

GUEST COLUMN *Opinion by Nicholas Sarantakes*

Victory in Iraq requires will to win



Nicholas Sarantakes

is a professor at the U.S. Air War College in Alabama. These views are his only.

Is "Iraq" Arabic for "Vietnam"? A recent Washington Post-ABC News poll has found that more than four in 10 Americans think the Iraq war is a modern-day equivalent of the Vietnam War. It is not.

The comparison has some merit, though. Vietnam, like Iraq, was an insurgency. In this kind of war, success is difficult to measure. There is a military objective, but unlike a conventional nation-state vs. nation-state war, there are no clear front lines or geographical objectives for military units to seize. These kinds of conflicts are often fought not with large formations, but with infantry platoons under the command of lieutenants. There are no major battles, but rather one small, vicious fire fight after another.

There are, however, clear goals in this kind of conflict. The problem is that they are intangible. The goal in an insurgency is psychological. The objective is to break the will of the other side. The question of victory and defeat is decided mainly by your willingness to continue fighting.

No military situation is ever exactly alike, and there are some major differences between Iraq and Vietnam. This insurgency follows a conventional war, which was not the case in Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, you had a guerrilla war and a conventional war being fought at the same time.

Another important difference is organization. The Viet Cong was a guerrilla force with a clear command structure, while the insurgents in Iraq are a diverse group fighting for different reasons, at odds with one another and are united only in their desire to defeat the United States.

So the two wars are different. The real question is: Can the United States get a different result this time around? The fact that the Soviet Union suffered a defeat fighting an insurgency in

Afghanistan might make some people wonder whether an insurgency can ever be defeated. The short answer to this question is yes. An insurgency is nothing more than a method of fighting. Like any other approach to war, there are counters that anti-insurgents can use. The United States has proved that it can defeat an insurgency.

The Filipino Insurrection of 1899-1902 is a much better comparison for Iraq than Vietnam. When the United States took control of the Philippines, there was a period of conventional combat that the Americans won in fairly quick fashion and then an insurgency. It took several years to win this struggle, but Americans found fairly effective, focused ways to apply their power against small targets.

It is also important to keep another point in mind. Since insurgency is a method that the few and the weak use against the many and the strong, it is often difficult to eliminate completely. As long as 10 or 20 people are determined to keep on fighting and killing others, an insurgency will continue. Sometimes the goal for those combating irregular soldiers is not to bring about their defeat, but rather contain their force.

In this situation, an insurgency becomes a chronic condition that a society can tolerate and endure much the same way individuals live with high blood pressure. A good example of such a condition is the situation in Northern Ireland.

There is little doubt that American soldiers and Marines can handle the fighting in Iraq itself, but that is only half the battle. The question of will power will be decided here at home and that outcome is still up in the air.

Contact Nicholas Sarantakes at nicholas.sarantakes@maxwell.af.mil.