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Current Comparisons Between Iraq, Vietnam Misleading, Says IWU Historian

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Although many political commentators continue to draw comparisons between America's involvement in Vietnam and Iraq, Illinois Wesleyan history professor Paul Bushnell believes that analogies between the two conflicts are misleading and potentially catastrophic.

"These are not analogous situations now," says Bushnell. "With Iraq, there is no easy exit anywhere."

Recalling a popular prescription from the Vietnam era that suggested the United States should "declare victory and leave," Bushnell believes that an early exit from Vietnam might have saved many lives in that situation but that the result would be very different in Iraq.

"Pulling out of Vietnam earlier than we did probably would have saved tens of thousands of lives," Bushnell says. "I'm not convinced that pulling out in this case would be less destructive for Iraq."

"With many observers beginning to think seriously about the prospect of a civil war there, the result could be almost as much of a failed state as Afghanistan and maybe even a more perfect breeding ground for terrorism."

Indeed, a premature withdrawal of U.S. troops would probably increase the number of casualties, Bushnell says.

"They wouldn't be our casualties, but they would be our fault, our responsibility," he adds.

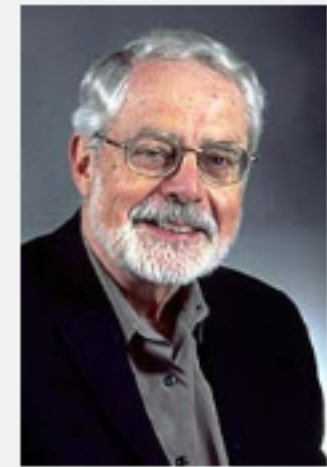
At the same time that he sees the dilemma of withdrawing from Iraq, Bushnell observes that anti-war protestors who have rallied behind Cindy Sheehan, whose son died in Iraq, represent a very different kind of movement than was active during the Vietnam era.

"One of the key differences between Iraq and Vietnam, of course, was that the burdens were being shared more in Vietnam," says Bushnell. "With the draft in place, the youth of America were very acute listeners to the news and to what was happening in Vietnam. That is not the case in Iraq."

Consequently, Bushnell says, the mother of a slain soldier stepped into a void that had existed in the anti-war movement since the fall of Baghdad. Her protest outside President Bush's Texas ranch this summer had begun to spread to other parts of the country when Hurricane Katrina hit. While the news coverage of Sheehan's protest has subsided, she continues to speak out around the country.

"Cindy Sheehan has been effective in this role not just because she lost a son but also because she sees the political framework," Bushnell says. "In the Vietnam protest era, the anti-war violence that ultimately began to be expressed created a situation that distracted from the main goal. In this instance, you have a mother who has strong symbolic value, and it is difficult for the administration to turn the attack back on her."

To talk with Professor Bushnell, contact either Jeffery G. Hanna or Ann Aubry at 309/556-3181.



Paul Bushnell