

Nation & World

By Kenneth T. Walsh

At the White House, they call it the “V” word. Vietnam. It is the historical parallel that the Bush administration dreads most, because of fears that comparisons with the bitter, bloody Southeast Asian conflict will cast even more doubt on the conduct of the war in Iraq today. “Entirely different situations.” White House Press Secretary Tony Snow told *U.S. News*.

But the idea that Iraq increasingly resembles Vietnam in some important ways appears to be gaining

credibility among historians, pundits, and, most important, the public. While 50 percent of Americans think the United States will avoid another Vietnam—which was far more costly in terms of human life and military spending—40 percent think the United States is “heading for the same kind of involvement in Iraq as it had in the Vietnam War,” according to a *Washington Post*/ABC News poll taken in mid-October. President Bush fueled the debate last month when he agreed that the current spike in Iraqi violence reminded him of the Tet offensive in 1968. That’s when attacks across Vietnam seemed to under-

TWO TEXANS

Lyndon Johnson was undone by Vietnam. George



mine President Lyndon Johnson's claims that there was light at the end of the tunnel. Bush conceded that, in a similar manner, Iraqi insurgents may be trying to break America's will today.

The comparisons will only intensify as Bush prepares to visit Vietnam for a high-profile economics conference next week and as frustrations with the course of the war in Iraq grow. "People see Iraq as an echo of the experience of Vietnam," says historian Robert Dallek, biographer of President Johnson, who escalated the Vietnam War in the mid-

TRIPS. Left, Lyndon Johnson pinning medals on the troops at Cam Ranh Bay in October 1966. Above, George Bush during a surprise Thanksgiving visit to Baghdad in November 2003

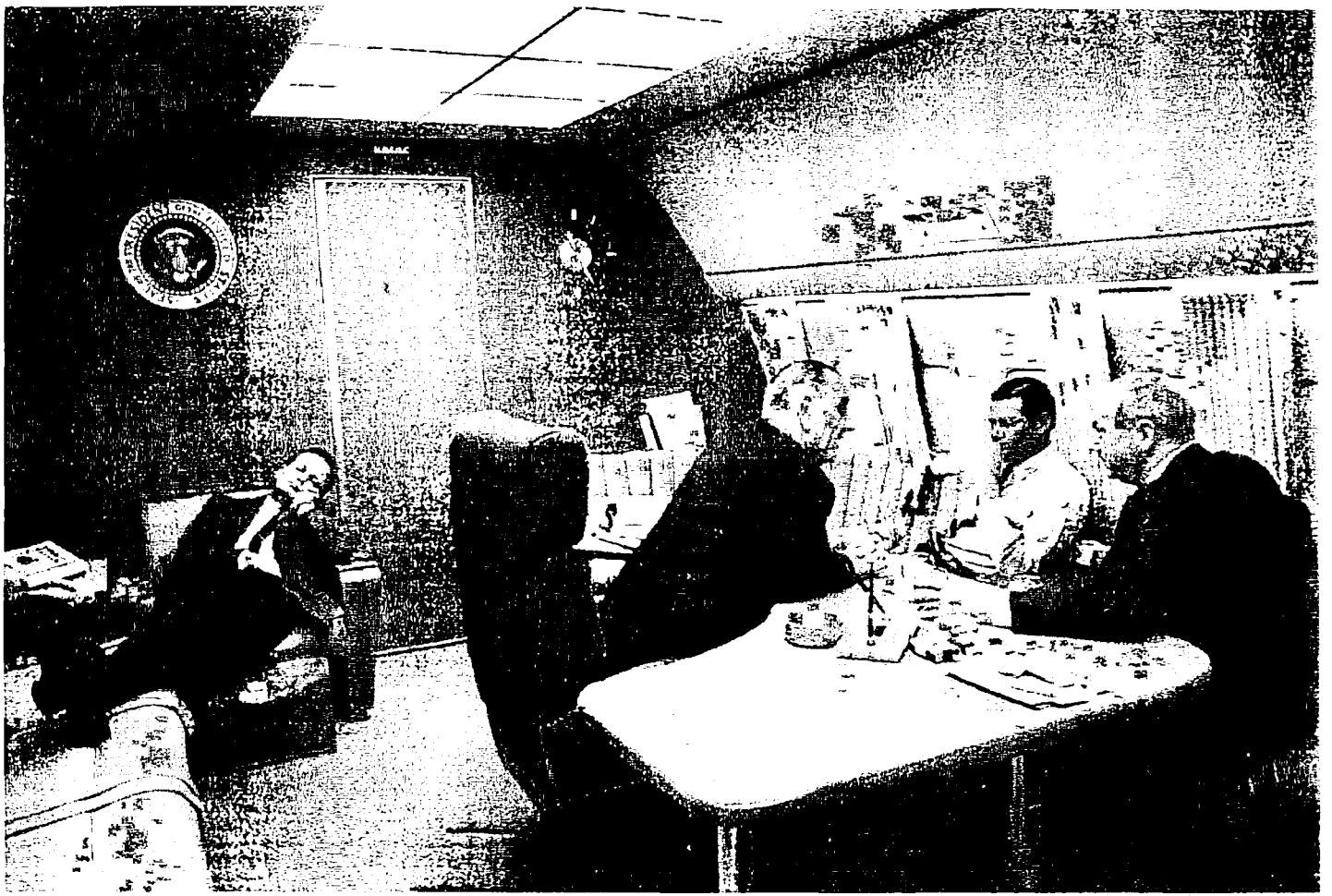
and late 1960s. "We got trapped there in a quagmire. And today, there is a sense once again that, like Vietnam, we are caught in a

trap of our own making, and there is no way out."

Such assessments are vigorously challenged by President Bush and his senior aides. The war in Iraq, they say, is being won, contrary to media reports, and the administration has an effective strategy to eventually turn security over to the democratically elected Iraqi government. White House counselor Dan Bartlett conceded that Americans are frustrated, but he said

INTROUBLE

Bush is mired in Iraq. Are the comparisons fair?



that's mostly because "they want to know we can win." And Bush is confident of victory, Bartlett told *U.S. News*.

But those arguments are being aggressively challenged by the critics, some of whom cite eerie parallels with Vietnam. Johnson and, later, President Richard Nixon said they would turn over security to the South Vietnamese, and the plan failed.

It is also true that in each case, America's commander in chief immersed the nation in a faraway conflict for reasons that turned out to be misleading or just plain wrong. In each case, the cost in lives and treasure—and the strength and tenacity of the opposition—exceeded the government's initial estimates. In each case, as opposition mounted at home and abroad, the exit strategy seemed unclear. And in each case, a president who initially sought to focus on domestic issues found his other priorities shunted aside.

Vietnam "engulfed" the Johnson presidency, as Iraq is threatening to do to Bush's, says Boston University historian Julian Zelizer. And as the going got tougher, a "feeling of helplessness" eroded each president's popularity. Bush's approval rating today stands at only 34 percent, largely because of Iraq, just about

BRAIN TRUSTS. Johnson, on Air Force One in June 1967, with (from left) Press Secretary Bill Moyers, McNamara, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Below, Bush with Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney

where it was for Johnson in August 1968.

There are many differences between the two wars.

of course. Today, there is no military draft, which intensified opposition to the Vietnam War. The level of casualties was much higher in Vietnam, where often some 500 American troops died every month. In contrast, 105 U.S. troops died in Iraq in October, the highest monthly total in a year. Vietnam was more a true civil war, with north divided from south, where Iraq is far more complex, inflamed by ethnic strife complicated by a grab bag of variously motivated insurgents.

And yet the parallels seem to be a growing part of the national debate on Iraq and could help influence what happens there next.



THE ROOTS OF WAR

Both Johnson and Bush, two tough-talking Texans, offered justifications for war that turned out to be tragically flawed. LBJ used an alleged confrontation between U.S. and North Vietnamese forces in the Gulf of Tonkin to win Senate approval for a resolution authorizing him to escalate the conflict in Vietnam. LBJ argued that on the cloudy night of Aug. 4, 1964, the North Vietnamese attacked

At the White House, they call it the "V" word. Vietnam.



CARNAGE. Above, a scene from a Saigon neighborhood reduced to rubble after U.S. forces fought Viet Cong snipers there in 1968. Below, the aftermath of a car bomb in Baghdad's Karada neighborhood

two Navy destroyers, the USS Maddox and C. Turner Joy, without provocation. Johnson and other U.S. officials

either distorted or misunderstood on-scene observations from Navy personnel and intercepts of enemy communications. Whatever the reason, they made it look as if the attacks happened, when they didn't. "In truth, Hanoi's Navy was engaged in nothing that night but the salvage of two of the boats" damaged in a confrontation with the Maddox two days earlier, wrote historian Robert Hanyok in a government report that came to light last year. Similarly, Bush and his senior advisers said the regime of Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, but it didn't. Bush has blamed faulty intelligence, but the erroneous claims have badly eroded his credibility.

Both presidents saw their wars as part of a broader international struggle. Johnson believed that if Vietnam fell to the Communists, other nations would follow. Bush sees the Iraq war as a "central front" in another type of global war—a fight with an Islamic jihadism. If Iraq falls, Bush warns, the terrorists will seek to topple other regimes and, eventually, attack the United States again.



easily overcome what he called a "raggedy-ass little fourth-rate country." Massive bombing, Johnson said, would bring the North Vietnamese to their knees; it didn't. Added David Halberstam in *The Best and the Brightest*: "[T]he principals never defined either the mission or the number of troops . . . There was never a clear figure and clear definition of what the strategy would be."

Many believe Bush and his war planners have made similar blunders. The Bush team consistently underestimated the need for more U.S. troops in Iraq. Defense Secretary Don-

In 1966, as Johnson was preparing to escalate the war, he told aides that America's technological might would

ald Rumsfeld and other members of the administration initially argued that the Iraqis would welcome American forces as liberators, as Robert McNamara, another hard-charging Pentagon boss, had argued during Vietnam. Yet the struggle for Iraqi "hearts and minds," to borrow a Vietnam-era phrase, isn't exactly going real well.

ald Rumsfeld and other members of the administration initially argued that the Iraqis would welcome American forces as liberators, as Robert McNamara, another hard-charging Pentagon boss, had argued during Vietnam. Yet the struggle for Iraqi "hearts and minds," to borrow a Vietnam-era phrase, isn't exactly going real well.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT
LBJ's strategy of "limited war" prevented U.S. forces from entering North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cam-

The cost in lives and money exceeded initial estimates.

bodia and Laos, which guaranteed that the United States could never deliver a knockout blow. Bush is in a similar predicament because the opposition is so diffuse and elusive. "In both cases, we have the problem where you divert your forces to one area and occupy it, but the moment you leave, the enemy comes right back," says Rep. John Murtha, a Pennsylvania Democrat, Vietnam veteran, and critic of the Iraq war. "The other thing that is so similar and so important is that the military must use overwhelming force, much like they had to in Vietnam, to protect our people in Iraq But when you use that kind of force, you end up killing civilians on the ground, and that's when you turn the hearts and minds against you."

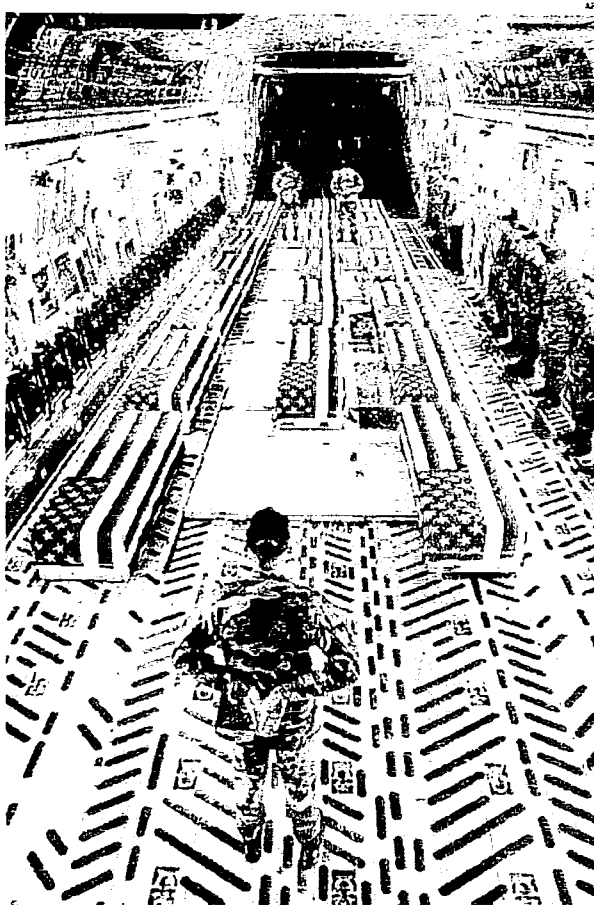
LBJ had a penchant for micromanaging—the U.S. Air Force, he once boasted, couldn't bomb an outhouse without his say-so. Bush conducts himself much differently, he told conservative columnists recently: "Remember the pictures in the Oval Office, with them sitting over the maps, picking out the targets in Vietnam? That's not happening in this war." There are also fundamental differences in how the two presidents have responded emotionally. Luci Johnson, LBJ's daughter, once recalled: "He'd be looking at the TV set and they'd be giving reports on fatalities that day, and it was as if you were looking at a man who had a knife thrust into the pit of his stomach He just physically looked like he was in agony."

Bush (who served as a stateside Air National Guard pilot during Vietnam) compartmentalizes. He weeps with the families of slain troops—with whom he meets regularly in private. But he doesn't let the emotional toll weaken his resolve. "He feels that 30, 40, 50 years from now he'll be seen to have made the right decision in Iraq," a senior adviser says.

And he still can enjoy himself. "He keeps the mood light," says an aide. On a recent trip back from campaign stops in Michigan and Iowa, the president came to the conference room on Air Force One and joined a game of gin rummy with Karl Rove and a few other staff members. With the World Series underway, the talk soon turned to baseball. Bush reminisced about his days as managing partner of the Texas Rangers and revealed an insider's knowledge of the lineups of the St. Louis Cardinals and the Detroit Tigers.

CREDIBILITY GAPS

A huge blow to the U.S. war effort in Vietnam began in the predawn hours of Jan. 31, 1968—an annual holiday



HUMAN COSTS. Flag-draped coffins of American troops killed in Iraq lined up in rows aboard a cargo plane in Dover, Del.

called Tet—when an estimated 75,000 fighters from North Vietnam and the Viet Cong launched coordinated attacks against South Vietnam's five largest cities, 100 other cities and towns, and scores of allied military bases. This came only two months after Gen. William Westmoreland, the U.S. commander in South Vietnam, declared that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were so chewed up they could barely pursue large-scale offensive operations. Tet cost the lives of 2,000 Americans and 4,000 South Vietnamese troops. Militarily, American troops scored a victory; 40,000 of the enemy were killed. But Tet called U.S. claims into question; it showed the war could go on for years—and it did.

Johnson and many military officers blamed the news media for failing to portray Tet as a military defeat for the enemy, part of their larger contention that the media undermined support for the war by focusing on bad news. Today, Bush makes similar charges against the media for focusing on the negative in Iraq. "It's maddening for us," says a senior Bush adviser.

Yet media defenders say the reporting in Iraq will be vindicated, as it was—mostly—in Vietnam, and they point to a 1989 study for the Army by historian William Hammond, entitled "The Military and the Media." It found that "what alienated the American public in both the Korean and Vietnam wars was not news coverage but casualties." When casualties jumped, public support dropped. Hammond said that despite serious shortcomings in military journalism, "the press reports were still often more accurate than the public statements of the administration in portraying the situation in Vietnam." Today, though many Americans distrust the media, they also have doubts about whether the president is talking straight. "Bush has a very big credibility problem in Iraq," historian Dallek told *U.S. News*.

THE SPECTER OF QUAGMIRE

A more fundamental problem is whether America's resolve can be maintained. Bush warns frequently that the terrorists believe Americans will tire of the Iraq war, and he urges patience. He promises to pursue the war to victory "even if it drives him down to 3 percent" approval in the polls, Snow says.

But, in an eerie harbinger of the current situation in Iraq, North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong said in 1962: "Americans do not like long, inconclusive wars—and this is

The Vietnam War "engulfed" the Johnson presidency.

going to be a long, inconclusive war. Thus, we are sure to win in the end."

Johnson and Bush gambled that the indigenous populations in Vietnam and Iraq would eventually take over the fighting and establish stable, democratic governments. That didn't happen in Vietnam, and it is proving very difficult in Iraq. Former CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite, who declared the Vietnam War a stalemate after the Tet offensive on Feb. 27, 1968, told *U.S. News*: "I suppose you [can] say there were big similarities in the long run in Vietnam because it became apparent that we were going to have to create a democracy there as well. And that isn't easy."

LBJ declined to run again in 1968 after he was challenged in the Democratic primaries by antiwar candidates Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy. Bush, of course, won his narrow re-election victory two years ago, but he's facing the possibility of considerable setbacks in this week's elections be-

cause of Iraq, which could make him a lame duck.

The Vietnam War cost the United States more than 58,000 lives and claimed hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese. It cost more than \$500 billion in today's dollars. The Iraq war has claimed more than 2,800 American lives and tens of thousands of Iraqis so far. The financial cost of the Iraq war is expected to reach \$320 billion in the coming months and is running at about \$2 billion per week—far more than initial estimates.

And consider this: After Johnson left office, in January 1969, the conflict continued for more than six years. The last U.S. combat troops didn't leave Saigon until 1973, and South Vietnam, trying to go it alone, fell to the North in April 1975, as frightened residents climbed to the rooftops, hoping, vainly, to be taken along by the fleeing Americans. ●

With Silla Brush, Angie C. Marek, and the U.S. News Library

LOOKING FOR LIGHT IN IRAQ

Behind all the violence, some signs of progress

By Linda Robinson

Samir Sumaidaie, Iraq's ambassador to the United States, is under no illusions about the difficulty of achieving peace in his country. His deputy chief of mission has lost three nephews to the violence engulfing the country—two of them killed by Shiite militia members when they went to a Baghdad hospital to retrieve wounded neighbors, the third by Sunni insurgents while visiting a cemetery to mourn one of the dead. "Extremists have a way of finding reasons to continue fighting," says the gray-haired engineer, who was ambassador to the United Nations before coming to Washington last April. But he has not lost hope.

Obscured by the reports of spiraling violence and the latest contretemps between Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and U.S. officials is the surprising fact that the Iraqi government itself has laid out a timeline for dealing with the most contentious issues tearing the country apart. Achieving a timeline is not the same thing as reaching substantive agreement on solutions, but it may provide the kickstart for a last-ditch



Residents of Baghdad's Sadr City neighborhood with images of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr

attempt to avoid fullblown civil war—and if deadlines matter, it is a measuring stick of the Iraqis' own making.

"Outlaws." Two months ago, the Political Council for National Security—which includes the prime minister, the president

"The question [is], 'What kind of Iraq do you want... a divided country...[or] a thriving country?'"

and vice presidents, the head of parliament, and their deputies—agreed on 15 items to be accomplished between September 2006 and March 2007, ending with a referendum on constitutional amendments. The timetable has already slipped by a month, but they have made progress on two key items: The parlia-

ment passed a foreign investment law last month and is debating legislation on how the oil industry will be run and profits divided among the Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish populations. Sumaidaie expects the measure to pass this month. The next item is revising the de-Baathification process that drove many former regime bureaucrats and soldiers into the insurgency rather than offering them incentives to support the new government.

By all accounts, the toughest items on the agenda are those slated for December, when a law offering amnesty to Sunni and Baathist insurgents and demobilizing militias is supposed to be passed. A U.S. defense intelligence official with long experience in Iraq seriously doubts whether Iraq's Shiite-majority government will offer a genuine olive branch to Sunni insurgents, whom