



The Vietnamization of Iraq

By Maj. Jonathan Persons

On September 7, 2015, *Washington Post* published a story chronicling the failure of U.S.-backed Iraqi forces to retake the western city of Ramadi.¹ The article, along with many others on the topic, attempted to identify reasons why the Iraqi campaign against Daesh has seemingly come to a halt. Rather than laying blame on the lack of coalition airstrikes, an Iraqi-developed campaign plan, or forces to carry out a campaign plan if one even existed, one needs to look much further back in order to find the root cause of the current quagmire. Back before the winter of 2014, when Daesh took control of Falluja. Back before the last U.S. troops withdrew from Iraq at the conclusion of Operation New Dawn. To find the root cause of the current Iraqi dilemma, one needs to look back to the Nixon Administration's handling – or failure to handle, depending on one's perspective – of the conflict in Vietnam.

The Obama Administration's current strategy "to degrade and ultimately destroy the terrorist group known as [the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant]"² is reminiscent of the insights of Melvin Laird – who served as Secretary of Defense during Richard M. Nixon's first presidential term (January 22, 1969 – January 29, 1973) – as outlined in *A Strategy for Peace*.³ Laird's tenure coincided with a period of transition for the United States military, similar to the transition the military is facing today. While the U.S. has been "the main provider of security throughout the world for the past 70 years,"⁴ it has continued to do so through numerous transitions. By taking on the major role of upholding the strategic world order, the U.S. has provided other nations the ability to seek diplomatic – rather than martial -- solutions to conflicts, while also protecting the fertile ground upon which a world economy could grow and prosper. Had the U.S. not taken on the lead role of maintaining international stability, neither the European Union nor the Association for South East Asian Nations would exist. Despite whatever transitions the U.S. military might go through, allies need to be reassured that "the U.S. has both the will and the capacity to provide defense against aggression. That has been and remains the cornerstone of the system that has undergirded the liberal world order."⁵ The question faced by the Obama administration, therefore, is not should America maintain its standing in the world but, rather, how to do so while reducing stress on Federal resources. The answer can be found in good part by looking at how the Nixon administration handled a similar situation.

Presidents Nixon and Obama were both elected in the midst of unpopular, protracted wars. Both men came into office with promises of ending American involvement in said wars.⁶ Consequently, both Presidents, and their Defense Secretaries, needed to develop new strategic guidance for employment of the U.S. military once American forces had been extracted from their respective wars. Both were handed an opportunity to reshape the means by which the U.S. achieved its objectives. Secretary Laird laid out the Nixon administration's strategic guidance in *A Strategy for Peace*, while Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta first laid out the Obama administration's vision in *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*.⁷ Secretary Laird designed his strategy under President Nixon, in what would come to be known as the "Nixon Doctrine," stressed "pursuit of peace through partnership with our allies."⁸ The three guiding principles of the Nixon Doctrine were:

1. [T]he United States will keep all of its treaty commitments;
2. [The United States] shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us or of a nation whose survival we consider vital to our security; and
3. [I]n cases involving other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance when



requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But [the United States] shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense.⁹

On 3 November 1969, in a nationally broadcast speech on the Vietnam War, President Nixon announced that the above-stated principles would be applied to the on-going conflict in Vietnam through a process called “Vietnamization.”¹⁰ Based on the fact that the United States would no longer be the primary force fighting its allies’ wars, Secretary Laird believed that the president’s stated policy required a restructuring of the nation’s military capabilities.

At the time, the United States military was designed to fight two simultaneous theater-wide conflicts, a la World War II. Secretary Laird believed that deploying portions of “highly capable U.S. conventional forces, designed primarily for theater warfighting” to deal with sub-theater-level hostilities was not the best way of dealing with these types of conflicts.¹¹ Consequently, he suggested modifications to the force structure that would “provide a portion of them with an enhanced capability for brigade or task force-type operations...”¹² Secretary Laird believed such a force modification would “provide for a more flexible, self-contained Army capability, organized for quick response and to the degree possible, for self-contained operations.”¹³

Secretary Laird also believed that to be successful in dealing with sub-theater hostilities, use of these specialized elements would need to be fully integrated with “the forces of our allies, the military and economic assistance that we would visualize appropriate to provide them, and those other initiatives – diplomatic, political, and economic – which would enhance country and regional security.”¹⁴ Secretary Laird held that, in the past, the United States’ national strategy had focused too much on theater conventional warfare to the detriment of planning for sub-theater hostilities. In his view, the United States “should not subsume our sub-theater planning, either overall or for military forces, to the concept of homogeneous, sophisticated, and theater-oriented capability.”¹⁵

The strategic guidance adopted by the Nixon administration is not unlike the current administration’s strategic guidance, as published in *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*. One of the objectives in that document, for instance, is the ability to deter and defeat “aggression by an opportunistic adversary in one region even when our forces are committed to a large-scale operation elsewhere.”¹⁶ This statement is reminiscent of the doctrine, created under President Nixon, outlining that the military must be able to fight and win one-and-a-half-wars.¹⁷ Then, as now, the change in doctrine was facilitated by a need to reduce costs: Thanks to the across-the-board spending cuts implemented under sequestration, the Department of the Army will need to reduce its fighting force to 450,000 by Fiscal Year 2017.¹⁸ Consequently, the United States military will no longer be sized to fight a two-front war.

Additional similarities can be found between *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership* and President Nixon’s strategic guidance in Melvin Laird’s *Strategy for Peace: A National Security Strategy of Realistic Deterrence*. One of the more striking parallels is the fact that both documents focus on the reliance on our nation’s friends and allies to provide for more of their own defense. Comparing Secretary Laird’s statement that “[i]f Europeans are unwilling to prepare for [a conventional land war in Europe], we won’t assume the responsibility alone”, with that of Secretary Panetta, who said, “[m]ost European countries are now producers of security . . . this has created a strategic opportunity to rebalance the U.S. military investment in Europe . . .” shows that the U.S. has known for years how to reduce costs, but has been unable to obtain the contemplated savings.¹⁹

Of course, knowing how to reduce its share of the cost for the defense of Europe does not necessarily mean the U.S. would be able to extricate itself by any great measure from the defense of Europe. As President Obama noted in his April 25, 2016 *Remarks to the People of Europe*, “sometimes Europe has been complacent about its own defense.”²⁰ As a result, the European members of NATO have come to rely far too heavily on U.S. assistance. “In other words,” Alexander Mattelaer noted, “the decade-long process of hollowing out their militaries in terms of numbers, equipment and readiness levels has led to a situation wherein many European nations are incapable of self-help in an increasingly wide range of contingencies.”²¹



The similarities were highlighted even further in the national address President Obama delivered on September 11, 2014 concerning the fight against ISIL.²² Just as President Nixon's November 1969 speech on "Vietnamization"²³ announced that the United States would look to South Vietnam to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense,²⁴ so too did President Obama's speech highlight the need for the Iraqis to take the lead in the fight against ISIL when he said, "American power can make a decisive difference, but we cannot do for Iraqis what they must do for themselves, nor can we take the place of Arab partners in securing their region."²⁵

Practically speaking, there are also similarities in the criticisms of how the two policies were applied on the ground. According to the September 7, 2015 *Washington Post* article, Maj. Gen. Qasim al-Mohammadi, the top Iraqi army officer in Anbar province, the lack of coalition airstrikes is the primary reason for the lack of progress in the battle for Ramadi.²⁶ This concern echoes those raised by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in a February 1972 memo to the Secretary of Defense in which they posited that the success of Vietnamization could hinge on continued U.S. support of South Vietnam.²⁷

It should also be noted that, as with the war in Vietnam, there is no consensus on what, exactly, the U.S. military needs to do. In a May 21, 2015 commentary Anthony H. Cordesman wrote for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, he opined that the lessons of Vietnam required the U.S. military to embed "a small, but experienced team of combat leaders" with "new and weak units" of the Iraqi Army in order to provide "on-the-ground help in getting the essentials of combat operations right."²⁸ Mr. Cordesman's opinion is diametrically opposed to that of Walter Pincus, who believes that "The Vietnam experience showed that when dealing with such situations the provision of additional American personnel to 'train and assist' can easily and perhaps inevitably lead to sending more forces to do the actual fighting."²⁹

The fact that so many parallels exist between administrations separated by 40 years is a bit disconcerting. In a 2005 *Foreign Affairs* article entitled "Iraq: Learning the Lessons of Vietnam," Secretary Laird compares the two wars and comes to conclusion that – while Iraq was not Bush's Vietnam – there are definite similarities between the two conflicts.³⁰ The primary similarity for the purpose of this paper was, and is, America's insistence on going it alone. "Our pattern of fighting our battles alone or with a marginal 'coalition of the willing' contributes to the downward spiral in resources and money."³¹ America's willingness to go it alone creates an infinite loop in which alliances are neglected, which in turn undercuts our legitimacy with our allies, which ultimately results in America being forced to go it alone. As Secretary Laird wrote in 2005, "If our treaty alliances were adequately tended to and shored up – and here I include the UN – we would not have so much trouble persuading others to join us when our cause is just."³² Being able to rely on our allies would help defray the cost in resources and money America expends on force projection.

Spanish-born philosopher George Santayana once wrote that those who do not learn from the past are condemned to repeat it.³³ Yet, the similarities between the strategic environments faced by the Nixon and Obama Administrations – both not only needed to extricate the nation from unpopular wars, but they were also both required to restructure the military in the face of uncertain economic times – are so striking that Santayana's old aphorism may once again be proven correct. There are, however, significant differences. The army of North Vietnam, for instance, was a million-man strong, well-trained military that operated within a unified control and control structure. The fighting forces of Daesh, on the other hand, number in the tens of thousands and control is far from unified. Additionally, the North Vietnamese had the support of the Soviet Union and China, arguable the two most powerful nations in Asia. Conversely, Daesh receives no support from any nation-state. On the home-front, the U.S. military that fought in Vietnam was made up in large part of draftees, while participation in the U.S.'s current fighting force is completely voluntary. Clearly, the current battle in the Levant is not a repeat of the conflict in Vietnam.

A more apropos maxim has been credited to Mark Twain: "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme."



The two conflicts are dissimilar enough for the U.S. not to get caught up repeating the mistakes made in Southeast Asia, but they have enough in common to allow the U.S. to adapt the lessons learned in that earlier conflict for application in the conflict currently ongoing in Southwest Asia. Based on the similar manners in which both administrations handled these conflicts, it is clear that the insights of Melvin Laird as outlined in *A Strategy for Peace* are not only still applicable, but are actually still being applied, albeit adapted to fit the current scenario.

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