

# In ESSENCE

REVIEWS OF ARTICLES FROM PERIODICALS AND SPECIALIZED JOURNALS HERE AND ABROAD

Foreign Policy & Defense **75** // Politics & Government **78** // Economics, Labor & Business **80** // Society **82**  
Press & Media **87** // Religion & Philosophy **87** // Science & Technology **90** // Arts & Letters **93** // Other Nations **95**

## FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

### It's Not Vietnam!

**THE SOURCE:** "Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon" by Stephen Biddle, in *Foreign Affairs*, March–April 2006.

LIKE SOME OF ITS CRITICS, THE Bush administration seems to regard Iraq as another Vietnam. Taking a leaf from the Nixon administration, it is seeking to win the hearts and minds of Iraqis while handing off more and more of the fighting to indigenous forces. But this strategy is based on a set of dangerously false Vietnam analogies, argues Stephen Biddle, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

The conflict in Iraq is not a Maoist people's war, a "struggle for good governance between a class-based insurgency claiming to represent the interests of the oppressed public and a ruling regime portrayed by the insurgents as defending entrenched privilege." It is instead a brewing "communal civil war" between groups whose loyalties are already established. In a people's war, insurgents and regime compete for the allegiance of the people, who could go either way. In such a case, a strategy like "Vietnam-

ization," by strengthening the government's claim to legitimacy, might make sense, says Biddle. "But in a communal civil war, it throws gasoline on the fire. Iraq's Sunnis perceive the 'national' army and police force as a Shiite-Kurdish militia on steroids." Yet integrating more Sunnis into the army and police would probably only make these forces less effective, more prone to internal strife and penetration by insurgents.

The administration's critics are just as wrong-headed in their Vietnam analogies, according to Biddle. Some military analysts, for example, argue that the United States is not "refighting Vietnam properly," and should abandon the early Vietnam strategy of search-and-destroy missions for the more successful later strategy of pacifying certain areas. Journalists, meanwhile, lavish praise on military officers who adopt the late Vietnam strategy of promoting local democracy initiatives and pursuing service improvements, such as getting the trash picked up, while commanders who employ the "bad" Vietnam tactic of using massive

firepower get critical coverage. And advocates of rapid withdrawal cite the old war's battle for hearts and minds in arguing the battle for Iraq has already been lost.

Biddle argues that none of the underlying "lessons" of Vietnam is relevant in Iraq. "The fight is about group survival," not ideology, good governance, or loyalty.

He believes that the buildup of Iraqi security forces "must follow a broad communal compromise, not the other way around." That would require "a constitutional deal with ironclad power-sharing arrangements protecting all parties." To achieve such a deal, Washington should exploit the insecurities of Iraq's major groups, using the prospect of a U.S.-backed Shiite-Kurdish force to compel the Sunnis to come to the negotiating table while threatening the Shiites and Kurds with an early U.S. withdrawal or even support for the Sunnis.

Biddle acknowledges the obstacles to his plan. It would be hard to sell to the American public, since it would offer no early troop withdrawal. The Iraqis might not be willing or able to settle their differences. But "whatever the prospects for peace, they would be considerably better if Washington stopped mistaking Iraq for Vietnam and started seeing it for what it really is."