

ECHOES OF THE PAST

MORE THAN 30 YEARS AFTER THE VIETNAM WAR, AMERICANS ONCE AGAIN ARE TILTING AT WINDMILLS TO CONFIRM OUR PRECONCEPTIONS ABOUT DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM.

BY DELL F. PENDERGRAST

“**A**dviser Pendergrast,” the young Vietnamese school teacher said, “Americans have suffered great casualties, but you must understand that we Vietnamese have lost many more supporting you.” Thanh and I were nursing midafternoon beers in the welcome shade of an outdoor café patio along a busy provincial highway. It was early 1971, and I was well into my second year as a civilian adviser in Tay Ninh province, which bordered Cambodia about 100 kilometers north of Saigon.

“But Mr. Thanh,” I reacted with some incredulity, “we’re supporting a free and democratic Vietnam. That really is why we are here.” A steady stream of U.S. and Vietnamese army trucks raced by, suffocating us with clouds of diesel exhaust.

Thanh smiled indulgently. Outside the classroom, he was a prominent local activist with the Dai Viet, a non-communist nationalist movement. “Independence has always been precious to us. But in Vietnam, my friend, the words freedom and democracy have a very different meaning. This is your war and not ours.”

Thanh and most Vietnamese did not share or understand America’s fixation on democracy and nationbuilding.

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Indeed, in many ways, Americans and Vietnamese did not speak the same language even when using English.

More than 30 years later, Americans once again are tilting at windmills in the Third World to confirm our preconceptions about democracy and freedom. Our mission in Iraq is even more fragile and shaky than in Vietnam during the early 1970s. Bombings and mayhem proliferate on Iraqi streets; Americans hide in fortress-like compounds and military camps; public services are haphazard in what many believe is an emerging “failed state;” the country is fragmented by sectarian and tribal rivalries.

During my 1970-1971 tenure in Vietnam, the war unfolded mainly in remote rural and border regions. The daily lives of most Vietnamese were generally unaffected. I routinely traveled unescorted across a serene Vietnamese countryside, something unimaginable by any American in Iraq today.

Filters or Blinders?

Both in Iraq and Vietnam, Americans have been blinded by faith in exceptionalism: the tendency to view the world through the filter of our own institutions and values, even when surveying societies with vastly different histories and cultures.

This attitude is rooted in America’s origins and character. We are a nation united by ideas and not by the ethnicity, religion, culture or tribal traditions dominating other countries. The unifying ideology of the United States — a shared commitment to representative government and individual freedom — succeeded and attracted millions of immigrants seeking to share this dream. We passionately

want to believe that our experience is a template for societies trapped in repression or tradition.

As a result, Americans have difficulty accepting that religion, ethnic affiliation, family or other traditional institutions often control human behavior more than does allegiance to Western-style democracy. We also tend to forget that without the underlying values of democratic governance — compromise, tolerance, respect for majority rule and minority rights, freedom of speech and conscience — elections are meaningless, and the American model withers into irrelevance.

Our zealous commitment, however, often controls and defines reality — at least in the short term. “Those villages all voted, Dell,” my boss, a jut-jawed, ramrod-straight Army colonel declared. “Nothing else matters.” After all, the United States had invested heavily in proving that democracy worked in Vietnamese villages.

“Sir, to be honest, some of those councils were selected ahead of time by village elders. The elections were just window-dressing to appease Saigon.”

The colonel roared in response to his civilian subordinate’s unwelcome candor. “I don’t care! We reported 100-percent election success. That’s what Saigon and Washington wanted, and we gave it to them.”

From the White House to the working level in districts and provinces, a relentless propaganda of success ruled our decade-long Vietnam experience. Prefiguring our current commitment in Iraq, the crusade in Southeast Asia seized on all available evidence (especially the American weakness for statistics) to validate the nationbuilding vision. But the legendary “light at the end of the tunnel” we perceived turned out to be a roaring locomotive of harsh reality headed straight for us.

Change Must Come from Within

In 2000, George Bush and his principal foreign affairs adviser, Condoleezza Rice, sharply criticized the Clinton administration’s nationbuilding efforts and rejected any U.S. role as a global policeman. The Bush administration reversed direction sharply after 9/11, however, arguing that Islamic terrorism created a new, overriding mandate to transform Middle Eastern societies. Terrorism replaced communism as the global enemy that drives, sanctions and sometimes distorts America’s worldwide mission.

Even accepting the new strategic vocation, however, does not change the practical reality we experienced in Vietnam and continue to ignore today: the United States

has limited competence and capability, especially in the short term, to transform traditional values and behavior. Our economic, political and educational programs can support modernizing, democratic trends, but the main impulse must originate in the local society, with change evolving over an extended period of time. Pretending that American resolve can accelerate or even miraculously substitute for this process only invites frustration and disillusionment. It happened in Vietnam, and history is now repeating itself in Iraq.

We Americans are idealistic, optimistic, confident. Such qualities tamed the frontier and built the most successful and enduring democracy in human history. But that same resolute determination flounders in societies with completely different cultural and historical backgrounds. In Vietnam, and now in Iraq, we have been handicapped by a paucity of diplomats and soldiers who know the language and culture.

Heavy reliance on the ubiquitous interpreters only creates another layer of potential misunderstanding and false intimacy. Without the local language — and the associated grasp of local

behavior, customs and traditions — Americans are blind men and women in dark rooms groping wildly to comprehend. As Graham Greene describes the young idealist in his classic 1955 novel, *The Quiet American*: “I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused.”

America’s newest quagmire recalls a conversation I had a few years ago with an elderly Vietnamese man at a Borders bookstore in Tyson’s Corner, Va. We were inspecting a shelf of books about Vietnam, and our common interest led to a long discussion in the store’s café. A small, frail man with a tired, resigned look on his face, Minh had been an officer in the South Vietnamese army, spent five years in a re-education camp, and then escaped to join his family in the United States.

“You Americans never understood our country.” His English was halting, heavily accented, but fluent.

“You’re right,” I agreed. “But the Vietnamese never understood the Americans either.”

Mr. Minh sipped his tea. “Perhaps. All the talk about democracy confused my people. It really did not seem to have anything to do with them. They wanted only to be left alone and survive, the way Vietnamese have done for centuries. We were just a stage for your foreign policy. It became your war and not our war. Once you gave up and left, there was no reason to fight.”

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Why should our plan to transform Iraq be any more successful than the decade-long effort to transform Vietnam?

Reality vs. Idealism

America's passion, despite the best of intentions, eventually becomes the problem, especially in a foreign society engulfed by an enormous U.S. presence. No one questions the awesome power of our armed forces, irrefutably demonstrated twice in wars with Iraq. And no one underestimates the service or the sacrifice of the professional military and their families.

But the ability to win on the battlefield should not be mistaken for the capacity to reinvent another country's social, political and cultural fundamentals. We have chased this fantasy in Vietnam and Iraq with equally disappointing and tragic results. Why should our plan to transform Iraq be any more successful than the protracted effort to transform Vietnam that cost so many lives and so much treasure?

Despite the stumbling attempts at nationbuilding, our obsession with the distinctive American model always seems to cloud our judgment about a world of many different historical and cultural backgrounds.

We tend to see the world that we want rather than the world as it is. Others simply do not define freedom and democracy in the same way that we have cultivated and worked out over 230 years.

Lamentably, that lesson from Vietnam has been lost on the highway to Baghdad. ■

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