Iraq: Déjà-vu All Over Again?

Yogi Berra once quipped: “it’s déjà-vu all over again.” America’s involvement in the Middle East since September 11, 2001 seems like déjà-vu. Three historical events have been consistently used to contextualize September 11th and the war in Iraq, namely, the war in Vietnam, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and Nazi aggression. The utility of these déjà-vu comparisons is doubtful at best.

9/11 and “Pearl Harbor déjà-vu”

On September 11th, 2001, pundits compared the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In what ways might the comparison be valid or invalid?

Déjà-vu:
• Both Pearl Harbor and 9/11 were surprise attacks.
• Both attacks were on American soil.
• Both attacks involved airplanes.

Not déjà-vu:
• Pearl Harbor involved an aggressive nation. There were large red dots painted on the Japanese planes: no doubt of the enemy’s identity. Al-Qaeda is as nebulous an organization as ever. It hasn’t been stopped. Its list of targets is expanding, and apparently none of its members are in Iraq.
  • Japan was a modern nation-state, using conventional armed forces in a scheme of aggressive territorial expansion. There was little doubt about how and where to respond. Al-Qaeda is highly unconventional, and it holds no territory. It even uses American territory and resources.
  • The war with Japan had clearly identifiable military objectives: take such-and-such hill, capture such-and-such island, attack such-and-such fleet. The attempt to destroy al-Qaeda cannot be easily reduced to military objectives. Al-Qaeda doesn’t hold such-and-such hill or such-and-such island, and has no fleets. The U.S can’t even find Bin Laden even though it supposedly controls the whole country.

Assessment:
Comparing 9/11 to Pearl Harbor yields very little insight, especially the kind of insight that empowers executive decision-making. The events are more dissimilar than similar. This isn’t déjà-vu, it’s a new and entirely different nightmare.

Saddam Hussein and “Adolph Hitler déjà-vu”

Soon after 9/11, the administration began a media blitz to convince Americans that Saddam Hussein had to be attacked immediately. Officials opined that Hussein was another Adolph Hitler, and non-action was simple appeasement. Proponents of this position prophesied of an apocalyptic future in which an unrestrained Saddam Hussein would attempt world domination, beginning with the Middle East.
Déjà-vu
- Hitler was an aggressive dictator. Saddam Hussein was once an aggressive dictator.

Not déjà-vu
- Hitler sought world domination, producing a holocaust in which millions of Jews, millions of Polish Catholics, thousands of Gypsies, Jehovah’s Witnesses and homosexuals were confined and brutally put to death. Hitler’s war produced as many as forty million deaths. Saddam Hussein sought to reclaim Kuwait in 1991 (which the British separated from the rest of the former Ottoman province of “Mesopotamia,” renamed “Iraq”). He failed. He built no huge death camps, gas showers or furnaces. He ruthlessly murdered all opponents, but let’s not forget: he sometimes used US-supplied weapons to do it.
- Hitler controlled the material output of an advanced industrial nation, and a world-class economy. Hitler had a massive military machine ready to realize his twisted will. Hitler successfully formed the international Axis alliance to assist him. Saddam Hussein headed a nation undone by sanctions, with very little industry and no armed forces to speak of. Iraq was internally divided by “no-fly zones,” and was isolated diplomatically. Although Hussein coveted Kuwait in 1991, there were absolutely no signs of new aggression in 2003. In fact, the government knew before the war that Hussein posed no actual threat to the region, let alone to America.

Assessment
There is no valid historical basis to compare Saddam Hussein to Adolph Hitler. No déjà-vu here.

The Current War with Iraq and “Vietnam déjà-vu”
The comparison to Vietnam is perhaps the most valid of the three, but isn’t a true match – yet.

Déjà-vu
- The Vietnam War was militarily complex compared to the Iraq war. The United States faced conventional forces (the NVA, or North Vietnamese Army), guerilla forces (The VC or Viet Cong), and terrorists (locals using small children in suicide missions to blow up soldiers with hand grenades hidden in fruit baskets). The war in Iraq is similar in that there are guerilla (insurgent) forces and terrorist attacks. Iraq has, however, no conventional army, although one wonders what may become of the native security force the United States is currently training.
- The Vietnam War produced a high number of civilian casualties. Some estimates run in the millions. Given the decade-plus duration of the Vietnam War, the current conflict in Iraq may yet produce Vietnam-like civilian casualty levels: the coalition forces have produced over 10,000 civilian deaths since the war began a little over a year ago. The current administration’s continued expansion of the rules of engagement and the use of deadly force will accelerate the growing number of civilian deaths. The war is already producing thousands of Iraqi refugees within the country as families flee the increasingly violent conflict and collect in larger cities, cultivating a growing hatred for the United States.
Not déjà-vu…yet

Perhaps the most significant difference between Vietnam and Iraq is the draft (or the lack of one). Currently the United States operates on a volunteer basis, but that may soon change. Reservists and members of the National Guard are not renewing their enlistments in significant numbers (go figure). Recruitment is down. Over time, the size of the overall U.S. force is dwindling. The “D” word (“draft”) is being used with increasing frequency in Washington. Senator Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), publicly stated on April 20, 2004 what many others fear privately: “Why shouldn't we ask all our citizens to bear some responsibility and pay some price?” (New York Post, 21APR2004) Talk of a draft is in direct contradiction to the administration’s claim that the conflict will magically end on June 30, 2004: the day when America hands over control to the new Iraqi government. Instead, talk of a draft indicates that there is no end to the conflict in sight, and we’d better prepare for a long occupation. Paul Bremer recently disclosed that Iraqi security forces will not be ready to take control on July 1, 2004.

Assessment

The case for Vietnam déjà-vu is the strongest, especially if there is a draft. However, we still have another decade or more to go before Iraq matches the duration of the Vietnam War. Besides, only 700 Americans have been killed … so far. An officer in the National Guard and veteran of Gulf War I recently confirmed growing suspicions: the number of new recruits is declining; the number of re-enlistments is dropping. If the occupation of Iraq continues, a draft is inevitable. The number of soldier suicides in Iraq is growing. Morale is dropping precipitously. Things are moving from bad to worse. Don’t our soldiers deserve better?

America’s Historical Blinders

The lessons of Vietnam, Pearl Harbor and Nazi Aggression have several common elements. They are engrained in our collective memory. They all involved death and disaster. They all are taken from US historical experience. None of these experiences has, however, cannot compare with Iraq. British historian Niall Ferguson recently stated the flaw inherent in a US-centered historical viewpoint: “Maybe, just maybe, some younger Americans are realizing that the United States has lessons to learn from something other than its own supposedly exceptional history.” (New York Times, 18APR 2004) How might an understanding of Iraq’s history point toward lessons that America must, according to Ferguson, learn or risk repeating? As with most historical lessons about the modern Middle East, the answer begins with the aftermath of World War One.

The Great Revolt of 1920: déjà-vu all over again.

World War One changed the face of the Middle East. This was especially true for Arab lands formerly part of the Ottoman Empire. The British and French drew the modern borders of Iraq soon after the Great War, creating the nation of “Iraq” by joining two distinct and often hostile regions: Assyria (the northern area around Mosul) and Babylonia (the southern region including Baghdad and Basra). “Iraqis,” resentful of British interference, rose in revolt in 1920. It lasted for several months, resulting in over 2,000 British deaths, and many more Iraqis.

Déjà-vu
• The revolt occurred in August, 1920, four months after the British turned over power to a sham indigenous government, “elected” in a caucus-style procedure similar to the system the U.S. now advocates.
  • A radical shi’ite leader incited the 1920 revolt, comparable to the present efforts of Moqtada al-Sadr.
  • Iraqis used guerilla tactics: ambushes, hit-and-run, retreat into the general populace.
  • Iraqis used terror tactics: kidnapping, hostages, mutilation of soldier’s bodies and bombings.

Not déjà-vu – yet
• Britain was the first nation to use WMDs in the Middle East when they used mustard gas against civilians in 1920. Although Donald Rumsfeld personally supervised the delivery of chemical weapons to Saddam Hussein in 1983 and 1984, and Saddam used them on Kurdish civilians, the US itself has not stooped to their use.
  • The British response was ultra-violent, employing aerial bombing and the incineration of villages (a regrettable tactic occasionally used by out-of-control American soldiers in Vietnam).

The current war and the Great Revolt of 1920 form a more genuine case of déjà-vu than events in American history. Consider the following quotes, all made in 1920 during the Great Revolt in Iraq. These quotes are taken from David Fromkin’s book “A Peace to End All Peace.”

• An American missionary residing in Iraq in 1920 told British colonial administrator Gertrude Bell: “You are flying in the face of four millennia of history if you try to draw a line around Iraq and call it a political entity! Assyria always looked to the west and east and north, and Babylonia to the south. They have never been an independent unit. You’ve got to take time to get them integrated. It must be done gradually. They have no conception of nationhood yet.”

• On 7 August 1920, The Times of London commented on the revolt, which would ultimately result in the death of over 2,000 British soldiers: “how much longer are valuable lives to be sacrificed in the vain endeavour to impose upon the Arab population an elaborate and expensive administration which they never asked for and do not want?”

• The Times, 10 August 1920, lamented that “we are spending sums in Mesopotamia…which may well reach a hundred million pounds this year” in support of what the paper termed “the foolish policy of the government in the Middle East.”

This examination of Iraq’s recent history is more insightful than comparisons to Hitler or Pearl Harbor. Its lessons are more sobering: the occupying power took a licking. If this lesson is repeated, America can expect more violence in the future.

Is it too late?
According to George Santayana, “those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it.” History itself is not repetitive, but as Santayana suggests, past mistakes are often repeated. The problem is how to identify appropriate historical lessons, and apply them intelligently.
What lessons can be gleaned from our recent experience in Iraq? More than 10,000 Iraqi civilians are dead as the result of this questionable war. That is over three times the number killed by terrorists in the World Trade Center. Don’t the people of Iraq deserve better? Hasn’t there been enough bloodshed? Insurgents have recently upped the stakes. Is America poised to turn up the military heat in response, to burn villages, to bomb towns and to poison entire populations as the British did in 1920? Or, will America avoid repeating one of the hard lessons of history?

America’s future should be more than déjà-vu all over again.