

OPINION

It's merely hype: Iraq is not Vietnam, and history is not repeating itself

By Nicholas Evan Sarantakes
Guest Columnist

Despite what many people may think, the American people have not turned against the Iraq war. Nor is Iraq another Vietnam. Americans, though, are angry that the United States is not winning. All of these facts are very important in determining what policy the United States should pursue.

EVEN THOUGH parts of the war in Iraq resemble Vietnam, history is not repeating itself. There is no anti-war movement in the United States. You do not see huge protest rallies on college campuses from one end of the country to the other.

The 2004 presidential election and 2006 mid-term election were no litmus tests on the war either. Sen. John Kerry

of Massachusetts did not run against the war two years ago. He voted in support of the conflict and was not ready to flip-flop on such a basic issue. He tried to take advantage of sentiment on the war. The problem was that activist elements in the Democratic Party were strongly against the war then, while the American public was not.

Things have changed in the past two years, but the American people have not pivoted 180 degrees on Iraq. Voters were angry, yes, and they blamed President George W. Bush and the Republicans. The Democrats profited from this sentiment, but that hardly means that it was a national referendum on the war. There were a number of reasons voters turned against Republicans. Some of them were that the public had tired of corruption scandals involving

Republican congressmen such as Randy "Duke" Cunningham and Tom DeLay, and lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Then, there was the whole sordid matter involving former Rep. Mark Foley. Voters also tired of congressmen claiming to be fiscally responsible while using earmarks to waste money on projects of limited use.

THE FATE OF Sen. Joe Lieberman, the Connecticut Democrat, is a good case study of public sentiment about the war. Lieberman lost his party's nomination for re-election due to his stand on the war. The senator then ran and won as an independent. The Democratic Party of Connecticut was of one mind, the people in the state of another. At a joint press conference with Lieberman, Sen. John McCain, the Republican from

Arizona, used his colleague to prove that supporting the war was no kiss of death. "There's no way this guy could have been re-elected if it was as simple as that," McCain said.

Activists in the Democratic Party are treating the elections as if they have a mandate from the people to reverse the course of the war. Consider the words of Eli Pariser, director of the MoveOn political action committee: "The bottom line is that when voters elected the Democrats, they did that on the promise that the Democrats would lead the country out of the war. Democrats need to fulfill on that promise, and they're going to."

These individuals are getting results. "Twenty-one thousand five hundred troops ought to have 21,500 strings attached to them," House Majority Whip

James E. Clyburn, a South Carolina Democrat, remarked.

The strongest proponents of withdrawal, though, are in the Senate. Edward Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat, told the National Press Club: "The American people sent a clear message in November that we must change course in Iraq and begin to withdraw our troops, not escalate their presence."

HE WAS EVEN more blunt moments later: "It would compound the original misguided decision to invade Iraq. We cannot simply speak out against an escalation of troops in Iraq. We must act to prevent it." He then compared Iraq to Vietnam. Sen. Joseph Biden, D-DeL., was proposing withdrawal almost immediately after the balloting was finished.

Kennedy and Biden's reasoning, though, is wrong. Iraq is not

Vietnam. If they think the war is a policy mistake, fine. They are doing their constitutionally mandated job, but if they think that a noisy minority in their own party that cannot force a military defeat on a Republican administration is the voice of the American people, then they are in error and could be pushing an agenda that could blow up in their face the way it did for the Federalists in the War of 1812, the Whigs after the War with Mexico, and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party in the late 1860s and 1970s.

(Editor's note: The writer is an associate professor of joint and international operations at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, and is stationed at Fort Gordon. The views expressed in this piece are his only and do not reflect any official position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Army.)