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The Analogy Quagmire

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By Dan Froomkin

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President Bush boldly entered risky rhetorical territory this morning, likening the war in Iraq to Vietnam.

It's an analogy Bush typically avoids, given how strongly Vietnam is associated in the national consciousness with the concept of quagmire -- and with its lesson about the limits of American military power.

But Bush today tried to turn the Vietnam analogy on its head, arguing that the U.S. withdrawal led to disaster there and emboldened American enemies around the globe. He even went so far as to argue that present-day terrorists like Osama bin Laden are inspired by the turning of American public opinion against the war in Vietnam.

The White House was so proud of this speech that Bush's new counselor, Ed Gillespie, took the unusual step of releasing extensive [excerpts](#) last night. Among them:

"Three decades later, there is a legitimate debate about how we got into the Vietnam War and how we left. Whatever your position in that debate, one unmistakable legacy of Vietnam is that the price of America's withdrawal was paid by millions of innocent citizens whose agonies would add to our vocabulary new terms like 'boat people,' 're-education camps,' and 'killing fields.'

"There was another price to our withdrawal from Vietnam, and we can hear it in the words of the enemy we face in today's struggle -- al-Qaeda. In an interview with a Pakistani paper after the 9/11 attacks, Bin Laden declared that 'the American people had risen against their government's war in Vietnam. They must do the same today.' . . . Here at home, some can argue our withdrawal from Vietnam carried no price to American credibility -- but the terrorists see things differently."

Bush's speech was a big hit at the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Convention in Kansas City. But it's hard to imagine that it will go over nearly as well with a wider audience -- not to mention with historians.

That's because the obvious lesson of Vietnam is not that leaving a quagmire leads to disaster, but that staying only makes things worse. (And oh yes: that we shouldn't get into them in the first place.)

The previews of today's speech allowed reporters and bloggers to get a head start on putting Bush's remarks in context.

[James Gerstenzang and Maura Reynolds](#) write in the Los Angeles Times: "Historian Robert Dallek, who has written about the comparisons of Iraq to Vietnam, accused Bush of twisting history. 'It just boggles my mind, the distortions I feel are perpetrated here by the president,' he said in a telephone interview.

"We were in Vietnam for 10 years. We dropped more bombs on Vietnam than we did in all of World War II in every theater. We lost 58,700 American lives, the second-greatest loss of lives in a foreign conflict. And we couldn't work our will,' he said.

"What is Bush suggesting? That we didn't fight hard enough, stay long enough? That's nonsense. It's a

distortion,' he continued. 'We've been in Iraq longer than we fought in World War II. It's a disaster, and this is a political attempt to lay the blame for the disaster on his opponents. But the disaster is the consequence of going in, not getting out.'

Gerstenzang and Reynolds also spoke to Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. (D-Del.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who "criticized Bush's speech, saying the president 'continues to play the American people for fools.'

"The only relevant analogy of Vietnam to Iraq is this: In Iraq, just as we did in Vietnam, we are clinging to a central government that does not and will not enjoy the support of the people,' he said."

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid issued a [statement](#): "President Bush's attempt to compare the war in Iraq to past military conflicts in East Asia ignores the fundamental difference between the two. Our nation was misled by the Bush Administration in an effort to gain support for the invasion of Iraq under false pretenses, leading to one of the worst foreign policy blunders in our history. While the President continues to stay-the-course with his failed strategy in Iraq, paid for by the taxpayers, American lives are being lost and there is still no political solution within the Iraqi government. It is time to change direction in Iraq, and Congress will again work to do so in the fall."

[David Jackson and Matt Kelley](#) write in USA Today: "Vietnam historian Stanley Karnow said Bush is reaching for historical analogies that don't track. 'Vietnam was not a bunch of sectarian groups fighting each other,' as in Iraq, Karnow said. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge toppled a U.S.-backed government.

"Does he think we should have stayed in Vietnam?' Karnow asked."

Talking Points memo blogger [Josh Marshall](#) asks: "[I]sn't this quite possibly the worst argument for his Iraq policy? . . .

"[V]irtually none of the predicted negative repercussions of our departure from Vietnam ever came to pass.

"Asia didn't go Communist. Our Asian allies didn't abandon us. Rather, the Vietnamese began to fall out with her Communist allies. With the Cold War over, in strategic terms at least, it's almost hard to remember what the whole fight was about. If anything, the clearest lesson of Vietnam would seem to be that there can be a vast hue and cry about the catastrophic effects of disengagement from a failed policy and it can turn out that none of them are true."

After one of the few other times Bush used a Vietnam analogy -- during his [official visit](#) to Vietnam last November -- [Robert Scheer](#) wrote in The Nation: "The lesson of Vietnam is not to keep pouring lives and treasure down a dark and poisonous well, but to patiently use a pragmatic mix of diplomacy and trade with even our ideological competitors.

"The United States dropped more bombs on tiny Vietnam than it unloaded on all of Europe in World War II, only hardening Vietnamese nationalist resolve. Hundreds of thousands of troops, massive defoliation of the countryside, 'free fire zones,' South Vietnamese allies, bombing the harbors . . . none of it worked. Yet, never admitting that our blundering military presence fueled the native nationalist militancy we supposedly sought to eradicate, three US Presidents -- two of them Democrats -- lied themselves into believing victory was around some mythical corner.

"While difficult for inveterate hawks to admit, the victory for normalcy in Vietnam, celebrated by Bush last week, came about not despite the US withdrawal but because of it."

What Else Bush Said

Listening to Bush today, you'd be forgiven for thinking that the war in Iraq is entirely a battle against al-Qaeda. But you'd be wrong.

Bush spoke extensively of the ideological struggle against al-Qaeda, comparing it to the enemies that this country has faced down in the past. From a White House "[Fact Sheet](#)" released this morning: "Today, The Violent Islamic Extremists Who Fight Us In Iraq Are As Certain Of Their Cause As The Nazis, Imperial Japanese, And Soviet Communists Were Of Theirs -- And They Are Destined For The Same Fate."

But ideally the media coverage of the speech will remind the public that the group called Al Qaeda in Iraq is only one of large number of players on the Iraqi battlefield, that its affinity with its namesake organization does not appear to extend much beyond a desire to end the U.S. occupation -- and that it wouldn't even exist had Bush not invaded in the first place.

As [seven soldiers](#) wrote in a New York Times op-ed on Sunday: "What soldiers call the 'battle space' remains the same . . . It is crowded with actors who do not fit neatly into boxes: Sunni extremists, Al Qaeda terrorists, Shiite militiamen, criminals and armed tribes. This situation is made more complex by the questionable loyalties and Janus-faced role of the Iraqi police and Iraqi Army, which have been trained and armed at United States taxpayers' expense."

Bush also ratcheted up his rhetorical attack on the critics of the war, going so far as to speak on behalf of the American troops in Iraq: "They have a question: Will their elected leaders in Washington pull the rug out from under them just as they are gaining momentum and changing the dynamic on the ground in Iraq?" he asked.

Is Bush right? Do the grunts see withdrawal as pulling the rug out from under them -- or as giving them a ride home?

Maliki Watch

It can be hard to keep up with this White House. Just as I was filing [yesterday's column](#) about the White House's desperate efforts to prop up Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki (despite the growing realization that his government is a failure), Bush was backpedaling on Maliki. Sort of. And then in today's speech, he was front-pedaling again.

Bush's [remarks](#) to reporters in Canada yesterday were widely interpreted as a backing away from Maliki.

[Michael A. Fletcher and Megan Greenwell](#) writes in The Washington Post: "President Bush pointedly declined Tuesday to offer a public endorsement of embattled Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, expressing his disappointment at the lack of political progress in Iraq and saying that widespread popular frustration could lead Iraqis to replace their government."

[Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Jim Rutenberg](#) write in the New York Times that "it was a striking attempt by the White House to distance itself from the Maliki government before September, when the president's troop buildup faces an intense review on Capitol Hill. . . .

"Mr. Bush is already facing skepticism within his own party over the troop buildup, and will almost certainly confront repeated attempts by Democrats to force an end to the war. So he seems to be laying the groundwork for a new message, one that says, 'We're doing our job in Iraq; don't blame us if the Iraqis aren't doing theirs.' . . .

"Experts say Mr. Bush does not appear to be trying to force Mr. Maliki out, if only because there is no obvious alternative. Rather, they say, the president's remarks are aimed at a domestic audience. Back in January, Mr. Bush sold the troop buildup to the country as a plan that would tamp down violence and

create 'political breathing space' to allow the Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds to create a unity government.

"Now Mr. Bush is admitting publicly what anyone who follows events in Iraq can plainly see: that plan is not altogether working."

All this reportage about Bush distancing himself from Maliki came despite the fact that, as The Post's Fletcher wrote in a pool report, White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe stopped by the press cabin on Air Force One yesterday afternoon "to emphasize that Bush's comments earlier in [Canada] were not to be taken as backing away from the iraqi pm."

This morning, Gerstenzang of the Los Angeles Times wrote to his colleagues that Johndroe complained about the coverage, saying "that despite WH efforts to make that support clear on Tuesday, 'that did not come through.'

"What was misreported? 'Bush backs away from Maliki; Bush is cool toward Maliki,' Johndroe said.

"Does Bush still feel Maliki is 'the right guy?' 'Yes,' Johndroe said, adding that Maliki is the PM, chosen by Iraqis. "That makes him the person we will deal with."

And in this morning's speech, Bush called Maliki "a good guy -- good man with a difficult job," and said "I support him."

Bottoms Up?

From Bush's [remarks](#) in Canada yesterday: "There are two types of political reconciliation that can take place in a new democracy: One is from the top down, and one is from the bottom up. Clearly, the Iraqi government has got to do more through its parliament to help heal the wounds of years -- having lived years under a tyrant. . . .

"There's bottom-up reconciliation taking place. It's noticeable and tangible and real, where people at the grass-roots level are sick and tired of the violence, sick and tired of the radicalism, and they want -- and they want a better life. And they're beginning to reject the extremists that have the desire to have a safe haven, for example, from which to launch further attacks on America. In other words, there's a process taking place. And the fundamental question is, will the government respond to the demands of the people? And if the government doesn't demand -- respond to the demands of the people, they will replace the government. That's up to the Iraqis to make that decision, not American politicians."

Someone, by the way, should ask the White House for some "noticeable and tangible and real" examples of "bottom-up reconciliation."

Maliki's View

[Qassim Abdul-Zahra](#) writes for the Associated Press: "Iraq's prime minister lashed out Wednesday at U.S. criticism, saying no one has the right to impose timetables on his elected government and that his country 'can find friends elsewhere.'

"Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki blamed the U.S. presidential campaign for the recent tough words about his government, from President Bush and from other U.S. politicians."

Reality Check

[Tina Susman and James Gerstenzang](#) write in the Los Angeles Times: "Despite the addition since February of 28,500 U.S. troops, mainly in Baghdad, and what [Ambassador Ryan] Crocker said was an overall decline in sectarian violence, the Shiite-led government has done little either on the legislative or social level to bring the Shiite majority and Sunni Arab minority together. None of the laws that the

White House considers key to ending sectarian violence has been enacted. Basic services such as water and electricity are spotty at best. The country's educated middle class is fleeing or being killed off.

"Since April, Maliki's government has been beset by walkouts and boycotts by various political blocs, some of which accuse his administration of being driven by sectarian interests. The most crippling walkout has involved Sunni lawmakers, whose absence means that one of Iraq's major population groups is unrepresented.

"Without strong U.S. backing, Maliki would be hard-pressed to hold his 15-month-old government together in the face of opposition from lawmakers and from a public worn down by violence and other hardships that have followed the U.S.-led invasion of March 2003."

Journalist Nir Rosen tells [Amy Goodman](#) of Democracy Now that all the arguing over Maliki is irrelevant.

"AMY GOODMAN: What do you think of [Democratic] Senator [Carl] Levin calling for the Maliki and the whole government to disband?"

"NIR ROSEN: Well, it's stupid for several reasons. First of all, the Iraqi government doesn't matter. It has no power. And it doesn't matter who you put in there. He's not going to have any power. . . . These days, you have a collection of city states: Mosul, Basra, Baghdad, Kirkuk, Irbil, Sulaymaniyah. Each one is virtually independent, and they have their own warlords and their own militias. And what happens in Baghdad makes no difference. So that's the first point.

"Second of all, who can he put in instead? What does he think he's going to put in? Allawi or some secular candidate? There was a democratic election, and the majority of Iraqis selected the sectarian Shiite group Dawa, Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution, the Sadr Movement. These are movements that are popular among the majority of Shias, who are the majority of Iraq. So it doesn't matter who you put in there. And people in the Green Zone have never had any power. Americans, whether in the government or journalists, have been focused on the Green Zone from the beginning of the war, and it's never really mattered. It's been who has power on the street, the various different militias, depending on where you are -- Sunni, Shia, tribal, religious, criminal. So it just reflects the same misunderstanding of Iraqi politics. The government doesn't do anything, doesn't provide any services, whether security, electricity, health or otherwise. Various militias control various ministries, and they use it as their fiefdoms. Ministries attack other ministries."

The Democrats

[Jonathan Weisman and Anne E. Kornblut](#) write in The Washington Post: "Democratic leaders in Congress had planned to use August recess to raise the heat on Republicans to break with President Bush on the Iraq war. Instead, Democrats have been forced to recalibrate their own message in the face of recent positive signs on the security front, increasingly focusing their criticisms on what those military gains have not achieved: reconciliation among Iraq's diverse political factions.

"And now the Democrats, along with wavering Republicans, will face an advertising blitz from Bush supporters determined to remain on offense. A new pressure group, Freedom's Watch, will unveil a month-long, \$15 million television, radio and grass-roots campaign today designed to shore up support for Bush's policies. . . .

"For people who believe in peace through strength, the cavalry is coming,' said Ari Fleischer, a former Bush White House press secretary who is helping to head Freedom's Watch. . . .

"GOP leaders have latched on to positive comments from Democrats -- often out of context -- to portray the congressional majority as splintering. Rep. Ellen O. Tauscher (D-Calif.), an Armed Services Committee member who is close to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), said many of her

colleagues learned a hard lesson from the Republican campaign.

"I don't know of anybody who isn't desperately supportive of the military,' she said. 'People want to say positive things. But it's difficult to say positive things in this environment and not have some snarky apologist for the White House turn it into some clipped phraseology that looks like support for the president's policies.'"

CIA Watch

[Joby Warrick and Walter Pincus](#) write in The Washington Post: "Former central intelligence director George J. Tenet and his top lieutenants failed to marshal sufficient resources and provide the strategic planning needed to counter the threat of terrorism in the years before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, according to a summary released yesterday of a long-secret [CIA report](#). . . .

"The report said Tenet bears 'ultimate responsibility' for the CIA's lack of a unified, strategic plan for fighting al-Qaeda. The intelligence community 'did not have a documented, comprehensive approach' to al-Qaeda, the document said, and Tenet 'did not use all of his authorities' to prepare one."

E-Mail Watch

[Pete Yost](#) writes for the Associated Press: "The Justice Department said Tuesday that records about missing White House e-mails are not subject to public disclosure, the latest effort by the Bush administration to expand the boundaries of government secrecy.

"Administration lawyers detailed the legal position in a lawsuit trying to force the White House Office of Administration to reveal what it knows about the disappearance of White House e-mails. . . .

"The office has prepared estimates that there are at least 5 million missing White House e-mails from March 2003 to October 2005, according to the lawsuit filed by Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, a private advocacy group. . . .

"The White House has said it is aware that some e-mails may not have been automatically archived on a computer server for the Executive Office of the President.

"The e-mails, the White House has said, may have been preserved on backup tapes.

"The Office of Administration is looking into whether there are e-mails not automatically archived; and once we determine whether or not there is a problem, we'll take the necessary steps to address it,' said White House spokesman Scott Stanzel.

"The first indication of a problem came in early 2006 when special counsel Patrick Fitzgerald raised the possibility that records sought in the CIA leak investigation involving the outing of Valerie Plame could be missing because of an e-mail archiving problem at the White House."

The Advance Manual

[Peter Baker](#) writes in The Washington Post that "the White House evidently leaves little to chance when it comes to protests within eyesight of the president. . . .

"A [White House manual](#) that came to light recently gives presidential advance staffers extensive instructions in the art of 'deterring potential protestors' from President Bush's public appearances around the country. . . .

"The techniques described have become familiar over the 6 1/2 years of Bush's presidency, but the manual makes it clear how organized the anti-protest policy really is. . . .

"The manual offers advance staffers and volunteers who help set up presidential events guidelines for assembling crowds. Those invited into a VIP section on or near the stage, for instance, must be 'extremely supportive of the Administration,' it says. . . .

"To counter any demonstrators who do get in, advance teams are told to create 'rally squads' of volunteers with large hand-held signs, placards or banners with 'favorable messages.' Squads should be placed in strategic locations and 'at least one squad should be 'roaming' throughout the perimeter of the event to look for potential problems,' the manual says."

The manual was turned over to the American Civil Liberties Union as part of a lawsuit filed on behalf of people ejected from Bush events. One couple, Jeffery and Nicole Rank, were handcuffed and removed from a July 4, 2004, speech on the West Virginia state Capitol grounds for wearing anti-Bush T-shirts. Two others were kicked out of a Denver rally after arriving in a car with a bumper sticker that said, "No more blood for oil."

The ACLU put the manual online in June; it was first reported by [Ann Imse](#) of the Rocky Mountain News on June 28.

The manual says: "If the demonstrators are yelling, rally squads can begin and lead supportive chants to drown out the protestors (USA!,USA!,USA!). As a last resort, security should remove the demonstrators from the event site. The rally squads can include, but are not limited to, college/young republican organizations, local athletic teams, and fraternities/sororities."

The Ranks were on [MSNBC](#) Monday night. Asked if they ever got to see the president that day, Nicole Rank replied: "No. We were removed probably a couple of hours before he ever even spoke. And it wasn't until after our arrest, our detention and finally being released, when we were reeling from the incident, that we saw his speech being replayed in the hotel lobby where we were staying on a big-screen television, and -- and just kind of choked to hear him [speak](#) about free speech and freedom of expression."

Conspiracy Theory Watch

Bush and his fellow North American leaders had to spend some of their time yesterday swatting down a conspiracy theory that has spread through right-wing Web sites like [WorldNetDaily](#).

[Jon Ward](#) writes in the Washington Times: "President Bush and the leaders of Canada and Mexico yesterday ridiculed the notion that their countries are conspiring to create a regional supergovernment similar to the European Union. . . .

"The rumors of an EU-style plot, which started out on obscure Web sites and talk radio, have since been picked up by CNN anchor Lou Dobbs and have now gained traction among some of the House Republicans who successfully derailed Mr. Bush's immigration-reform plan. . . .

"Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper joked that a superhighway rumored to be in the works linking the three countries could also be 'interplanetary.'"

Here's [Dobbs](#) in October: "These three countries moving ahead their governments without authorization from the American people, without congressional approval, this is straightforward an attack on national sovereignty as there could be, outside of war."

From Bush's [remarks](#): "I'm amused by the difference between what actually takes place in the meetings and what some are trying to say takes place. It's quite comical, actually, when you realize the difference between reality and what some people are talking on TV about."

Live Online

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Crawford Watch

[John Hendren](#) of ABC News has a lighthearted look at the White House press corps in Crawford -- and how they pass the time. (Hans Nichols of Bloomberg writes poetry.)


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[Dwane Powell](#) on the effects of the Bush presidency.

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