffrey-s-buchanan-and-brig-gen-kendall-p-cox-sr-sept-7.
12. Kaplow, "Think Again: Iraq."
13. Ibid.
14. Differences also exist among many of those clans containing Shiite components. The Tajik Shiites are of the Ismaile sect, while the Hazaras contain members of the Ismaile sect as well as the more conventional "Twelver Shia" group.

15. NATO Media Backgrounder, "Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)," 26 October 2010, http://www.isaf.nato.int/images/stories/File/factsheets/1667-10_ANSF_LR_en2.pdf. The Afghan National Police numbered 120,500 in September 2010.

16. Joshua Partlow, "Karzai Calls on U.S. to Lighten Troop Presence," *Washington Post*, 14 November 2010; "Attacks Kill 8 Foreign Troops in Afghanistan," Reuters, 14 October 2010, http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE69D10P20101014; and Karen DeYoung, "Obama Pushes Back on Karzai Criticism," *Washington Post*, 21 November 2010. The latter article lists a total of approximately 140,000 ISAF troops in Afghanistan; the first article lists 150,000.

17. "NSAM 288, U.S. Objectives in South Vietnam, 17 March 1964," in Neil Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 283.

18. See, for example, the text of "President George W. Bush's Address to the Nation Regarding Iraq," 7 September 2003, http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/terrorism/bushiraq5.html; and of "President George W. Bush's Address to the United Nations," 23 September 2003, http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/terrorism/bushiraq6.html.

19. Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the End of Combat Operations in Iraq" (Washington, DC: White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 31 August 2010), http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/08/31/remarks-president-address-nation-end-combat-operations-iraq.

20. Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York: Viking, 2008), 219–39, 265–92.

21. Steven Lee Myers and Alissa J. Rubin, "U.S. Scales Back Political Goals for Iraqi Unity," *New York Times*, 25 November 2007.

22. Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan" [United States Military Academy at West Point, West Point, New York] (Washington, DC: White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 1 December 2009), http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan.

23. Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 59–60.

24. Headquarters USAF, *Analysis of Effectiveness of Interdiction in Southeast Asia, Second Progress Report*, May 1966, Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL, file K168.187-21, 7; and Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, *Air War against North Vietnam*, 90th Cong., 1st sess., 25 August 1967, pt. 4, 299.

25. Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff, eds., *The Air War in Indochina* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 11, 168–72; and Earl H. Tilford Jr., *Crosswinds: The Air Force's Setup in Vietnam* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), 109.

26. NSSM 1 (February 1969), *Congressional Record* 118, pt. 13 (10 May 1972), 16833.

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