

Center for the Study of the Presidency



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#13 “Vietnam and Iraq: A Strategic and Tactical Analysis”

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This analysis compares America’s tactical approach during the Vietnam Conflict to the on-going counterinsurgency in Iraq. As a former Deputy Province Senior Advisor in Vietnam and through thoughtful analyses, and humorous memories of some of the key officers, offers insight into how the two conflicts differ. He also offers a list of “best practices” that worked in Vietnam and may be helpful in Iraq. Mr. Olsen examines the tactical similarities of the two clashes.

In Report to the President-Elect 2000: Triumphs and Tragedies of the Modern Presidency, the Center analyzed Presidential leadership through the lens of more than seventy-six case studies. These Issue Papers are a forward looking complementary series of short, single-author papers that frame and briefly analyze key issues and policies that the Administration should address. Views expressed in these papers are those of the authors.



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FOREWORD

The question of Iraq sliding into the Vietnam paradigm of inevitable defeat is shown by Norman Olsen in his Strategic and Tactical Analysis to be a false historical analogy. At this time of questioning and increased requirements for sacrifice and American steadfastness in support of the emergent democratic regime in Iraq, it is important to remember that the Vietnam War was not a lost military, but a lost political cause.

The strategic analysis provided by Olsen highlights, in retrospect, many of the things that were going right in Vietnam and by forward projection, could be effective in a reconsideration of U.S. strategy and tactics in the current conflict. The changes required for America to prevail in this new theater are central to our work in the rest of the region and for the future of American standing in the international community.

Without sober reflection on where we were in Vietnam, versus the quick and shallow interpretations of what happened in Vietnam, we will have lost sight of one of our most valuable resources in the fight against Global Terrorism and that is the effective lesson of history. We owe a debt to Norm Olsen for his poignant, often funny, and incisive dissection of those critical lessons that we should have learned from our experience in Vietnam and what they could mean for our work in Iraq.

General Edward Meyer, USA (ret)
Arlington, Virginia
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Vietnam and Iraq: A Strategic and Tactical Analysis

Norman L. Olsen

The impetus for this paper started at my son's wedding in December during which several of his Army and Marine colleagues asked about my experiences in Vietnam. In particular, they were interested in whether Marine Corps combined action platoons were as effective as the Marine Corps is now claiming and whether the concept might work in Iraq. Their questions led me to draft a letter to the young officers, all of whom were company commanders in elite combat units in Iraq, describing what worked and what did not work in Vietnam. Based on this experience, I also speculated a bit about what might work in Iraq.

Within a week of drafting the original letter, I received an invitation from the Center for the Study of the Presidency to participate in a seminar comparing Vietnam and Iraq. I mentioned I had drafted this letter and was invited to submit it as part of the discussion materials. I expanded the original letter a bit and then participated in the seminar.

The seminar participants were an august group including a former Army Chief of Staff, several other generals, and a couple of prominent journalists and academics. My claim to creditability rested on the fact that I was the only participant who had actually talked to a live, healthy, and at large Viet Cong. In fact, in 1967 a Viet Cong Colonel lived at my house in Vietnam for the better part of a month.

Credentials

This brings me to the question of my credentials for speaking on this subject. I served in Vietnam from 1966 through 1970 with US Agency for International Development in the Mekong Delta. I started in Vietnam with the U.S. Agency of International Development (USAID) as a Chieu Hoi advisor. Specifically I was in charge of a program in Kien Phong province designed to get the Viet Cong (VC) to move, or as it was officially called "rally" to the Government of Vietnam (GVN) side. I set the record for the most Cong come-overs, over four hundred in one month, by the good fortune of scheduling my most intensive campaign to coincide with the worst flood in over ten years on the Mekong. Two hots and a dry cot proved to be an irresistible advertising slogan. That was combined with an aggressive military campaign, exploiting superior helicopter mobility when the VC were limited to moving by sampan or swimming, proved to be a winning combination for that particular campaign.

In assessing the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, it is important to recognize the variations in individual experience. A battalion commander in a U.S. Army division has a

much different experience from a Province Senior Advisor or a B-52 pilot. All of those experiences are valuable, but they give a different sense of reality. There is a human tendency to believe one's personal reality is truth. That tendency needs to be accounted for and guarded against.

Background

My Chieu Hoi experience brought me into contact with a somewhat emotionally conflicted Viet Cong Colonel. He didn't like the direction the VC were taking, and was concerned about excessive NVA control of the National Liberation Front (NLF), but really hated the corruption of the GVN. We agreed he would come to town, live in my house, and have free access to the province capital (Cao Lanh). And, over the next three months decide if he wanted to throw in his lot with the GVN, return to the VC, or pursue other options.

At that moment, I was courting a very pretty International Voluntary Services volunteer from Ohio named Elizabeth Ann Bilan. Betsy was in fact invaluable in discussions with Colonel Pham because she would bake cakes for our frequent evening discussions. This definitely helped to soften his views of America. Col. Pham was of the view that while U.S. policy, was often mistaken, those Americans sure knew how to bake.

Col. Pham's views of America and Americans were interesting. Like most Vietnamese he really liked Americans. In particular, he appreciated our generosity, admired what he viewed as our generally positive role in the world, and respected the energy we brought to business. He also said morale was always very high when the VC attacked American forces, rather like it might be if DeMatha was to play the New England Patriots. The VC soldiers were scared, but these attacks represented a great opportunity to play the champs and it was an opportunity to which they looked forward. Col. Pham also noted that the VC thought the Americans made great targets because we were so big—plus, we had an unmistakable smell that made us easier to locate.

Col. Pham was clearly a highly intelligent and very capable, if largely untutored, commander. Yet, his world view tended to be limited. For example, he was convinced that he had unloaded a Communist Chinese submarine in the middle of the U-Minh forest. He was undoubtedly mistaken about the type of vessel he was unloading, but I can assure you his level of conviction would pass any lie detector test.

Ultimately, Col. Pham drifted off, I suspect returning to the VC because while he liked the Americans, that was a less important issue than his hatred of the corruption of the GVN. He was also concerned with what he viewed as the undisciplined nature of South Vietnamese society, a quality that Americans would probably have described as capitalist energy.

Organization

From 1966 to 1968, the organization of the US Mission changed so that the Civil Operations Rural Development Support (CORDS) program ultimately encompassed all the civilian agencies and military advisors at the corps and province level. CORDS was the advisory element to the GVN and consisted of the US military advisors, USAID field operations, CIA field operations (called OSA in Vietnam), and the U.S. Information Service (called JUSPAO in Vietnam). Each province had a CORDS team, headed by a senior field grade officer and senior civilian officer. If the military officer was in overall command, his deputy was civilian; if the civilian was in overall command, his deputy was military. Under CORDS, I became the Deputy Province Senior Advisor, and finally Acting Province Senior Advisor. All of my experience was at the province level in the Mekong Delta. I departed Vietnam in late 1970.

Citations

I would like to submit three all purpose footnotes, for which I offer my most visible supervisors who were always there in a very hands on approach to management:

1. *Mr. (Col.) Wilbur "Coal Bin Willie" Wilson.* Mr. Wilson was a career Army officer who ultimately joined USAID but never really got out of the US Army. He made full colonel in three years in WWII and then was not promoted in the next 20 years which gives one a view of his personality. Mr. Wilson was a very able man who didn't think he was doing his job unless he was chewing one out three-times a day. He was called Coal Bin Willie because, according to legend, as a regimental commander at Fort Bragg. He insisted that the troops white wash the coal bins and pile the coal at a 45 degree angle. The troops at Fort Bragg, and certainly I, quickly learned that 45 degrees meant 45 degrees, not 43 and certainly not 46. As an example of the calm reasonable dialogue in which we typically engaged, we once blew out a phone talking at each other.

2. *John Paul Vann. The Bright Shining Lie.* Enormously energetic, exceptionally courageous, and intolerant of anything that he viewed as diminishing his prestige, Vann was also personally very generous. For example, he occasionally loaned Betsy (by now Mrs. Elizabeth Ann Olsen) his helicopter to come visit me. He was very proud that he could get by on only four hours sleep. His management style was personified by 0200 telephone calls asking what I was doing about a particular issue or problem. My standard answer was always, "John, I am glad you called because I was thinking about just that issue." Sometimes I actually was.

3. *William Colby.* He was the Commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam and later the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI). Colby graduated first in his law school class at Columbia. He was a young OSS Lt. in WWII; for which W.E.B. Griffen dedicated several books to him. Famous for calling at around 1600 and asking if he could come down and spend the night, Colby would arrive within two hours with his little black book on a province, a little black book that was approximately the

size of a volume of the federal procurement regulations. He usually traveled with a journalist who was on “deep background.” Talk about pressure: briefing the Chief of CORDS who we all knew would become DCI, with a reporter in the back of the room, and any wrong answer potentially career threatening. In reality, Ambassador Colby was easy to talk to because, while the grilling was intensive, I always felt that I had been listened to carefully and had his support. Actually, I always felt that no matter how harsh the exchange, I had the support of all three. Colby could see where progress was and was not being made. Reasonable explanations of problems were acceptable, particularly when accompanied by a plan for improving the situation; excuses were not. The key factor was that Colby had a good understanding of the reality behind the numbers, that is, what the metrics actually represented in the field.

So my three all purpose citations are:

1. An infinity of chewing outs: Wilbur Wilson, 1968 -- 1970
2. Dozens of very early morning phone calls: John Paul Vann, 1966 – 1970
3. Approximately ten quarterly reviews: William Colby, 1967 – 1970.

Biases

1. Not only could the war in Vietnam have been won, it should have been won. Almost inevitably we won the battles; most of the campaigns were successful. Why didn't we win the war? We did not win because we were fighting the wrong battles. And we were fighting the wrong battles because of institutional biases that no one seemed capable of breaking. From the beginning of US involvement, many voices, both civilian and military, accurately articulated what was needed to effectively fight the war; however, until the emergence of the Abrams, Bunker, Colby trio, none was heeded. Because of inadequate political leadership in the U.S. and until the arrival of General Abrams, ineffective senior military leadership in the field, insufficient resource mobilization, and personified by the fact that the more the U.S. Army did, the less the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) did.

2. We did not need to go to war in Iraq; containment was working adequately. Starting the war in Iraq represented a poorly calculated risk that the U.S. should not have undertaken. The initial attack went well, but the preparations for the post attack phase were extraordinarily negligent.

3. Bush has the one essential ingredient necessary for successful presidential leadership: exceptionally good luck and lots of it. And thus we are likely to become lucky in Iraq and this may be enough to see us through in other areas of the region. My greatest fear is that in lucking out, the prevailing perception will be that we did it right in Iraq. This would be an extremely dangerous perception.

Views

In my view the US made three major errors in Vietnam which we are now repeating in Iraq:

1. Gradual escalation.
2. Failure to provide for moving ideas up the chain of command for an appropriate review.
3. Inappropriate budget priorities.

1. *Gradual escalation.* In Vietnam we escalated gradually, both in troop strength and in the air war. Most people now recognize that gradual escalation of the air war in Vietnam was a mistake. We should have moved with decisive force or not at all. In Iraq, it appears that the US is repeating the same type of error, starting small and then escalating troop strength gradually. The result in each case has been the same: the enemy has learned it and can adapt.

2. *Failure to move things up the chain of command for appropriate review.* This deficiency is well documented in Vietnam. More recently the 9/11 Commission gets into this in terms of the hunt for Osama bin Laden (OBL), noting that in the decade preceding 9/11, OBL had been identified as a major threat and various military options had been presented for neutralizing him. Those options were rejected at the political level as having too little likelihood of success. That might have been the correct decision but, from a reading of the 9/11 report, it does not appear that the political level made any conscientious effort to thoroughly analyze risks and benefits. For example, failure to run OBL to ground was not because of insufficient deadly force. Rather it was a lack of appropriate intelligence, a CIA that seemed to take refuge in lack of legal authority to pursue OBL, and an over reliance on Afghan troops with little desire to capture OBL. One might also question if by capturing OBL would bring about the results the U.S. seeks. In Iraq the decision that sticks out is demobilization of the Iraqi Army based on the preference of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) while ignoring the overwhelming preponderance of expert advice to the contrary. Contrastingly, the current uniformed services seem to be doing a good job of adapting to the challenges of Afghanistan and Iraq.

3. *Inappropriate budget priorities.* In Iraq, as it was in Vietnam, the Army and the Marine Corps are doing the fighting and will ultimately determine victory or defeat. However, the Air Force and Navy are receiving the money. Not a smart way to fight most contemporary wars. In Vietnam, for example, my final report included a case for far greater effort in developing local police forces, stating that money spent this way would be far more effective than spending it on the Starlight scope, for example (note: I have nothing against starlight scopes). I suspect that the same thing applies in Iraq in terms of the police. One notes we are continuing to budget for ever more sophisticated submarines and fighter planes when those in our current inventory are still

overwhelmingly superior to any that the potential enemy might possess. Given that a neo-Soviet incursion across the north German plain is much less likely than further small unit terrorist actions in multiple locations around the world, it seems imperative that the U.S. reposition our resources to face the most likely dangers.

Iraq

I have no personal experience in Iraq, but my son Mark served as a company commander in the 82nd Airborne for the first six months of the war. I have discussed the war in Iraq with him and with his Army and Marine Corps colleagues.

One of the proudest moments of our family life was Betsy being at Fort Bragg awaiting the deployment of the 82nd Airborne aboard airplanes that would fly troops to Kuwait to start the war in Iraq. Mark was poised, polished, and prepared. His men were thoroughly trained and they and their spouses were fully confident in Mark's ability to lead them. Together Delta company was ready to stack the enemies of our nation like cord wood. The problem of course was that stacking the Iraqis like cord wood was not the issue; rather, it was persuading the Iraqis that America was not the enemy and that they should make common cause with the Americans and other Iraqi ethnic, political and or religious groups to create a better life for all.

Strategic Comparisons

1. In comparing Vietnam and Iraq one unavoidably notes the similarity of McNamara and Rumsfeld as highly intelligent, very energetic, and superb briefers unhandicapped by self doubt. They are also very similar in terms of skills, experience, and character with a strong tendency to over rely on technology. They seem to view their major mission as transforming the military; -- something most of us would probably agree is desirable. In McNamara's case, military reform meant making the military more efficient by getting a bigger bang for the buck: in Rumsfeld's case, it was making the military more deadly. In neither case was the transformation they aimed for directly related to the wars the United States is likely to be fighting. Nor do they seem to have taken the military into their confidence in making the desired changes. Often it has seemed to be a clash between civilian political leadership and the military establishment over turf.
2. Ominously, the two wars have had very similar combat results. U.S. forces have been brilliant in the set piece battles, while neither were able to sustain control of the land and population as a whole, nor to train effective local military and police forces. Politically, the situation in Iraq seems to be changing for the better. However, I note that it often seemed to be changing for the better in Vietnam.

3. Political situations in which war was justified but avoidable, and in which many do not believe that vital US interests were directly threatened.
4. Widespread international opposition to each war and growing domestic dissent against the present war in the US.
5. Beliefs by the senior U.S. political leadership that these were new and unique challenges in which many old principles and historical truths did not apply.
6. Multi - ethnic, religious, and political populations with little experience in democratic practices and a suspicion of U.S. motives.
7. Long periods of sustained conflict. Vietnam 1940 -1980, Iraq 1975 to present.
8. In Vietnam, there was a failure to understand the motivation and the sociology of the North Vietnamese. For example, most senior U.S. leaders with whom I worked, both civilian and military, tended to think of the NVA senior leadership as "hard headed realists" like themselves. To them, Ho, Giap and the rest of the COSVN gang were less communist ideologist and moreover as conventional power seekers. In a democracy, the US leaders' assessment of their counterparts might have been correct, because it is hard to imagine a democratic electorate suffering the level of casualties the NVA did without coming to terms. But in an Asian communist dictatorship, reality was far different. The leadership was more than willing to lose half of the male population between 16 and 25 each year in order to conquer South Vietnam, and the population had little choice but to tolerate the losses. Similarly, most reporting from Iraq indicates that American understanding of Saddam Hussein and his senior colleagues were at best fragmentary.
9. The Vietnamese family structure also worked against the U.S. approach to war. I faced this directly in the Chieu Hoi program. The program was very successful with the VC from South Vietnam and equally unsuccessful with the NVA. Interrogation of captured NVA indicated that they were well aware that they were likely to be killed or wounded. Similarly, the NVA enlisted men they did not seem to like, whether it was their mission or the government they represented. However, if they took the logical step in American terms and turned themselves in, they would never see their families again. Very few NVA turned themselves in, preferring instead the less than 50% odds of safely returning to their families in North Vietnam to life in a far more prosperous South Vietnam. Similarly, the tribal and religious structure in Iraq is clearly posing obstacles to democratization.
10. There was a failure to see the war as an integrated whole. The issue was never whether we (the U.S. Army and Marine Corps) could defeat the NVA or the Republican Guard in direct fire engagements. Rather it depended on whether the U.S. could sufficiently gain and sustain the allegiance of a potentially neutral to

hostile population so that stable, effective, and pro-western national government could prevail.

Tactical Situation

The issue in both wars is much the same. The U.S. had in Vietnam, and now has in Iraq, an overwhelming advantage in firepower. In Vietnam, we could effectively engage the enemy at a far greater distance than the enemy could respond. The same is clearly true in Iraq. The VC and the NVA saw their task as narrowing that distance, hoping to engage at distances of as close as 50 meters thereby limiting the effectiveness of air strikes, artillery, and crew served weapons. In Iraq, it appears to be much the same; terrorists and the road side bombs seem to focus on targets even closer than 50 meters.

In our discussions at the Center for the Study of the Presidency, there was a high level of agreement on some basic points concerning to the conduct of the war in Vietnam. These include:

1. Ambiguousness of the enemy. In Vietnam, a major difficulty was finding the enemy. A similar situation seems to exist in Iraq (one note that this gradually changed in Vietnam. Where in the post Paris treaty period of the war, it was basically major formations fighting one another).
2. Lack of U.S. experience in protracted conflicts with slow progress.
3. Lack of a social dimension in strategy. This was overcome in the later stages of the Vietnam War, but clearly is a problem in Iraq. Currently overcoming this in Iraq is very difficult because random violence makes reconstruction a dangerous and difficult activity.
4. Lack of executive branch cohesiveness in planning and implementation.
5. Trouble identifying accurate metrics to measure progress.
6. Ineffective use of U.S. reserve forces in Vietnam, which resulted in greater reliance on the draft and increased unpopularity of the war. In Iraq, the problem is the reverse; over reliance on the reserves lead many Americans to believe that the social contract in respect to the reserves has been broken.
7. Doctrine that often did not fit the field situation; lack of uniformity of doctrine even if it did fit.
8. Ineffective senior leadership (this changed in Vietnam with the emergence of the Abrams, Bunker, and Colby trio).
9. Ineffective advisory effort. At the Army of the Republic of Vietnam level, I agree with the prevailing view of those at the Center for the Study of the Presidency. At

the province level, I think that the effort was far more successful because one worked more closely with counterparts than with the actual combat troops and government implementing agents. With the ARVN, the problem was less the advisory effort and more that the far more aggressive U.S. units tended to push the ARVN units to the side.

Best Practices

In our discussions at the Center for the Study of the Presidency, we touched upon the concept of spreading best practices. The idea of best practices is widely praised, but poorly understood. What are best practices? They are not doing something “better;” rather “best practices” means “doing it better because of a superior technique or process.” There are several critical factors in identifying best practices. As was noted by one discussant, the improvements in the situation in Afghanistan started with the arrival of the two new senior commanders. That is not necessarily the best practice and it may be that the new commanders are merely better commanders.

To accurately identify best practices, one needs to thoroughly study the environment in which the practice takes place and then determine why the practice works. Oftentimes, the person who started the practice does not know why it works better. In extending the practice, one needs to be particularly careful of two things. First, the environments to which the practice is extended must be reasonably similar and the best practice must be used as intended. Second, there is a human tendency to believe that your environment is different, that you are just a little smarter than the inventor of the best practice, and therefore the best practice needs to be modified to meet your situation. Frequently, this leads to the best practice not working.

In my experience, the following are the best practices from Vietnam that might be used in Iraq:

1. *Combined Action Platoons*. Pioneered by the Marine Corps, a Marine squad was linked with an ARVN platoon to provide local security. Combined Action Platoons seemed to work well in providing security; they worked less well in developing social, economic, and political institutions.

2. *Multiple small unit ambushes and patrols*. Several U.S. Army brigades pioneered the concept of saturating an area with squad size patrols and ambushes. By using superior communications to connect those units to quick reaction forces when contacted, helped reinforcements assemble quickly and massively.

3. *CORDS*. The CORDS initiative brought U.S. unity of command to the province level and integrated plans and programs. The result was increased village level security which, in turn, allowed economic, social, and political development programs to function more effectively.

4. *Provincial Interrogation Centers (PIOC)*. These were relatively small facilities under the command of the GVN province chief that brought together most members of the province - level intelligence community. They were supported by American advisors. A key factor in the effectiveness of the PIOC was that they systematically developed a reasonably accurate outline of the Viet Cong infrastructure. Contrastingly, in Iraq, one gets the feeling that interrogation is aimed at finding immediately actionable intelligence, i.e., "tell us where the bad guys are at this instant and we will go get them." In my experience such finds are very rare.

5. *RF/PF*. As noted by one of the Center participants the Regional Force Companies and Popular Force platoons fought surprisingly well. They did well because they were recruited from the local level and served close to their home communities and often represented groups such as the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Catholic communities that had a historical antipathy to the VC. They were trained regionally in secure centers so that, when they initially faced battle, they had a reasonable level of preparation. Their officers were from the region and understood the environment. Often they were defending their own families.

Another reason the RP/PF did relatively better than the ARVN was a different advisory relationship. The commanding officers in the ARVN unites, from platoon leader on up, almost always had far greater actual combat experience than the U.S. advisor. Frequently the Vietnamese officers were older as well, and often the ARVN commanders had similar educational backgrounds to their U.S. counterparts. To many ARVN officers, this presented a face losing power struggle if they readily accepted the advisor's advice. On a technical level, the ARVN commanders were often below regimental level and did not appreciate that U.S. advisors calling in helicopter gun ships by putting much fire power on target as an ARVN infantry battalion.

My strong impression is that the U.S. officers were superior to their ARVN counterparts in terms of tactical skills; however, they were poorly prepared in addressing the strategic question that is getting one's counterpart to accept and implement advice.

Contrastingly, the RF/PF officers while also more experienced in combat, and older, were generally less educated than their U.S. counterparts. They were less vulnerable to losing face by accepting advice and seem to have had a greater appreciation of the firepower and communications resources the advisors could bring to bear. There was also a great appreciation amongst the Vietnamese soldiers of the medical evacuation helicopters.

6. *Hamlet Evaluation Survey (HES)*. Initially developed by the CIA, this was a comprehensive questionnaire that each District Senior Advisor submitted monthly on each hamlet in the district. The weakness was that the HES quickly became the score card against which the Province Chief was measured. President Thieu looked at the HES each month, and any Province Chief who had a hamlet that regressed received a call from Thieu. Having the Americans make the evaluations meant that one lost the advantage of local knowledge but maintained a reasonable standard of integrity in the process. To a

lesser, but significant degree District and Provincial Senior Advisors were also evaluated by the HES score. There was a certain amount of inflation, and a normal tendency to want to render one's own global judgment rather than wait for the computer to convert some unknown formula. The biggest variant in the scoring came from the differing abilities of the District Advisors to accurately evaluate the situation. However, even with this human weakness, the HES were useful in showing trends and identifying problems and successes.

A key question on the HES was the number of incidents; if they were declining, one was doing well; if the number of incidents was going up, it was an ominous warning. If current newspaper reports are correct and the number of incidents in Iraq is declining that is truly encouraging.

7. *Frequent and intensive visits from senior corps and national HQ commanders.* Ambassador Colby and John Paul Vann were particularly good at this, coming often enough, Vann monthly, Colby quarterly, and staying long enough, usually overnight, to get to know you, the situation, and the programs. The key factors were regular visits, and an appreciation that the numbers did not always tell the whole story. They were willing to take the time to grasp reality as seen from field level.

8. *Spooky.* The AC-47s, armed with rapid fire cannon and Gatling guns, got to outposts under attack quickly and then delivered an enormous volume of accurate fire.

9. *RD Cadre Teams.* If memory serves correctly, these were 59 member teams armed with small arms and basic levels of expertise in agriculture, health, education, and intelligence. They could provide their own security against VC units up to the size of a reinforced platoon. The quality of leadership varied significantly but was often quite effective in identifying the local VC infrastructure and working with villages on basic development projects. Well led RD cadre teams often used USAID self help funds to quickly build village schools and dispensaries, as well as to repair roads and bridges.

10. *Land Reform.* This was probably USAID's most effective field level program. In the highly insecure provinces I worked in, land reform merely reinforced previous Viet Minh and Viet Cong land reform programs but the farmers definitely appreciated having title from who ever was going to ultimately govern. University students were usually the land reform agents. As long as they were productive they got to stay out of the Army, which was an effective motivation tool. Land reform may not be an issue in Iraq, but one suspects that property ownership and confiscation is.

11. *High yield rice.* In the midst of war, rice production actually increased and farmers could make enough to buy a Honda motorcycle.

12. *Commodity import program.* It kept the economy humming and employment high. It is one of the reasons that Americans are still welcome in Vietnam.

What did not work in Vietnam

1. The more the U.S. did, the less the ARVN did. The level of effort remained essentially the same.
2. In the early days of the war, the RF/PF was seriously out gunned because they were at the end of the supply line. Grease guns and carbines do not match up well to AK47s. Initially the RF/PF was often inadequately trained enlarging the handicap.
3. Seriously flawed planning. Volume of paper substituted for strategy. As far as I am aware, there was no overall theory of victory, other than we would inflict so much pain on the VC/NVA that they would quit. Ho and Giap did not think that way. In that there was an overall strategy, it did not seem to be linked to tactics for achieving it. I noted in IV Corps there were 16 provinces and 16 different strategies.
4. Until very late in the war, there was a serious misunderstanding on the part of the senior U.S. leadership of the motivation of the Viet Cong and NVA.
5. One-year tours for military officers. At the provincial level, that was just about enough time for the GVN officials and officers to decide whether you could be trusted.
6. Inappropriate training for the particular position. For example, in my four - plus years in Vietnam, the psych war positions in my provinces were filled by two nuclear submarine executive officers, an air force meteorologist, and a B-52 navigator. Each was a very able man. None, by training or experience, were well equipped to win the hearts and minds of rural Vietnamese farmers. Each tried hard, and they learned (and becoming better officers in the process), but their contributions to winning the war were modest.
7. U.S. units were not good at locating VC/NVA supply caches. That was a major problem in the Cambodia incursion until ARVN units were introduced. The ARVN were frequently ineffective in fighting the NVA, but were good at finding the supply dumps. The ARVN also tended to take advantage of the situation to loot civilian houses.

A number of differences exist between the two countries.

1. The VC/NVA units appear to have been more capable of directly engaging the U.S. forces than the Republican Guard. However, the level of security in Iraq appears to be much lower than that in Vietnam. By being prudent, one could frequently actively engage the Vietnamese people without fear of car bombs, ambushes, ect... – clearly this is not the case in Iraq. The U.S. troops in Iraq need to be far more careful than would a USAID field rep in Vietnam talking to villagers. That has an impact on how well and how quickly one learns to deal with the local situation.

2. I also have the impression that, at the moment, the Iraqi people are at best very wary of Americans. Contrastingly, the majority of Vietnamese liked Americans because we were rich, generous with our money, and friendly. But perhaps more importantly, the

economy was growing, employment was up, and fortunes were being made. In Iraq, unemployment is huge and largely intractable; religious differences are also a serious issue.

3. My impression is that the current Iraqi conflict has most of the characteristics of a low intensity guerilla war. From 1968 onward, Vietnam's fronts were fluid and guerilla action was frequent; a major characteristic of the fronts were the battalion size and larger units going at each other.

Possible next steps and transferences of best practices

If one could start over in 2002 it would be easy to say what the US should have done in Iraq: A) make sure that State Department and DOD planning was integrated from the beginning, B) make sure that adequate well trained forces were on hand from the first day Baghdad was occupied to ensure stability, and C) purge existing Iraqi institutions of the senior Bathists leadership while maintaining the ability of those institutions to provide basic services. However one cannot change yesterday.

At the moment, the solution is not solved with more troops and in any case, additional troops are not available. There is even reason to be optimistic given the relative success of the first election. Yet, South Vietnam has held many successful elections with a higher turn out than the 58% who voted in Iraq recent election. One election does not make a trend; progress can easily come undone. One also needs to recognize that there is unlikely to be any magical war winning idea. Rather it will take a number of well executed actions. Some things that could help include:

1. Iraqi forces. Much improved training of Iraqi police and military is required. Then those forces need to be strongly supported by effective quick reaction forces. One could use some variation of combined action platoons as a means of training and improving overall effectiveness of the Iraqi units. It will not immediately help the car bomb situation but should cut down on the random small arms attacks and perhaps kidnappings. This requires reshaping the Iraqi and perhaps U.S. forces to deal with local threats. Stopping the kidnappings is particularly critical. Recruit according to local needs. Thoroughly train in a secure environment. Deploy those forces within a supporting context and support them with adequate communications and back up firepower.
2. Massively increase the Arabic language training for U.S. troops. Personally I would put a minimum of 2000 soldiers per year into a one year course with substantial incentives for effectively learning the language. If we do not need them in Iraq there will be ample call on the capacity in other areas of the region.
3. Variations on the hamlet evaluation survey. Renamed and recast to the realities of Iraq a reoccurring survey could begin to get a more accurate and systematic view of realities, needs, and progress.

4. Spectre. AC-130 gun ships will not work in urban areas: we need to think of alternatives appropriate to urban Iraq. Sniper teams backstopped by unmanned aerial vehicles could serve a similar function. For example, Iraqi poll workers complained that they were under intense pressure from anti-democratic forces not to participate in the elections. Knocks on the door in the middle of the night were an unwelcome and one presumes very terrifying experience. Only two per cent of Sunnis voted, indicating that to some degree the pressure was successful. One could not protect all 6,000 or so poll workers; one could probably protect up to several hundred and perhaps reverse the terror by neutralizing a dozen or so of those unwelcome knocks in the night. One imagines that word would rapidly go forth if even a few of those knocking in the night were silenced.

5. Pump priming. Unemployment was not a major issue in Vietnam, because of the enormous construction and import programs. The pump was primed. Currently it is not in Iraq. Personally I suspect that without a substantial reduction in unemployment it will prove to be extremely difficult to significantly reduce terrorism. Perhaps something like the Civilian Conversation Corps of the depression would work.

Conclusions

Personally, I think we are going to luck out in Iraq. Liberals are going to have to contend with the real possibility that Bush did get the word from God, and in heeding it, may well have caught an historic wave headed in the direction of freedom and democracy. And conservatives are going to need to admit that Bush should have listened to the Lord much more closely concerning the details because the Lord is not remotely as careless a planner as this administration. The deliberate exclusion of the State Department from the process is inexcusable, particularly as the SecDef does not appear to have substituted any planning of his own except an arrogant belief in the inevitability of American victory. It cost lives that did not need to be lost.

Whatever mistakes have been made in Iraq, it seems clear that the administration is not open to debate on the general issue or on how those mistakes might be corrected. Thus, it is unlikely that anyone on the outside can make a significant difference. What can be done is to take a hard look at the wars that the United States is likely to fight and how those future wars should be fought. This requires asking the right questions and being open to differing answers. In my view we asked the wrong questions in Vietnam and thus came to badly flawed answers. This is likely to be the case in Iraq.

Over the past fifty years America's wars have been fought against enemies that were substantially outgunned in a conventional sense. Those wars were also fought in close proximity to a civilian population with uncertain political sympathies. A constant complaint of American forces is that they could not reliably identify the enemy. Often open political boundaries in which the enemy seemed to be able to easily resupply was a factor.

In my view, U.S. citizens should not so much be after a military that is both more efficient and deadly, but one in which recognizes that in contemporary conflicts, efficiency and deadly should not be exclusively measured by total ordinance on target. Finding the correct target is by far the greatest issue; if we can find it, we can almost certainly destroy it. What we should be after is a Department of Defense in which the political and military leadership have reasonable agreement on goals and methods and most importantly are actively seeking to fully prepare the United States to fight wars against small, but deadly enemies in unfriendly environments for limited ends. This means that in addition to knocking out major formations, we need to be capable of dealing with guerilla and terrorist actions by working in populated urban environments. Intelligence is an obvious priority. Less obvious, but equally important, is developing a capability to train indigenous security forces while also assuring that basic government services are provided. Foremost are having both civilian and military leaders capable of flexibly dealing with the cultural aspects of America's likely conflicts.

Center for the Study of the Presidency

FINDINGS FROM THE ROUNDTABLE ON

VIETNAM: LESSONS LEARNED

Chaired by

Dr. David M. Abshire

President, Center for the Study of the Presidency

General Edward C. Meyer, USA (Ret.)

Former Chief of Army Staff

January 14, 2005

10:00AM – 12:00PM

CSP Boardroom

This memo summarizes consolidated findings and conclusions of a 14 January 2005 meeting at the Center on the similarities and differences between the Vietnam and Iraq conflicts, as well as suggestions on how to best apply these lessons to the current war on terrorism. The findings of this memo were taken from off-the-record comments and are not attributable to specific participants. A participants list is attached.

Findings in Brief

I. DOMESTIC POLITICS

When any administration goes to war it is essential to legitimize the war for the American public and, by extension, the United States Congress. No matter what military successes are achieved, the effort will be derailed if public dissent overwhelms the decision-making process. In order to establish domestic consensus, a President – be it Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, or Bush – must include Congress in bipartisan deliberations about the nature, necessity, goals and results of the conflict. The President must be open and honest with Congress and the public about successes and failures or, over time, support will erode.

For example, Nixon should have consulted with Congressional leaders before he ordered the controversial invasions of Cambodia and Laos. Legislators were outraged that Nixon expanded the war without their notification. Nixon's continued belligerence toward Congress resulted in its rebellion. In 1975, Congress retaliated by cutting off funding for South Vietnam, thereby forcing an end to U.S. involvement.

President Bush should note Nixon's failure to obtain Congressional support for his policies. By engaging leaders on the Hill and by discussing alternate options, Bush can maximize Congressional support and mitigate partisan objections to the war.

II. MILITARY ORGANIZATION AND STRATEGY

Just as Vietnam showcased America's superiority in tactical weapons and firepower, the initial phase of the war in Iraq reinforced the preeminence of U.S. military power in the world. Unfortunately, the U.S. military, in its present capacity, is not geared to fight a protracted counter-insurgency campaign. Rather, it is trained to defeat main-force enemy units rapidly with minimal casualties. As the Iraq conflict continues, structural flaws in U.S. military organization become evident.

The growth of the Iraqi insurgency led Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to rely more heavily on the National Guard. However, the National Guard is not designed to be America's first line of defense and now is vastly overstretched. National Guard deployment to Vietnam was minimal and thus provided a way for some to avoid service overseas. Currently, the National Guard and Reserves make up 40% of all U.S. forces in Iraq. These forces are being deployed overseas for extended periods of time to combat unabated insurgency. Often, their civilian livelihoods are threatened because employers and families cannot afford their long-term absence. The role of the National Guard and Reserves must be re-examined and restructured to fit America's new global strategy, especially for the war on terror.

The administration has failed to establish a broad, unified strategic picture for its engagement in Iraq, including the metrics for success, the limits of American involvement, and an adequate assessment of U.S. roles, mission and resources. During Vietnam, McNamara used such metrics as body count and weapons tonnage to measure success. Unfortunately, success or failure could not be quantified in those terms. America risks replicating this mistake in Iraq if it cannot realistically assess goals and accomplishments. McNamara remained obdurate and refused to listen to alternative strategies for new developments in Vietnam and, in many ways, Rumsfeld has exhibited these same characteristics in dealing with Iraq.

III. TRAINING INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

The concept of Vietnamization, or the training and development of indigenous citizens to defend and control South Vietnam without the help of the U.S. military, became increasingly important in American strategy, especially after the shock of the 1968 Tet Offensive. Significant funds and resources were earmarked for this development. As the Lam Son operation and North Vietnam's failed Easter Offensive demonstrated, the energy and treasure invested in Vietnamization paid dividends. Some critics have argued that if Congress had not cut off funding, Vietnamization would have led to a stable South Vietnamese government capable of waging war against Communist and North Vietnamese insurgents.

The current escalating insurgency in Iraq strains U.S. military abilities to effectively respond in Iraq and elsewhere. America must allocate adequate resources and manpower to train indigenous Iraqis to form dependable police and defense units capable of providing domestic security within Iraq. Yet, in 2003 the U.S. decided to demobilize the Iraqi army, which led to unemployment and provided recruits for the fledgling guerilla network. The administration must rectify this situation by properly training an adequate Iraqi defense force.

IV. CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

During the Vietnam War, America failed to understand and adequately appreciate the culture, history and motivation of the Vietnamese, or their victory against the French. Additionally, the Vietnamese were unaware of American history, vision, and customs. This knowledge barrier alienated Vietnamese and created suspicion and bitterness on both sides. This disconnect and the nature of guerilla war made it difficult to identify friends from enemies. Insensitivity fostered hate, which deepened distrust among American soldiers and their Vietnamese allies.

Like Vietnam, the population of Iraq has little experience in the democratic process and is suspicious of U.S. motives. To counter such resentment and confusion, the U.S. should encourage its soldiers to better understand Iraqi culture and psychology. The war must be seen as an integrated whole – a military victory combined with neutralization of enemy forces. Soldiers must know what to expect in the combat zone and be able to effectively communicate with Iraqi citizens. Also, U.S. policies must be standardized throughout Iraq; all commanders must share best practices to establish uniform guidelines for the entire country. Such consideration and knowledge of Iraqi culture may help calm hostile Iraqis by creating mutual respect, open communication, positive American-Iraqi relationships, and common purpose. Additionally, training Iraqi security forces will be more effective if American troops and Iraqi citizens establish a common dialogue and learn the intricacies of each other's cultures.

V. CONCLUSIONS

President Bush needs to create a firm strategic vision to unify national efforts in Iraq and the war on terror. Once this has been accomplished, the President must engage Congress in future decision making. Obtaining bipartisan support for his policies will foster a steadiness of purpose among the American public. Leaders must be honest with their evaluations of the war in Iraq to maintain the public's trust. Similarly, broad international condemnation and scrutiny has impeded the war effort. Once a uniform doctrine – supported by the President, Congress and citizens – has been established, the U.S. can seek improved relations abroad. The war in Vietnam derailed Johnson's domestic policies, most notably the Great Society, by diverting wealth and attention overseas. If the current President is not careful, his domestic agenda – social security, tax reform, and healthcare restructuring – will suffer a similar fate.

Center for the Study of the Presidency

ROUNDTABLE ON VIETNAM: LESSONS LEARNED

CHAired BY DR. DAVID M. ABSHIRE AND GENERAL EDWARD C. MEYER

January 14, 2005
10:00AM – 12:00PM
CSP Boardroom

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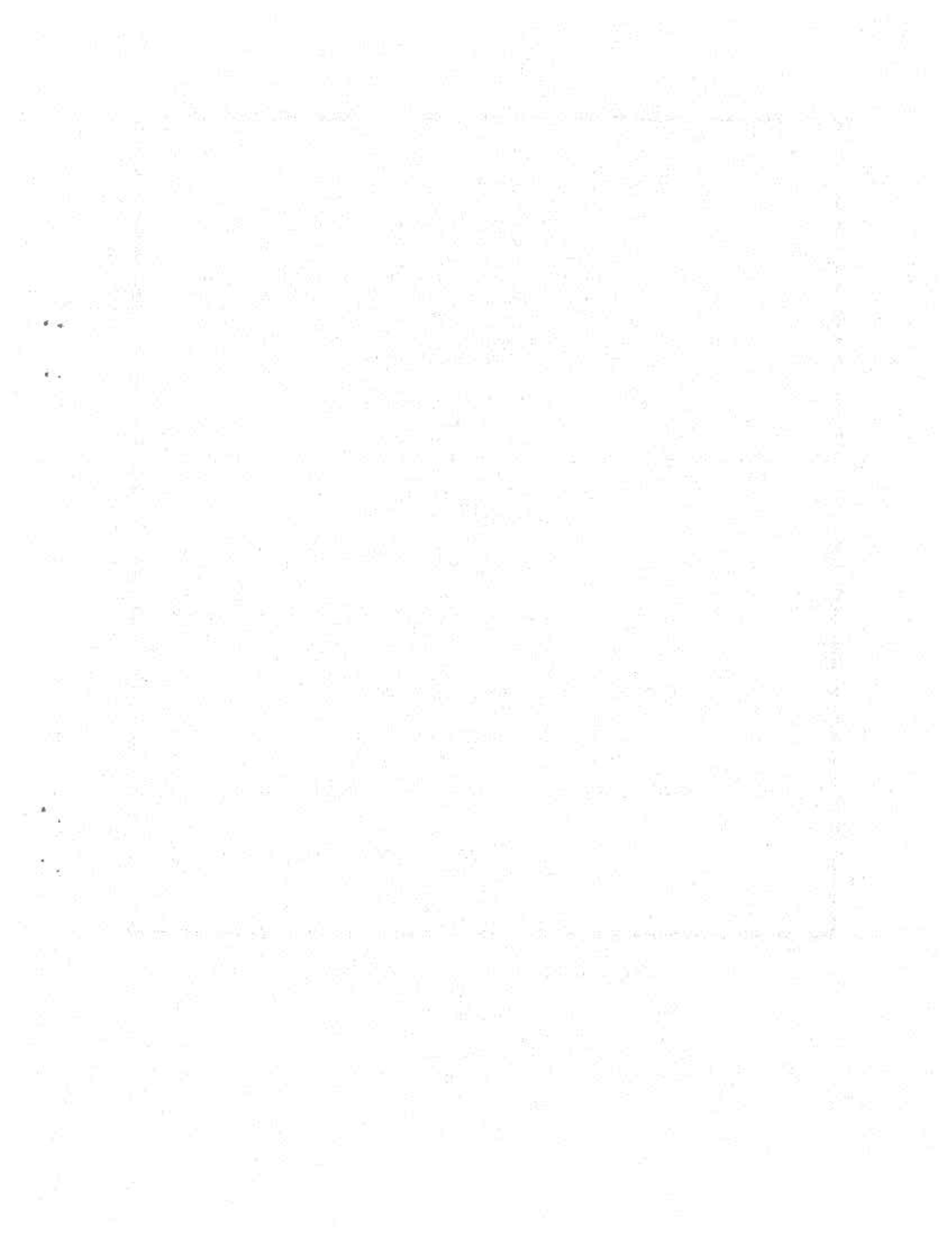
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Dr. David C. Mulferd
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George F. Murphy, Jr.
- #9. "Globalization and Economic Democracy"**
The Honorable Richard T. McCormack
- #10. "Thinking Anew on Homeland Security"**
David M. Abshire
- #11. "Looking Forward in Wartime: Vulnerable Points in the Global Economy"**
Richard T. McCormack
- #12. "A Long-Term Response to Biological Terrorism"**
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