News



Vietnamese Rangers rush children to a waiting helicopter near Saigon in 1974. The scene appears in Ken Burns and Lynne Novick's documentary "The Vietnam War," which premiered on PBS Sept. 17. (CNS/courtesy AP/The Horst)



by Colman McCarthy

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @colmanmccarthy

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

October 16, 2017

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

For a large portion of those who took in the 10-part documentary by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick on the Vietnam War, the hellscape events of those years must have seemed like ancient history. The first American deaths were in 1959, the last in 1974: 58,220 in all. Total military and civilian deaths were 3.4 million.

Yet the policies and decisions fueling the American invasion of Vietnam are not at all distant: many were the same that led to the massive killing in the 2003 Iraq War, which still rages on with no end in sight.

Five similarities stand out.

• Both wars were rabidly supported by Congress. In August 1964 only two senators — Wayne Morse of Oregon and Ernest Gruening of Alaska — voted against invading Vietnam. On Sept. 14, 2001, three days after 9/11, the Senate vote to support the war whoops of George W. Bush was 98-0. In the House: 420-1. Barbara Lee of Texas stood alone.

In 1967, with the Vietnam War in full swing, Morse correctly predicted: "We're going to become guilty … of being the greatest threat to the peace of the world. It's an ugly reality and we Americans don't like to face up to it. I hate to think of the chapter of American history that's going to be written in the future in connection with our outlawry in Southeast Asia."

On Sept. 14, 2001, Barbara Lee forecasted on the House floor: "If we rush to launch a counter attack, we run too great a risk that women, children and other non-combatants will be caught in the crossfire." Since 2003, an estimated 500,000 Iraqi civilians died in war-related causes (200,888 are documented).

• In both Vietnam and Iraq, the American invaders swooped in with little awareness, much less respect, for the culture, literature, religion and history of those countries. Tim O'Brien wrote in 2002 in the Baltimore Sun: "One thing that strikes me, as a Vietnam veteran, is how our country so often satanizes its latest 'enemy,' whether it be Tojo or Ho Chi Minh or Geronimo or bin Ladin or Saddam Hussein. Those with whom we have quarrels are always 'evil,' and America is always unsullied and

righteous."

Navy bombing pilot Sen. John McCain called North Vietnam soldiers "gooks." In Iraq, those on other side were called sand-eaters, rag-heads and hadjis.

O'Brien also said, "It strikes me, too, that so few of those Americans who scream for war are actually showing up at the recruiting stations. Odd thing. Why aren't they aboard troop ships? Why aren't they dispatching their sons and daughters and wives and husbands to lead the assault on Baghdad? Why aren't these bellicose let's-go-kill-em folks putting their own bodies where their rhetoric is? It's an old disgusting story. War, war, war — but let someone else do the dying."

Advertisement



Nov. 11, 2010: George McVey, who served in World War II and is a member of Veterans for Peace, helps read the names of troops from New York state who have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. (CNS/ Catholic Courier/Mike Crupi)

• Returning veterans opposed the wars they had been waging. Former Marine recruit William (W.D.) Ehrhart wrote in The Philadelphia Inquirer July 4, 1989: "During the long and painful passage of the 13 months I fought in Vietnam, I found myself less and less confident that neither I nor my government knew what we were doing. In a world of free fire zones, 'Bouncing Betty' mines, punji pits and Zippo raids, it became increasingly difficult to believe in anything but my own survival. In a world

where helpless old men were beaten bloody and small children were included in the body count of Viet Cong dead, it became impossible to avoid the conclusion that I was fundamentally, perhaps pathologically, evil. … I paid a terrible price for the bargain I struck with the people who sent me to wage war on Vietnam: more than decade of nightmares and alcohol and self-loathing."

On Nov. 26 2004, Marine Brandon Frazier's duty was to break into houses in Fallujah and kill people. Six years later as a student at American University, he wrote in a class paper: "What I realize now, astonishingly for the first time, is that I should have questioned my orders at every instance when I was told to go somewhere to take another's life. … There is no contract with any government in any country that can justify murder of any kind."

• Pseudo patriots who prayerfully say they support the troops never manage to become troops themselves. The short list includes Donald Trump, George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Robert McNamara and Patrick Buchanan. George McGovern had this sorry ilk in mind when he spoke on the Senate floor in Sept. 2000: "Every senator in this chamber is partly responsible for sending 50,000 young Americans to an early grave. … It does not take any courage at all for a congressman, or a senator, or a president, to warp himself in the flag and say we are staying in Vietnam, because it is not our blood that is being shed."

None of the 77 senators, including John Kerry and Joe Biden, who voted in 2002 to invade Iraq volunteered to do the fighting.

• The corporate media largely supported Lyndon Johnson's 1964 call to attack North Vietnam as it did 38 years later when Bush and Congress said it was time to bring down Saddam Hussein. Television networks hired retired generals to hype the war, with no network hiring a Noam Chomsky or Howard Zinn to air the other side. On the eve of the obliteration of Baghdad, Phil Donahue was fired by MSNBC — the so-called liberal channel — for hosting anti-war guests on his prime time interview show. A leaked internal company memo said that Donahue, himself opposed to the pending invasion, was providing "a difficult public face for NBC in a time of war" and giving "a home" to anti-war voices "the same time our competitors are waving the flag at every opportunity."



David Hempfling, an Iraq veteran who was a specialist fourth class during his time in the military, stands with his family and waves during the "Welcome Home the Heroes" parade in St. Louis Jan. 28, 2012. (CNS/St. Louis Review/Lisa Johnston)

A half-dozen other similarities are there.

• Lies justified the invasions of Vietnam and Iraq. It was false that a U.S. boat was attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin on Aug. 4, 1964, by the North Vietnamese and false that Saddam Hussein harbored weapons of mass destruction.

• The U.S. fled both countries in defeat, beaten by ragtag enemy soldiers who had no navy or warplanes.

• High suicide rates have plagued Vietnam and Iraq veterans, and there has been mistreatment by the Veteran's Administration for the living.

• The U.S. supported a corrupt South Vietnam government and sold weapons to the equally corrupt Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran.

• The Pentagon's hawkish orchestrators of both wars, McNamara and Paul Wolfowitz, resigned and found posts as heads of the World Bank, going from strategizing to kill people to giving loans and grants to help them.

• Torturing captured enemy soldiers was common: tiger cages in Vietnam's Con Son Island and waterboarding and sexual abuse in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison.

And then the money: billions and up to trillions of dollars squandered. There's more to be blown on the futile 16-year Afghanistan War. Funding will continue if the Trump Pentagon gets it way. As it did every budget going back to Vietnam.

[Colman McCarthy Colman directs the Center for Teaching Peace, a Washington non-profit. He began writing for NCR in 1966, and his most recent book is *Baseball Forever*.]

Read this next: 'The Vietnam War' weaves a narrative of human calamity