

Background

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Is Iraq Another Vietnam? Not for U.S. Troop Levels

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As the global war on terrorism enters its fifth year and American troops continue to fight and die abroad, there is a growing tendency to frame the discussion about troop deployments in the context of wars past, particularly the Vietnam conflict (1965–1973). Such comparisons, while natural, are more likely than not to produce flawed analysis. Each war is unique, and any comparison to other wars invariably suffers from oversimplification. With respect to troop deployments and casualties, comparing the Iraq War with the Vietnam conflict will demonstrate more differences than similarities.

Simply put, there are far fewer U.S. troops in Iraq today than there were in Vietnam in the late 1960s, and there are far fewer casualties. Second, troop levels are more stable in Iraq. Third, the duration of deployments cannot be compared because U.S. engagement with Iraq has been shorter, and the Iraq conflict is open-ended. Overall, American strategy in Iraq is less reliant on military muscle and more focused on the political and economic aspects of fighting a counterinsurgency. Focusing on political and economic development is the superior strategy, but success will require patience and endurance.

Troop Deployments Then and Now

In Vietnam, the United States employed a flawed strategy referred to as “graduated pressure.” The idea behind this was that increasing levels of military force, applied incrementally, could ultimately push the North Vietnamese to some abstract breaking point, achieving

Talking Points

- There are far fewer U.S. troops in Iraq today than there were in Vietnam in the late 1960s, by a 5:1 ratio, and there are far fewer casualties. The overall number of troops abroad is lower by a 3:1 ratio.
- While troop levels have held steady in Iraq for four years, Congress has shifted from calling for more troops to calling for fewer, and it is likely that U.S. troop levels in Iraq will decline as the war enters its fifth year.
- Although all wars are dangerous and troops endure many hardships, the argument that Iraq is especially deadly is not supported by the data, which may actually describe an overemphasis on force protection at the expense of cultural engagement.
- Despite political pressure, the U.S. effort in Iraq places far less emphasis on numbers of troops. There has been a greater focus on the political aspect of the counterinsurgency in Iraq than there was in Vietnam.

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victory for the U.S. and South Vietnam. The strategy focused on minimizing costs rather than winning the war, relied on faulty assumptions about the enemy's psychology, and, most of all, offered no real solutions about how to defeat the Communists other than essentially throwing more troops at the problem.¹

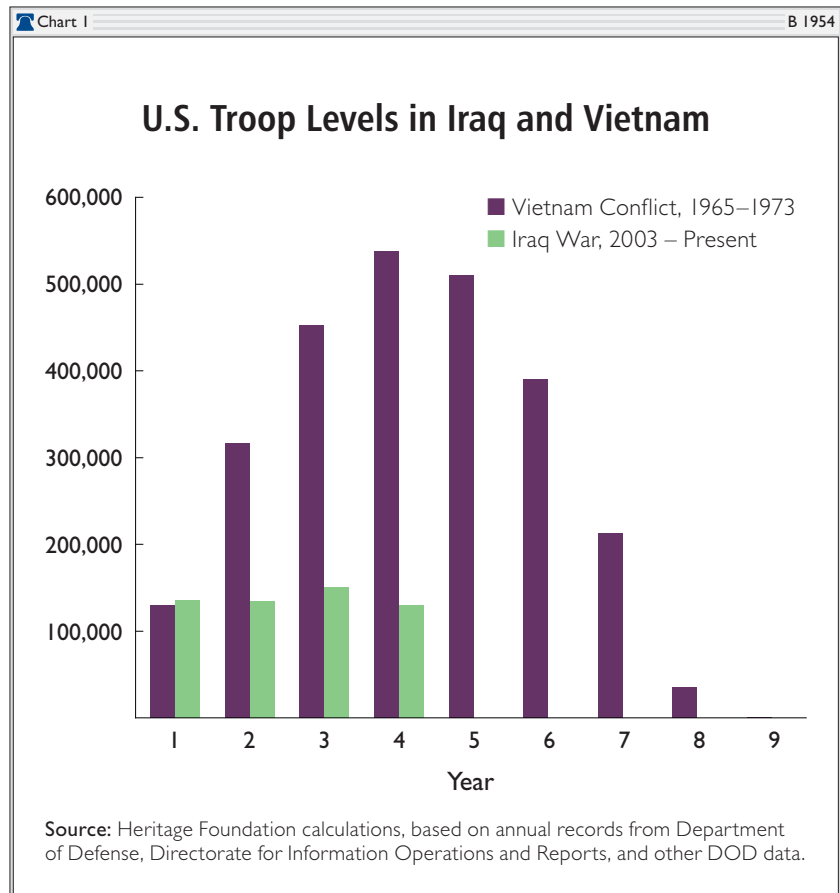
By contrast, U.S. troop levels in Iraq have remained relatively constant for four years. Throughout the conflict, there have been occasional fluctuations in the number of troops, particularly to provide better security for the Iraqi elections, yet annual levels have held steady at roughly 130,000.

During the Vietnam conflict, U.S. troop strength increased dramatically during the first four years, growing by 100,000 extra troops per year and peaking in 1968 at 537,377.² In contrast, around the time of the January 2005 Iraqi elections, the number of U.S. troops participating in Operation Iraqi Freedom reached its peak at approximately 159,000.³ During the third year of the Vietnam conflict (1967), the number of U.S. troops stationed there was 451,752—more than three times the number of troops stationed in Iraq today.⁴ (See Chart 1.)

Additionally, America's military is much smaller today than it was during Vietnam. In 1967, the total military force, active and reserve components combined, was just over 3.4 million. Almost 30 percent of the total number of U.S. troops were

stationed overseas, compared to 27 percent in 2005—similar percentages of vastly different-sized militaries.

Although the operational tempo as a result of the war on terrorism places great stress on the troops and their families, the numbers show that the current situation is not unusual in a time of war. The strain has been greatest on the National Guard and Reserves, but that is in large part because organizational changes in the Department of Defense that were prompted by the Vietnam conflict place a



1. H. R. McMaster, "Graduated Pressure: President Johnson and the Joint Chiefs," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Autumn/Winter 1999–2000, pp. 83–89, at www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/jfq_pubs/1723.pdf (July 10, 2006).
2. U.S. Department of Defense, "Deployment of Military Personnel by Country as of 30 September 1968," at www.dior.whs.mil/mmid/military/history/hst0968.xls (July 5, 2006).
3. Estimate based on U.S. Department of Defense, "U.S. Troops in Iraq Decrease to Last Summer's Level," January 25, 2006, at www.defenselink.mil/news/Jan2006/20060125_4008.html (July 5, 2006).
4. U.S. Department of Defense, "Deployment of Military Personnel by Country as of 30 September 1967," at www.dior.whs.mil/mmid/military/history/hst0967.xls (July 5, 2006).

much greater reliance on the Guard and Reserves today than was the case in Vietnam.

Troop Levels and Casualties

Over 2,500 U.S. service personnel have been killed in Iraq. These deaths are both heroic and tragic, but the total is dwarfed by the number of fatal casualties in the Vietnam conflict, which topped 58,000 by the time the last U.S. troops withdrew.⁵ While the war in Iraq certainly presents challenges, the bloodshed has not reached the same level. A report by the U.S. Army's Strategic Studies Institute comparing the Iraq and Vietnam wars concludes that from 1965 to 1973 an average of 134 American military personnel were killed in Vietnam every week.⁶ In contrast, the bloodiest month in Iraq saw fewer deaths of U.S. troops when 126 soldiers died in both April and November of 2004.⁷ That the average week in Vietnam was deadlier than the worst month in Iraq is a triumph of the force protection efforts of the Pentagon. Yet it is even more a symbol of a significantly smaller engagement.

As a percentage of the total number of troops deployed, the numbers of U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq and Vietnam are comparable. A deployment of 8.7 million U.S. troops in Vietnam, relative to 58,000 fatalities, yields a ratio of seven-tenths of 1 percent. In comparison, the Iraq figures to date are approximately 500,000 deployments and 2,500 fatalities, a ratio of five-tenths of 1 percent.⁸

What This Means for Americans

Iraq is not Vietnam. The war in Iraq, some 40 years after the Vietnam conflict, is different both

quantitatively and qualitatively. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the ranks of the U.S. military were filled with draftees; now they are filled exclusively with volunteers. In the 1960s, policymakers focused on body counts of the enemy; now they focus on the deaths of our own troops.

Both of these measures miss the point. What should matter to Americans is the mission to secure freedom abroad, because that is why our troops join and serve. However, troop numbers do inform us and dispel some conventional myths.

First, although troop levels have held steady in Iraq for four years, the political winds in Congress have shifted from calling for more troops to calling for fewer troops. It is likely that U.S. troop levels in Iraq will decline as the war enters its fifth year.

Second, by a ratio of nearly 3:1, there are fewer U.S. troops stationed overseas today than there were during the Vietnam conflict, even though the percentage of troops abroad compared to the total force is similar. This shows that the American military's footprint is smaller today, contrary to the myth of a new imperial posture.

Third, Iraq is not a meat grinder, nor is it more deadly than Vietnam. The number of U.S. troop deaths as a proportion of the total number to have served in Iraq is comparable to what it was in Vietnam. Though all wars are dangerous and troops endure many hardships, the argument that Iraq is especially deadly is not supported by the data. The data may, ironically, describe an overemphasis on force protection at the expense of cultural engagement.

5. According to the Department of Defense, the total number of U.S. service personnel killed in Vietnam is 58,209. See U.S. Department of Defense, "Principal Wars in Which the United States Participated: U.S. Military Personnel Serving and Casualties," at www.dior.whs.mil/mmid/casualty/WCPRINCIPAL.pdf (July 5, 2006).
6. Jeffrey Record and W. Andrew Terrill, "Iraq and Vietnam: Differences, Similarities, and Insights," U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute, May 2004, pp. 11–12, at www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/00367.pdf (July 5, 2006).
7. See U.S. Department of Defense, "Global War on Terrorism—Operation Iraqi Freedom [Casualties] By Month, March 19, 2003 Through July 1, 2006," at <http://siadapp.dior.whs.mil/personnel/CASUALTY/OIF-Total-by-month.pdf> (July 10, 2006).
8. Calculation made by the authors based on Department of Defense statistics. For the casualty figures and the number of troops that served in Vietnam, see U.S. Department of Defense, "Principal Wars in Which the United States Participated: U.S. Military Personnel Serving and Casualties." For figures on the number of troops to have served in Iraq, see Tim Kane, "Global U.S. Troop Deployment, 1950–2005," Heritage Foundation *Center for Data Analysis Report* No. CDA06–02, May 24, 2006, at www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/cda06-02.cfm. For casualty figures from the Iraq War, see U.S. Department of Defense, "Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) U.S. Casualty Status, Fatalities as of: July 5, 2006," at www.defenselink.mil/news/casualty.pdf (July 5, 2006).

Fourth, despite political pressure, the U.S. effort in Iraq places far less emphasis on numbers of troops. Even though there have been mistakes along the way, there has been a greater focus on the political aspect of the counterinsurgency in Iraq than there was in Vietnam.

Conclusion

The most important thing for Americans to remember about the Iraq War is that the vast majority of U.S. military personnel are serving admirably. Sadly, more than 2,500 have been killed, but they have rid the world of a murderous dictatorship that was determined to acquire weap-

ons of mass destruction;⁹ they have killed and captured thousands of terrorists; and they have helped a fledgling democracy to beat the odds and secure roots in the Middle East. They have done all this in the face of great adversity and in a restrained manner that should make Americans proud.

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9. See *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the Director of Central Intelligence on Iraq's WMD* (informally called the Duelfer Report), September 30, 2004, at www.cia.gov/cia/reports/iraq_wmd_2004/chap1.html (July 5, 2006). In its section on Regime Strategic Intent, the report discusses Saddam's WMD aspirations.