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No question mark needed.

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Saigon 2009

Afghanistan is today's Vietnam. No question mark needed.

BY THOMAS H. JOHNSON, M. CHRIS MASON

AUGUST 20, 2009

For those who say that comparing the current war in Afghanistan to the Vietnam War is taking things too far, here's a reality check: It's not taking things far enough. From the origins of these North-South conflicts to the role of insurgents and the pointlessness of this week's Afghan presidential elections, it's impossible to ignore the similarities between these wars. The places and faces may have changed but the enemy is old and familiar. The sooner the United States recognizes this, the sooner it can stop making the same mistakes in Afghanistan.

Even at first glance the structural parallels alone are sobering. Both Vietnam and Afghanistan (prior to the U.S. engagement there) had surprisingly defeated a European power in a guerrilla war that lasted a decade, followed by a largely north-south civil war which lasted another decade. Insurgents in both countries enjoyed the advantage of a long, trackless, and unclosable border and sanctuary beyond it, where they maintained absolute political control. Both were land wars in Asia with logistics lines more than 9,000 miles long and extremely harsh terrain with few roads, which nullified U.S. advantages in ground mobility and artillery. Other key contributing factors bear a striking resemblance: Almost exactly 80 percent of the population of both countries was rural, and literacy hovered around 10 percent.

In both countries, the United States sought to create an indigenous army modeled in its own image, based on U.S. army organization charts. With the ARVN in South Vietnam and the ANA in today's Afghanistan, assignment of personnel as combat advisors and mentors was the absolute lowest priority. And in both wars, the U.S. military grossly misled the American people about the size of the indigenous force over a protracted period. In Afghanistan, for example, the U.S. military touts 91,000 ANA soldiers as "trained and equipped," knowing full well that barely 39,000 are still in the ranks and present for duty.

The United States consistently and profoundly misunderstood the nature of the enemy it was fighting in each circumstance. In Vietnam, the United States insisted on fighting a war against communism, while the enemy was fighting a war of national reunification. In Afghanistan, the United States still insists on fighting a secular counterinsurgency, while the enemy is fighting a jihad. The intersection of how insurgencies end and how jihads end is nil. It's hard to defeat an enemy you don't understand, and in Afghanistan, as in Vietnam, this fight is being played out in a different war.

This is but the tip of the iceberg of a long list of remarkable parallels. What's really startling are the deeper strategic connections. The United States lost the war in Vietnam, historical revisionism notwithstanding, because of a fatal nexus of political and military failure, and the exact same thing is happening in Afghanistan. As Andrew Krepinevich noted many years ago, the army failed in Vietnam because it insisted on fighting a war of maneuver to "find, fix, and destroy" the enemy (with what became known as "search and destroy missions") instead of protecting the people in the villages. Today these tactics are called "sweep and clear missions," but they are in essence the same thing — clearing tiny patches of ground for short periods in a big country in hopes of killing enough enemy to make him quit. But its manpower pool was not North Vietnam's Achilles heel and neither is it the Taliban's. Almost exactly the same percentage of personnel in Afghanistan has rural reconstruction as its primary mission (the Provincial Reconstruction Teams) as had "pacification" (today's "nation-building") as their primary mission in Vietnam, about 4 percent. The other 96 percent is engaged in chasing illiterate teenage boys with guns around the countryside, exactly what the enemy wants us to do.

Meanwhile the political failure in Kabul is Saigon *déjà vu*. A government that is seen as legitimate by 85 or 90 percent of the population is considered the *sine qua non* of success by counterinsurgency experts. After the Diem coup, this was never possible in Vietnam, as one incompetent and utterly corrupt government succeeded another. None was legitimate in the eyes of the people. Contemporary descriptions of the various Saigon governments read almost exactly like descriptions of the Karzai government today. Notwithstanding all the fanfare over this week's presidential voting in Afghanistan, the Kabul government will never be legitimate either, because democracy is not a source of legitimacy of governance in Afghanistan and it never has been. Legitimacy in Afghanistan over the last thousand years has come exclusively from dynastic and religious sources. The fatal blunder of the United States in eliminating a ceremonial Afghan monarchy was Afghanistan's Diem Coup: afterwards, there was little possibility of establishing a legitimate, secular national government.

It doesn't matter who wins the August elections for president in Afghanistan: he will be illegitimate *because* he is elected. We have apparently learned nothing from Vietnam.

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