The Unconventional War: Parallels between the Combat Experience in Vietnam and Iraq

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Prior to the current operations inside Afghanistan, the conflict in Vietnam was considered “America’s longest war,” lasting from 1950 to 1975. While American combat troops were not committed in Vietnam until the summer of 1965, the long stalemate and the withdrawal of troops in the following years weighed heavily on American minds afterward. The war in Iraq, or in military parlance, Operation Iraqi Freedom, began in 2003 and has taken on many “alarming . . . similarities” to the Vietnam War. Ted Galen Carpenter notes that, “contrary to the cliché, history never truly repeats itself,” and that one should be cautious when comparing Iraq to Vietnam. While comparisons can be drawn between the Vietnam War and the Iraq War, some contrasts can also be illuminated—the most important difference being the absence of the Selective Service System, better known as the “draft.” The number of servicemen deployed to each war is far from equal. During the so-called “surge” in Iraq, 160,000 ground forces were deployed. On the other hand, Vietnam reached nearly 530,000 troops at its climax. Another difference concerns the nature of the enemy. Carpenter opines that in Vietnam the U.S.

2 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 21.
7 Ibid., 21.
faced a well-defined threat, the Vietcong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA).8 On the other hand, U.S. forces in Iraq face an unorganized, mixed-bag insurgency that “resembles a Hobbesian struggle of all against all rather than the kind of conventional insurgency the United States encountered in Vietnam.”9 Despite the differences between the Vietnam War and Iraq War, parallels emerge when considering the average combat experience of American infantry in each war. While examining the similarities in the nature of the enemy, the combat environments, the occurrence of ambushes, and the utilization of anti-personnel devices, this essay will also attempt to infer to what extent lessons from Vietnam could have been applied to the war in Iraq.

Soldiers in both Vietnam and Iraq had to endure taxing guerilla warfare. Paul Rieckhoff, a lieutenant serving in the Third Infantry Division, believed that the Iraq War presented many of the same problems that the United States encountered during Vietnam, including “a guerilla enemy . . . indistinguishable from civilians, a culture [that American soldiers] didn’t understand at all, and tenuous public support” at home.10 Soldiers in Iraq dealt with the constant threat of “Ali Baba,” a pejorative term designating guerilla fighters, which constituted “remnants of the Iraqi Army, foreign fighters, criminals, [and] political enemies.”11 Often, the “Ali Baba” were indistinguishable from innocent civilians and, more often than not, were “dressed in civilian clothes.”12 One particularly lethal group of paramilitary fighters constituted the Fedayeen—

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8Ibid.
9Ibid., 21.
11 Ibid., 65.
Saddam loyalists, who often rode in “civilian trucks” with “markings on the side.” The Fedayeen would occasionally use taxis to infiltrate “[U.S.] lines and observe [movements] or to ferry troops” behind American positions. Taxis and civilian vehicles also served to evacuate their wounded in the midst of battle, and also, to perpetrate car bombings against American targets.

Likewise, the generation of soldiers who fought in Vietnam encountered their own “Ali Baba,” only at that time these enemies were known by the pejorative “Vietcong,” a catch-all term short for Vietnamese Communist. While soldiers in Vietnam faced a formidable opponent in the North Vietnamese Army, it was common for skirmishes to be fought against elements of the Vietcong. Vietcong forces presented an ambiguous target, allowing for no set “criterion by which to distinguish a pretty Vietnamese girl from a deadly enemy.” The Vietcong were adept at ensnaring American combat forces in traps, as Private First Class Reginald Edwards recalls:

The first time we thought we saw the enemy in big numbers was one of these operations by Marble Mountain. We had received fire. All of a sudden we could see people in front of us. Instead of waiting for air, we returned the fire, and you could see people fall. I went over to this dude and said, “Hey man, I saw one fall.” Then everyone started yelling, “We can see ‘em fall . . .” Come to find out it was Bravo Company. What the VC had done was [to] suck Bravo Company in front of us . . .

13 Ibid., 62.
14 Ibid., 90.
15 Ibid., 90.
16 Herring, America’s Longest War.
17 Ibid.
18 Tim O’Brien, If I Die In a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship me Home (New York: Broadway Books, 1999), 116.
Sergeant Ron Asher’s letters parallel the situation recalled by PFC Edwards, as Sgt. Asher’s platoon walked “right into” a “perfect ambush” which constituted a company of “gooks” at 5:00 a.m. in the “pitch dark.”

As outlined above, American soldiers in Iraq did not face a “well-defined” enemy such as the North Vietnamese Army. The Iraqi Army under Saddam Hussein crumbled in the beginning stages of the 2003 invasion. Further complications arose from the elusiveness of the insurgent enemy, whose ranks were bolstered each day. American soldiers, tasked to “locate, capture, and kill all noncompliant forces,”—a tactic eerily reminiscent of General William Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition during the Vietnam war—often faced difficulties due to the complexities of urban warfare. Marine and Army combat elements in Iraq often found themselves “flanked on both sides by a jumble of walled, two-story buildings” where guerilla fighters concealed themselves behind “windows, [and hid] on rooftops and in alleyways,” launching salvos of machine-gun and rocket fire on disoriented American detachments. This is evidenced by examples of combat in the city of Nasiriyah. Elements of Task Force Tarawa, originating out of Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, became utterly helpless while pinned down by “Iraqis dressed in civilian clothes” concealed in buildings on flanks and viciously firing “AK

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22 Wright, Generation Kill; and Rieckhoff, Chasing Ghosts.
23 Rieckhoff, Chasing Ghosts, 47; and Herring, America’s Longest War. General William Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition instructed small contingents of American soldiers to launch forays into the jungle. These micro-operations were designed to interdict and annihilate similarly constituted contingents of Vietcong and NVA regulars. Unfortunately, due to the jungle environment, the lack of accurate intelligence, and the skillful ability of the enemy to avoid ambushes, and to, in turn, counter-attack American forces without the risk of sustaining severe casualties, the strategy of attrition was eventually scrapped.
24 Wright, Generation Kill, 1.
rifles, machine guns, and [Rocket-Propelled Grenades].” In another situation, members of Lt.
Rieckhoff’s squad were forced to search “the halls and rooms of [a] medical complex, flushing
out shooters from inside closets and from behind dying patients.” It was also often hard for
soldiers to discern the impact of engagements on enemy strength, especially when combatants
“melted away” as quickly as they appeared.

Similarly, combat forces in Vietnam engaged in pitched battles daily against elements of
the Vietcong, often in a confusing and frustrating environment. The majority of combat in
Vietnam was not fought in an urban setting as it was in Iraq. As Specialist Richard Ford notes,
“before the Tet Offensive, all the fighting was in the jungles.” In general, U.S. forces
encountered Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army elements in the midst of a tropical jungle
environment. The usual assignments sent “small American units” probing for “the hidden
enemy in a manner comparable to the Pacific island campaigns of World War II.” Soldiers
sometimes found themselves struggling through “grass eight to fifteen feet high, so thick as to
cut visibility to one yard,” and meanwhile, there were “all around . . . men possessing guns
trying to kill you.” Soldiers recalled finding it extremely difficult to locate enemy combatants
in the “impenetrable jungle[s]” of Vietnam, constantly being “tangled in ‘wait-a-minute
vines.’” Captain Joseph Anderson recalled that sometimes the squad could maneuver easily,
and other times the squad “moved 25 yards in one hour, cuttin’ and choppin’ [a] way through

25 Ibid., 80.
26 Rieckhoff, Chasing Ghosts, 62.
28 Wallace, Bloods, 46.
29 Herring, America’s Longest War, 186.
30 Spector, After Tet, 47.
31 Bernard Edelman, ed., Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam (New York: W. W. Norton & Company,
2002, 61; and Spector, After Tet, 47.
the bamboo every step.” Furthermore, Warrant Officer Richard Elliot argued that the jungle was “so thick” that it made it difficult to fire accurately at Vietcong running “from 20 feet” ahead. While the jungle tended to create a claustrophobic setting for combat, the elusiveness of the enemy proved equally frustrating to soldiers.

The combination of the environment and the enemy’s skillful maneuvering often obstructed American forces from acquiring accurate body counts. Colonel James Lincoln expressed frustration that, “it [was] unusual to catch [Vietcong] in an ambush,” and even when in the midst of combat, it was “difficult to tell” if the enemy had sustained any casualties. Col. Lincoln attributed this to the fact that the Vietcong “never leave dead or wounded after a battle.” Specialist Robert Mountain notes a firefight between U.S. and VC forces in which his men “supposedly killed four [VC]” but had nothing “to show for it” other than “some blood.” Moreover, George Herring opines that, “the sheer destructiveness of combat made it difficult to produce an accurate count of enemy killed in action.”

While soldiers in Iraq dealt with “a million rooftops and windows” from which enemy insurgents could appear, the U.S. ground forces in Vietnam had to deal with the infamous tunnel systems constructed by the National Liberation Front and Vietcong regulars. The tunnel systems were of a complex nature, usually consisting of “thousands of miles of tunnels that connected villages and linked staging areas to battle zones.”

32 Wallace, Bloods, 223.
33 Adler, Letters from Vietnam, 54.
34 Ibid., 36–7.
36 Wallace, Bloods, 177.
37 Herring, America’s Longest War, 187.
38 Rieckhoff, Chasing Ghosts, 153.
39 (Herring, American’s Longest War, 188.)
Downs recollected a skirmish with the Vietcong, who effectively utilized concealment in tunnel networks:

   My platoon sergeant crossed with his element and gave chase on the right flank. I took control of the left flank, and we took [the VC] under fire. We hit one, but he dropped into a tunnel and we lost sight of him. Meanwhile, on the right flank, a VC popped out of a hole and threw a grenade . . . up the right side of the hill . . . we found tunnels, spider holes, [and] straw mats.”

By dint of effective camouflage in the dense jungle and utilizing tunnel systems, the Vietcong were able to engage American soldiers with little to no risk of sustaining casualties. Sergeant George Carver recollected “a couple of shots . . . whizzing past” his vehicle while in Vietcong territory, and expressed his wishes that “these little SOBs would come out in the open.” As Sergeant George Bassett commented, it was extremely difficult for U.S. forces to pin down and annihilate or force the surrender of NVA or Vietcong units, primarily due to their knowledge of the terrain.

Soldiers in both wars were under constant threat of sniper fire, although it had the tendency to be inaccurate. 2nd Lt. Fred Downs recalled that a man could not “feel safe anywhere” in Vietnam due to numerous threats, snipers among them. Tim O’Brien remembered a particular mission in which “the company took continuous sniper fire, and it intensified into a sharp thunder” when they reached a bridge crossing the Diem Diem River. Philip Caputo characterized part of the Vietnam combat experience as “an invisible enemy”

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40 Edelman, Dear America, 68–9.
41 Adler, Letters from Vietnam, 29.
42 Ibid., 28.
43 Edelman, Dear America, 70.
44 O’Brien, If I Die in a Combat Zone, 118.
shooting at soldiers from “distant tree lines.” Specialist Robert Mountain argued that when on patrols, the Vietcong would “fire [sniper rounds] every once in a while to let you know they were still there,” which served to keep U.S. forces on edge.

While also facing the constant threat of snipers, soldiers in Iraq encountered various other forms of ambush. Marines in Nasiriyah dubbed one of the city’s roads “sniper alley,” but it was noted that before long that term applied to “any street in an Iraqi town.” Lt. Paul Rieckhoff recalled that in cities a “sniper shot could come from anywhere at any time.” Thomas Ricks notes a study that indicated in September 2004 that “every U.S. vehicle that moved near Fallujah was shot at” by snipers, men with AK rifles, or men with Rocket-Propelled Grenades (RPGs). Hardly ameliorating the condition of infantry, Rocket-Propelled Grenade launchers had nearly replaced the sniper rifle in Fallujah, and insurgents were capable of taking accurate shots from roof-tops and windows and in one case crippled armor elements of the 1st Infantry Division in a “kilometer-long” gauntlet of ambushes. As a consequence, the “constant threat of violence” which constituted snipers’ ambushes from rooftops and buildings, among other things, led to the tendency for soldiers, as in Vietnam, to become “dangerously violent.” Lt. Rieckhoff found “so many reasons . . . to be angry,” including the enemy’s notorious use of

46 Wallace, Bloods, 178.
47 Wright, Generation Kill, 110.
48 Rieckhoff, Chasing Ghosts, 153.
50 Ibid., 396–7.
51 Rieckhoff, Chasing Ghosts, 159.
“Improvised Explosive Devices, a lack of [accurate intelligence], the uncertainty [of combat], and the heat.”

The threat of booby-traps, mines, and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) presents the most obvious consistency between combat in Vietnam and Iraq. For instance, U.S. soldiers occupying cities in Iraq after the 2003 invasions dealt with a variety of deadly hazards ranging from the usual to the bizarre. Possibly the most ostentatious method of wanton violence perpetrated against U.S. soldiers during the Iraq War was a hand-gun assault. In this scenario, soldiers found themselves in the midst of a crowd of friendly Iraqis. Then emerging from the group, an assassin would casually approach the soldier, pull out a hand-gun and shoot the man in the face. Lt. Paul Rieckhoff underscored the brutality of these acts, opining that “any man shaking your right hand would shoot you in the face with the gun in his left.” Another crude booby-trap was a series of “cables” dropped from rooftops, designed to “decapitate or knock down the Humvee’s turret gunner.”

In areas designated as mine fields, soldiers contend that the “most obvious thing to booby-trap [is] a helmet lying on the ground.”

Sophisticated mines and explosive devices were commonly found in the streets and cities of Iraq. Staff Sergeant David Bellavia recalled his squad stumbling across a Building Improvised Explosive Device (BIED). The bomb was designed for the sole purpose of transforming an entire platoon of men into “mist adrift on the desert winds.” Constructed impediments compounded problems of urban warfare. Often, once traversable streets would

\[^{52}\text{Ibid.}, 98.\]
\[^{53}\text{Ibid.}, 158–9.\]
\[^{54}\text{Ibid.}, 159.\]
\[^{55}\text{(Wright, } \textit{Generation Kill}, 4.\]
\[^{56}\text{Bellavia, } \textit{House to House}, 122.\]
transform into “heavily barricaded and IED-strewn” impasses to halt the movement of armor and funnel dismounted infantry into “kill zones.” A common counter-insurgency tactic in Iraq was house-to-house warfare. This involved rooting out insurgents from the inside of various buildings, which were, on occasion, riddled with mazes of “trip wires” and other devices, in one instance containing exploding “pineapple grenades” and C4 explosive charges. Roads, such as the “Airport highway” in Baghdad constituted a gauntlet of mines and RPG attacks, thus compelling American units to avoid the route entirely.

Improvised bombings were perpetrated on both American soldiers and administrative buildings. These attacks were usually delivered by a suicide bomber, by parking a car packed full of explosives in proximity of troop concentrations, or planting mines on road-ways traversed by American convoys. On February 8, 2006, “two bombs” exploded in a Baghdad market killing five Iraqi civilians and injuring numerous Iraqi police officers, while at the same time separate explosions cost the lives of “four marines.” Highlighting specific examples of IED incidents and car-bombings leads one to believe that these occurrences may have been sporadic at most. However, quite the contrary seems to have occurred, as upon examining statistics for July of 2006, the New York Times reported that “roadside bombs” totaled “2,625 explosive devices” of which “1,666 exploded,” and “959 were discovered before they went off.” In January of 2006, the total number of bombs “exploded or . . . found” tallied 1,454. In

58 Ibid., 121–4.
59 Ibid., 127.
60 Rieckhoff, Chasing Ghosts, 127.
fact, of 42 U.S. soldiers killed in action during January 2006 and 38 killed during July 2006, “explosive devices accounted for slightly more than half of the total deaths.”64 In June of 2007, American soldiers were still dying as a result of these devices. Of fourteen men killed in action during June, thirteen had been the result of IEDs.65 During 2007, bombings in the Diyala Province did not assuage the plight of American servicemen, as five soldiers were killed in March, and nine other American servicemen were killed in August by suicide bombers and IEDs.66 Eruptions of insurgent violence in the Diyala Province failed to taper off in 2008; six soldiers were killed in January as the result of a Building-IED, and bombs were also discovered in neighboring buildings.67

American soldiers were also tasked with deflecting anti-Christian violence, which pervaded Iraq after the 2003 invasion. Ned Parker asserts that militants targeted the Christian minority, which constituted 800,000 in 2003, because of Western views and “their small numbers.”68 On January 30, 2006, bombs erupted outside Christian churches in Baghdad, killing three and wounding the Vatican envoy, among others.69 In 2008, the Catholic Archbishop of Mosul, Paulos Faraj Rahno, was kidnapped outside his church on February 29, and tortured to

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63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
death. Reports in 2008 showed that between October 2004 and October 2008, “insurgents had attacked 219 Shiite mosques, 94 Sunni mosques and 41 [Christian] churches;” meanwhile, the total number of civilian dead from all hostile aggression had reached “more than 85,000.”

Throughout the occupation, the Christian minority residing in Mosul was forced to evacuate in the face of threats and acts of violence, such as “homemade bombs” being detonated at the Miskinta Church in October 2008. On the whole, the use of explosives against American soldiers and Christians illuminates another variation of counter-insurgency strategy in Iraq as opposed to Vietnam: attempts at the interdiction of IEDs and other traps.

Soldiers in Vietnam sometimes experienced anxiety as a result of booby-traps and minefields. The threat of mines and traps in Vietnam was so ubiquitous that nearly every veteran memoir contains some description of the havoc wreaked by these devices. In light of these threats, Sergeant George Carver suggested that “each twig . . . broken [in the jungle] or the stillness of the animals means that danger may be near,” which caused him to admit he was “a bundle of nerves.” Tim O’Brien recalled a particularly deadly patrol in Vietnam that resulted in “a booby-trapped artillery round” blowing up “two popular soldiers” and launching them into a “hedgerow.” If a soldier survived a mine explosion, he was usually left mangled physically and tormented mentally by indelible reminiscences of the event. Tim O’Brien described the fear of mines as looking “ahead a few paces and wonder[ing] what your legs [would]

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70 Ibid.
73 Adler, Letters from Vietnam, 30.
74 O’Brien, If I Die in a Combat Zone, 119.
resemble if there [was] more to the Earth in that spot than silicates and nitrogen.”75 The most feared mine was the “Bouncing Betty,” which leaped “out of its nest in the earth, and when [reaching] its apex . . . explodes.”76 In fact, O’Brien recalled various mines, each with a nickname, all of which left deep impressions on the psyche of soldiers in Vietnam. Among the lethal arsenal were “M-14 anti-personnel mines, nicknamed the toe-popper,” the “booby-trapped grenade,” “Soviet TMB and the Chinese antitank mines” that were “known to have shredded more than one soldier,” and the “directional-fragmentation mine,” otherwise known as the claymore mine.77

These devices took their toll on American forces in Vietnam. In one instance, an operation took “almost 30 percent . . . casualties” from only mines and booby-traps.78 The Vietcong were regarded as “experts in the use of explosives,” particularly when using them to hinder the movement of U.S. units.79 Specialist Salvador Gonzalez recalled “a 250IB bomb that a plane had dropped and didn’t explode . . . so the NVA wired it up” to detonate as American forces approached.80 In some instances, soldiers would be forced to choose between routes replete with thick foliage, notorious for ambushes, or trails commonly laced with “booby-trapped” mines.81 Private First Class Robert Wilson recalled during one operation that the Vietcong set off “10 mines . . . spread out on the trail” causing “every man in the patrol [to be] hit.”82 Colonel Richard St. John argued that booby-traps were the Vietcong’s most effective

75 Ibid., 123.
76 Ibid., 122.
77 Ibid., 124–6.
78 Spector, After Tet, 54.
79 Ibid., 201.
80 Edelman, Dear America, 59.
81 Wallace, Bloods, 223.
82 Edelman, Dear America, 67.
means for inflicting “nickel [and] dime” casualties, meaning two or three wounded or dead at a
time.\textsuperscript{83} Mines had a damaging psychological effect on soldiers in Vietnam, and many came to
harbor a “bitter hatred for the local villagers,” whom soldiers believed knew of the traps.\textsuperscript{84}

The psychological consequences of combat in Iraq and Vietnam also bear some striking
similarities. For example, soldiers in each war felt the psychological ramifications of constant
vulnerability to enemy attack. Lt. Colonel Dave Grossman, a military psychologist, opines that
the “constant anticipation of being attacked can have a profoundly toxic effect, especially . . .
over months and years.”\textsuperscript{85} Grossman also suggests that the most psychologically strenuous
aspect of combat pertains to one’s awareness that “at any time you can go over the edge to
personal death and destruction.”\textsuperscript{86} Indeed, Tim O’Brien commented that combat in Vietnam
always left the soldier feeling “perfectly exposed” with “nowhere to hide” from the enemy.\textsuperscript{87}
Similarly, Staff Sergeant David Bellavia summarized his experience in the town of Diyala as
miserable, under constant threat of “IEDs on the local highway, the Mahdi militia around Muqdadiyah, and the house-to-house fights downtown,” which combined to position soldiers
in an atmosphere of perpetual unpredictability.\textsuperscript{88} Likewise, Philip Caputo partially blamed the
pressure of combat in Vietnam for the arousal of a “psychopathic violence in men of seemingly
normal impulses.”\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{83} Adler, \textit{Letters from Vietnam}, 75.
\textsuperscript{84} Spector, \textit{After Tet}, 201–2.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 273.
\textsuperscript{87} O’Brien, \textit{If I Die in a Combat Zone}, 110.
\textsuperscript{88} Bellavia, \textit{House to House}, 26.
\textsuperscript{89} McMahon, \textit{Major Problems}, 241.
Working in opposition to any efforts of ameliorating the privations of soldiers in both wars were the harsh climates they fought in. In Vietnam, soldiers were forced to “live in mud and rain” and to deal with the terrors of nighttime combat in a stygian jungle occupied by a clandestine enemy.\footnote{Edelman, \textit{Dear America}, 60–1.} O’Brien constantly remained on edge, because even when “the day was quiet and hot,” the “bushes [could] erupt.”\footnote{O’Brien, \textit{If I Die in a Combat Zone}, 117.} Likewise, soldiers in Iraq had to carefully monitor windows and rooftops in cities, and still, “many skirmishes . . . [would] begin in confusion.”\footnote{Rieckhoff, \textit{Chasing Ghosts}, 94.} Americans in Iraq found themselves “humping,” or marching, with over 60 pounds of gear while enduring “120-degree temperatures with one . . . bottle of water.”\footnote{Ibid., 65.} One could argue that the environment in which soldiers in each war fought appears dissimilar. Iraq constitutes an arid desert and urban landscape, while Vietnam is primarily a tropical jungle environment. These differences notwithstanding, both environments equally encumbered soldiers. In both wars, the enemy remained elusive—“insurgents and civilians . . . indistinguishable” from one another, leading to confusion and frustration.\footnote{Ibid., 120.} Irrespective of the conflict, American infantry occupied a country in which the population gradually turned against them.\footnote{Spector, \textit{After Tet}; Herring, \textit{American’s Longest War}; Rieckhoff \textit{Chasing Ghosts}; and Wright, \textit{Generation Kill}.}

In light of these observations, to what extent can the issues faced by American forces in Vietnam offer insight towards an understanding of Iraq and the current engagements in Afghanistan? It would be suspect to argue that the Vietnam experience offered a solution for the unconventional warfare the U.S. faced in Iraq. As George Herring opines, “each historical situation is unique, moreover, and to extract lessons from one and apply them indiscriminately
to another and very different event is at best misleading.” Furthermore, despite similarities in the combat experience of each war, the motives, objectives, and cohesion of the enemy was rather different. As Carpenter suggests, the enemy insurgency in Iraq constituted a conglomeration of entities from diverse nationalities and socio-cultural backgrounds, often at odds with one another, and holding ambiguous objectives to counter the American occupation.

Regardless of these differences and cautionary suggestions against applying the lessons of Vietnam to Iraq, one can tease out some minor connections. For example, the Vietnam War was essentially a war waged by an unconventional enemy who used tactics designed to weaken, not destroy, the American army both physically and psychologically. Herring argues that many politicians and military tacticians after Vietnam suggested that, “the [U.S.] military should have adapted to the unconventional war in which it found itself and shaped an appropriate counterinsurgency strategy.” General Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition directly impacted the nature of the operations in which U.S. ground forces were engaged, with the main objective of these missions being to “mount aggressive ‘Search and Destroy’ operations against the VietCong and their NVA comrades.” This plan was complemented by the utilization of defended enclaves from which soldiers could deploy into the jungle on assignment.

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96 Herring, America’s Longest War, 356.
98 Herring, America’s Longest War, 350.
100 Ibid.
General Westmoreland’s aims tended to be justified through reports of body counts, and the necessity to destroy the Vietcong’s capacity to wage war. Colin Powell recalls that body counts “became a macabre statistical competition” which often led to inflated and exaggerated numbers.101 The strategy lacked sufficient organization to effectively win over civilians, and did not allow for advantageous ground to be permanently occupied by U.S. soldiers. Therefore, infantry would contest an area only to abandon it and allow the enemy the privilege to reoccupy the ground. Another consequence was that soldiers were sent on assignments to engage the enemy, which more often than not entailed walking into ambushes and booby-traps. Robert Conner depicts the realities of “search and destroy” tactics when he recalls often walking through the jungle on “hot summer days . . . [praying] . . . Please God, don’t let us run into any VietCong.”102 The strategy also failed to consider furnishing protection for the civilian population, which rendered the small villages and hamlets safe-zones for the depredations of insurgents. The Vietcong adapted quickly to the predictable attrition strategy, primarily by attacking U.S. contingents in small numbers and melting “into the jungles before an effective counterstrike could be organized.”103 Private First Class Reginald Edwards opines that Americans in Vietnam should have started from “one tip of South Vietnam” and worked its way “to the top,” rooting out all VC along the way.104 While Specialist Harold Bryant asserts that “America should have won the war,” he identifies the common argument that soldiers were not “free . . . to fight.” Instead of doing monotonous search and destroy missions, which

104 Wallace, Bloods, 10.
constituted no meaningful conclusion to the war, Bryant agreed with PFC Edwards by asserting that U.S. soldiers should have been put “shoulder to shoulder” and marched from Saigon “all the way up to the DMZ,” making one clean sweep of the country.105

The lesson to be learned from Vietnam, whether it applies wholly to the Iraq situation or not, is that a clear strategy should have been adopted to deal with unconventional guerilla warfare. Marching soldiers around aimlessly in order to hunt for an elusive enemy runs the risk of causing psychological and physical exhaustion. As some veterans noted, the problem with Vietnam was that most soldiers experienced, as Westmoreland ably phrased it, a “limited war, fought with limited means, for limited objectives.”106 The threat of the enemy in Iraq was largely unconventional, and could not be prosecuted with the same means as World War II and Korea, with the focus being on body-counts and the victories consisting of “blitzkrieg-style warfare against other states.”107 The problem, as Thomas Ricks pronounced it, was that U.S. strategy in Iraq ignored the fundamental lessons of the Vietnam conflict—including the ability to counter “protracted ground combat, especially of an irregular or unconventional nature.”108 Regardless of whether President George W. Bush and his generals had successfully won the major battles, the real victory would come when the U.S. could effectively respond to an insurgency, as well as pacify the indigenous population. Ricks notes the conversation that retired Army Colonel Harry Summers, Jr. recalled having with a North Vietnamese General after the Vietnam War:

You know, you never defeated [the U.S.] on the battlefield,” Summers said.

105 Ibid., 28.
107 Herring, America’s Longest War, 350; and Ricks, Fiasco, 132.
108 Ricks, Fiasco, 132.
The North Vietnamese officer considered this assertion for a moment, and then responded, “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.” Hanoi’s center of gravity had not been on the battlefield.\textsuperscript{109}

One can argue that the overall strategy is crucial for influencing the combat experience of soldiers on the ground. American military strategists in Iraq should have adopted one of the crucial lessons from Vietnam, “that American power, however great, [has] distinct limits.”\textsuperscript{110}

The military doctrine espoused during the Iraq War could not be fundamentally based on kill-ratios and battles won. Although battles can be decisive in some respects, the most important understanding to be wrought from the Vietnam experience is the importance of an effective, solid counter-insurgency response that would assist the soldiers operating in the midst of car bombings, mines, booby-traps, and enemies indiscernible from civilians.

On the whole, the combat experience of soldiers in Vietnam and Iraq convey numerous similarities. Although the men-at-arms and the technology utilized by soldiers differed considerably between wars, the raw nature of combat remained the same. Americans in Vietnam faced an enemy that was often indistinguishable from civilian populations. The Vietcong and NVA were adept at evading American contingents, particularly when outnumbered. However, if it was so desired, both of these forces could engage numerically superior American platoons and companies from the jungle foliage without sustaining severe casualties. American servicemen in Iraq faced a similar threat during the insurgency. While the combatant forces did not constitute a united front, the motley paramilitary forces posed challenges to the ponderous American convoys negotiating narrow alleyways, city streets, and back roads. Insurgents in Iraq camouflaged themselves in civilian clothes, therefore possessing

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{110} Herring, America’s Longest War, 352.
the ability to meld into their environment. In Vietnam, American soldiers were more likely to stumble into Vietcong ambushes than to pre-emptively strike the enemy. The Vietcong’s uncanny ability to utilize dense foliage, tunnel systems, and the cover of night compounded problems faced by American “search and destroy” detachments. Similarly, in Iraq, insurgents could utilize the plethora of windows, doors, or rooftops to their advantage. Thus, American convoys and platoons often patrolled occupied villages and cities until receiving enemy fire.

The covert operations employed by the enemy in both wars identify one paradox of fighting a guerilla enemy. Although both a jungle and an urban setting afford American units adequate cover, the ubiquitous nature of the enemy stifles any modicum of comfort. Whether by dint of snipers, grenadiers, sappers, or mines, American units in both wars often suffered casualties without the ability to inflict sufficient damage to the enemy. Furthermore, one has identified that as a consequence of the guerilla tactics employed by the enemy in Vietnam, the ability to accurately tally enemy casualties was impeded. While the cumbersome climate in each war hampered the effectiveness of soldiers, the pervasive utilization of deadly anti-personnel devices in the form of mines, IEDS, and car bombs posed an equally acute threat to soldiers in each war. Finally, the plight of soldiers was hardly ameliorated by the intense psychological repercussions endured after months of combat. Soldiers in both Iraq and Vietnam became a “bundle of nerves” as a result of the motley threats they countenanced on each patrol. This aspect of combat in Iraq is best evidenced in the assassination of American soldiers at point-blank range by disguised insurgents. Overall, one can argue that despite objections raised to comparing the Vietnam and Iraq war, it is justifiable to suggest that the combat experiences of American soldiers in each war strongly parallel one another.