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## Comparisons Between Vietnam and Iraq Inevitable, Says IWU Historian

Jeffery Hanna  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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**CONTACT:** Jeffery G. Hanna

### *Comparisons Between Vietnam and Iraq Inevitable, Says IWU Historian*

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — No matter how hard the Bush Administration has attempted to avoid comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam, the shadow that Vietnam casts over U.S. military activity is impossible to escape, says an Illinois Wesleyan University historian.

Paul Bushnell, professor of history at Illinois Wesleyan, says that the more the situation in Iraq has deteriorated in recent months, the more similarities seem to appear between the two wars.

"The Bush administration kept warning people not to make this comparison [between Iraq and Vietnam] because they wanted to avoid a defeatist attitude and they certainly did not want the word 'quagmire' to come up," notes Bushnell.

Using Vietnam as a point of comparison is due, in part, to the fact that memories of that war remain vivid for many Americans. "It's not like trying to recall World War II," Bushnell says.

Like Vietnam, the U.S. military has superior firepower in Iraq but is now dealing with an enemy who is almost invisible. "The guerrilla war that we fought in Vietnam is similar in some aspects to what we see now in Iraq," says Bushnell. "The Iraqi insurgents melt into the civilian population, and we continue to underestimate them and their sheer willpower, as was true in Vietnam."

Ever since Vietnam, the government's ability to convince the American public to accept casualties has become a central factor in the development of military strategy.

"As long as the public has been in essential agreement with President Bush's interpretation of Iraq, it has been willing to accept these losses, seeing them as justifiable parts of a mission against Saddam Hussein and as a worthwhile investment in our life and fortunes," Bushnell says.

The prisoner-abuse scandals will test the public's willingness to make that investment, says Bushnell. "Now that our moral superiority, at least as we have conceived it, has been undercut both by the indication of mistreatment of prisoners and by the somewhat indiscriminate killing of Iraqi civilians, I think that the public's support is less certain," he says.

Some have compared the Abu Ghraib prison abuse with the My Lai Massacre in its potential impact on public opinion. Bushnell says that in terms of the magnitude of the atrocities, there is no comparison between the killing of 400 women, children, and old men at My Lai to what has been reported about the prisoner abuse in Iraq.

"However, the prisoner-abuse story does undermine our moral claim to be replacing the atrocities of a dictatorial and rapacious regime with, presumably, a democratic spirit," he says.

Bushnell adds that the decision to use Abu Ghraib as a prison was questionable in the first place since it had been used by Saddam Hussein to incarcerate his enemies and torture his victims.

"It's a little like using one of Saddam's palaces as the U.S. headquarters there," he said. "I think it shows insensitivity to the importance of symbols."

To interview Professor Bushnell, contact Jeffery G. Hanna at 309-556-3181.