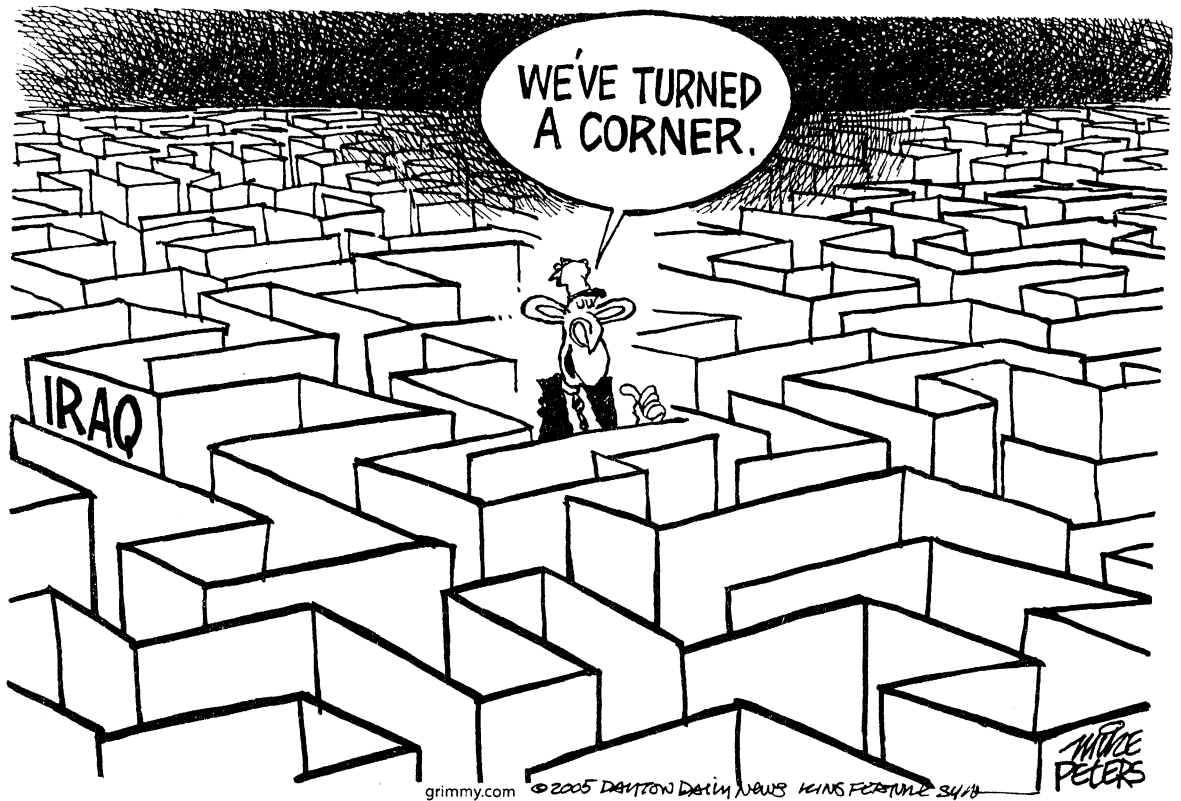


## Commentary

Mike Peters DAYTON DAILY NEWS



Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

# One election doesn't mean victory in Iraq

Despite coming of age in the 1960s and seeing the Vietnam War's effect on our nation, I have been suspicious of the parallels being drawn between Iraq and Vietnam — even though I have used them. The '60s bred skepticism about more than the motives of presidents and secretaries of defense.

But so many pundits have been so euphoric about the recent Iraqi elections that I feel a kind of '60s déjà vu, and it has removed most of my hesitation about drawing comparisons between the two conflicts.

On Sept. 4, 1967, an article in the *New York Times* proclaimed, "U.S. Encouraged by Vietnam Vote." It has been making the rounds on e-mail. Reading it might sober you up enough to wonder why so many people are celebrating the recent election in Iraq as a vindication of U.S. foreign policy.

The Iraqi election proves we can use our overwhelming military force to shut down a country for three days and make things peaceful enough so that a deeply divided people can cast votes for one day. It has symbolic value. It demonstrates that Iraqis have courage. But the real election results, as in Vietnam, are probably a decade or so away.

It is no fun to be sober when everyone else is as high as a kite, but here is some historical coffee.

You might just wonder whether the good times are really rolling in Iraq and whether, as the party-thrasher-in-chief has suggested, we can move the whole big bash next door to Syria or Iran. You might just wonder who will pay the tab in dollars and lives. Here is the *New York Times* article from 1967:

"United States officials were surprised and heartened today at the size of the turnout in South Vietnam's presidential election despite a Vietcong terrorist campaign to disrupt the voting. According to reports from Saigon, 83 percent of the 5.85 million registered voters cast their ballots yesterday. Many of them risked reprisal threatened by the Vietcong.

"The size of the popular vote and the inability of the Vietcong to destroy the election machinery were the two salient facts in a preliminary assessment of the national election. . . .

"A successful election has long been seen as the keystone in President Johnson's policy of encouraging the growth of constitutional processes in South Vietnam. . . .

"The hope here is that the new government will be able to maneuver with a confidence and legitimacy long lacking in South Vietnamese politics."

It is easy to tick off the parallels between Vietnam in '67 and Iraq in '05: recent dictatorships; deep ethnic and religious divisions; zealous national and extra-national "insurgency" forces; and a U.S. military force unable to quell terrorism for more than brief periods. In both nations, elections were hailed as first steps toward building democratic institutions where none had existed.

There are more similarities. Military expenditures in Afghanistan and Iraq eventually will top \$300 billion, more than half of the total cost of the Vietnam War in adjusted dollars. President Bush's "march for freedom" is moving fast. Even without marching to Iraq's neighbors, it will match our Vietnamese "war of freedom" within three years.

Then there are the false claims used to justify both wars. North Vietnamese General Giap and former U.S. Secretary

of Defense Robert McNamara have admitted that the attack on U.S. naval craft in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964 never occurred. Nevertheless, it led Congress to authorize Johnson "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." We repelled and repelled for more than a decade.

Meanwhile, the official Iraq Survey Group has ended its search for the weapons of mass destruction that were used as a false pretext for invading Iraq. Its official report to Congress will read, according to the *Washington Post*: "Any chemical and biological weapons Iraq possessed had been destroyed in 1991, and no WMD program had even been reconstituted."

But Bush already has his own Gulf-of-Tonkin-style authority to continue to use terrible force and to waste American and foreign lives.

There are differences between the conflicts, of course. A few years into the Vietnam War, McNamara made sure any interested American could know that the intensive bombing of North Vietnam was costing \$6.60 for every dollar in inflicted damage. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld doesn't bother with such statistics. Nor do enough people care about the fact that the Iraqi War contributed about 25 percent to our record budget deficit last year.

And no one is pursuing McNamara's most famous bilateral principle: "Things you can count, you ought to count. Loss of life is one." In Iraq, we are tallying losses only on our side.

Does that represent progress in our human decency? And what will things look like in a decade, when more of us have sobered up?

Palaima is Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at UT-Austin.