

# Iraqnam

*Scott Camil*

Recently, I was asked to speak at a teach-in built around the Downing Street Memo, a secret British document that shows that the public was lied to to get our support for Bush's war against Iraq. This "Memo" is actually meeting minutes transcribed during the British Prime Minister's meeting on July 23, 2002—eight months prior to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. (The *Sunday Times* in London printed the text of this document on May 1, 2005.)

I was asked to speak about what it feels like to be a U.S. veteran who voluntarily served in war, only to come home and learn that my government had lied to, manipulated and betrayed me. I thought to myself, "This will be a real easy speech: It sucks." The question made me think about the many similarities between the war in Vietnam and the war in Iraq.

- United States involvement in both wars started with deception. In Vietnam, the deception included the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the SEATO treaty, the violation of the Geneva Accords, and the manipulation of the public with propaganda. In Iraq, we were lied to about weapons of mass destruction. We were Goebbelized (fed propaganda) to believe that there were links between 9/11 and Saddam Hussein, and we were led to believe that Saddam was evil because of what he did to his own people. It was our moral obligation to remove him, even though we empowered him and sponsored his actions. We were told that our effort in Iraq would help the war on terror; instead, it is giving the terrorists a rallying cry and has allowed them to operate inside Iraq, which Saddam Hussein never permitted.
- The U.S. Congress was derelict in its duty to the Constitution and our citizens. The Constitution provides for checks and balances and gives Congress the power to declare war. In both wars, Congress abdicated its responsibilities and gave carte blanche to the executive branch. **This breach of responsibility cannot be overstated.**
- Neither war had a realistic exit strategy. The general strategy was and is "might makes right," and, "we'll kick their ass and make them do what we want." While we're kicking their ass, we're telling the public that we're winning their hearts and minds. In Vietnam, we used to say, "Grab them by the balls and their hearts and minds will follow." It didn't work in Vietnam, and it isn't going to work in Iraq. Every time you hurt the innocent, you bolster and inspire the anti-occupation forces.
- We claim that we will teach the Iraqis democracy and we will train them to be able to militarily gain control over the people of their country. We tried this in Vietnam and we called it Vietnamization. It did not work in Vietnam, and it won't work in Iraq. We have still not learned from our misplaced arrogance. Both Vietnamese and Iraqi culture are thousands of years older than ours.
- In both wars, we thirsted for oil. President Eisenhower spoke of the importance of Vietnam's oil to the US. Iraq has the second largest oil reserves in the world. The number one source of income of both countries is oil.
- In Vietnam, we trained, equipped and armed the South Vietnamese military and police. That enabled the anti-occupation forces (AOF) to infiltrate, get training, get equipment, and learn intelligence to help their cause. The same thing is happening in Iraq. When car bombers ambush military and police units on the way to a mission, it's because of inside information. It's almost as if we're fighting ourselves because we're equipping them and teaching them our military strategy.
- Part of our strategy in both wars was to eliminate the leadership of the AOF by assassination. In Vietnam, it was called the Phoenix Program. In that program, 41,000 Vietnamese citizens were assassinated. One of the men who worked in that program, Thomas O'Connell, has now become the U.S. assistant secretary for Special Operations. (Thomas O'Connell, before he came to this job, ran "Grey Fox," a unit of Special Operations forces and CIA that assassinates those considered to be enemies of the United States.) Special Operations controls Task Force 121 and its plan for dealing with the AOF is called "pre-emptive man-hunting." In both wars, there was monetary incentive to turn over neighbors who are leaders of the AOF to the Americans. That monetary incentive encourages people to turn in people they don't like and get paid for

it.

- In both wars, the United States carried the overwhelming economic and material of the burden of the war. They were international efforts in name only.
- Both wars saw a large drop in the international standing of the United States, which hurts our national security as well as our image.
- In both wars, the United States far outmatched the enemy in arms and technology and American troops didn't have to worry about enemy aircraft.
- In both wars, the United States attacked countries that were not a threat to the United States. Neither country had the power nor the ability to strike the United States.
- In both wars, the borders were not secure.
- In both wars, the United States made secret illegal incursions into neighboring countries.
- Both wars saw the use of mercenary forces by the United States. In Vietnam, they were Laotian mercenaries. In Iraq, there are mercenaries from Latin America and corporate mercenaries. One of the ways that the United States has played with the numbers to make Iraq look like a smaller commitment than Vietnam is by changing who handles the infrastructure of the war. In Vietnam, the military handled it. In Iraq, private corporations handle it, thereby concealing the actual size of our military presence there.
- Because of poor planning, in both wars, the U.S. government had to turn to coercion to supply the manpower needed for the commitment. In Vietnam, it was the draft; and in Iraq, it is the backdoor draft known as 'stop loss.' Under stop loss, once you've served all the time in the military you've signed up for, you can be kept in the military for up to six months after the war has ended.

During the Civil War in the U.S., combat units were organized by cities and towns, so when a unit from a certain place would take heavy casualties, it impacted that place in a much more detrimental way than had those soldiers been split up from around the country. We changed the way we organized combat units so this wouldn't happen anymore. Because Bush has bitten off more than the regular army can chew, this war has to be fought with a large percentage of reservists and National Guard, so again, as these units take casualties, certain towns and cities are taking a disproportionate share of the losses.

- Neither war was fought to hold land. You clear an area, you lose some men, you go somewhere else, only to come back and lose more men clearing that same area again. This creates a morale problem for the soldier.
- In Vietnam, the majority of casualties were from mines and booby traps. In Iraq, they're from improvised explosive devices, commonly known as IEDs. An IED is a mine.
- In both wars, there was and is an increase in soldiers going AWOL (absent without leave).
- Psychologically speaking, it was the trauma of the war of occupation in Vietnam that led to the realization that soldiers in combat will have psychological scars that may last a lifetime. Now we hear that 30% of the troops coming home from Iraq have symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- In both wars, there was and is a lack of concern for the safety of the troops. In Vietnam, we were given M16 rifles that didn't work. In Iraq, our soldiers don't have adequate body armor or armored vehicles.
- In both wars, there was lack of concern for the long-term health of the troops. In Vietnam, the use of Agent Orange still affects veterans and their families forty years later. In Iraq, the use of depleted uranium ammunition will have the same negative long-term effects on our troops and their families.
- In both wars, there was and is abuse of the citizens of the occupied countries by U.S. forces. There is much evidence of abuse of prisoners. In Vietnam, there were cases like My Lai and the testimony of U.S. servicemen at the Winter Soldier Investigation that show the type of abuse that went on. In Iraq, abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib Prison is so bad that our government is fighting to keep from the world the

photographs and films of these abuses, including rape of children. In Vietnam, body count as a measure of success led to many civilian deaths. Because of the stigma the body count created, in the Iraq war, they've decided not to keep track of the people they kill. This lack of accountability results in countless deaths of civilians.

- Major Colin Powell was assigned to investigate what happened at My Lai. Being a team player, he whitewashed the investigation. A year later, an investigative journalist named Ron Ridenhour sent numerous letters to the White House, the Pentagon and Congress, asking them to do something about the massacre at My Lai. Congressman Morris Udall started another investigation, which resulted in the conviction of Lt. William Calley. This conviction whitewashed the responsibility of U.S. government policy in the massacre. Years later, Major Colin Powell became U.S. Secretary of State and, as a team player, he sold the Bush lies about WMD in Iraq to the United Nations.
- In both wars, the government has scapegoated lower ranking members of the military, placing all of the blame for criminal acts on them while denying any responsibility by leadership or policy. This is directly counter to the rules established at the Nuremberg Trials where the U.S. presided over prosecution of war criminals.
- In both wars, the mainstream news media, having initially bought the government's deceptions, eventually followed public opinion and turned against the war.
- Journalists have died covering both wars. According to Reporters Without Borders, more journalists have been killed in two and a half years in Iraq (66) than were killed in 20 years of covering Vietnam (63). At least 20 of the journalists killed in Iraq have been killed by American troops.
- In both wars, the U.S. lauded big democratic voter turnout in the elections of their puppet governments. It didn't make a difference in Vietnam, and in Iraq, because everyone who was on government handout had to show a purple thumb to get their water and food rations, we don't really know how much of that turnout was for anything besides food and water.

When I think about occupation, I think about how would I feel if the United States were occupied. Let's say, for the sake of argument, that another nation decides that we need regime change in the United States. They present their justifications to the world before they unilaterally and preemptively attack us. Their reasons are as follows:

- The people of the United States do not have real democracy. They have voting systems without paper accountability. Their leaders are responsive only to the corporations and the wealthy.
- The United States is the only western nation that executes its own prisoners. It imprisons more of its people per capita than any other western nation.
- It refuses to abide by international law and ignores the World Court.
- It uses a much higher percentage of the world's resources than its share in terms of population.
- It's not willing to acknowledge the huge negative impact it has on the environment, putting the whole world at risk from things such as global warming and the use of depleted uranium in ammunition.

There are many things I could add to this list, but I think you get my point. I agree that all of the above is true and I agree that we need regime change, but I would never accept that change—as important as it might be to the world—if it came from the barrels of the guns of foreign troops occupying my country. Occupation only gives you control—and limited control at that—while you occupy. The occupier becomes a prisoner of his own policy. There's no way to get out and save face. We have to have the integrity to admit our mistakes in Iraq and try to correct them. The longer we draw it out, the worse it will be for us.

It is very clear that the majority of the people of Iraq were much better off under Hussein than they are under Bush. Under Hussein, they had reliable electricity, running water and telephone service, their children could walk to school without fear, their wives could go shopping without fear, their fathers could take public transportation to work, their daily routines were safe. Those politically opposed to Saddam, members of Al-Qaeda, or a religious fundamentalists had problems. Under Bush, the regular people, the overwhelming majority of people, do not have the services or the safety they had before we invaded.

The U.S. war in Vietnam lasted 10 years. We are now hearing that our military commitment to Iraq may also take 10 years. There are a few bottom lines here for me:

- 1) Ten years from now, the only ones who will be thinking about Iraq will be those who have lost family members and friends and those who have lost parts of themselves physically or mentally. The rest of America will go on, just as it did after Vietnam.
- 2) There will come a time when we leave Iraq and the Iraqis will choose for themselves what they want just as the Vietnamese did. So the real question is how many must die and suffer before that happens. I don't believe that more deaths and suffering will change the outcome. There are those that say if we "cut and run now," all those who have suffered and died will have done so in vain. I ask those people how many have to die before it's okay to cut and run? When there are 58,000 names for a wall of American veterans who have died in Iraq, will it then be okay to cut and run? Is that how many lives have to be thrown away before it's okay to admit that we've made a mistake and do what's right?

What should we do?

- 1) Withdraw all American troops and support services from Iraq immediately.
- 2) Turn over all responsibility except financial to the international community.
- 3) Pay the cost of repairing all the damage we have done. We broke it, we should have to pay to fix it.
- 4) Recognize the World Court and turn over to them everyone who is responsible for starting this war. Let them face justice.
- 5) Many American corporations are profiting mightily from this war. In return, they provide the economic support that allows these irresponsible and sometimes criminal politicians to hold onto their power. We must take the ability to profit out of war. If the troops are asked to show their patriotism by sacrificing life and limb, then let the corporations show their patriotism by sacrificing their profit.
- 6) Vote out of office every congressman and senator that supported this war. There are those who say it's not the fault of Congress, that there are many members of Congress who are good, decent people who got swept up in the politics of patriotism. But it is the responsibility of Congress to provide a check and balance to the executive branch. To allow the executive branch carte blanche because they wrapped a criminal policy in the flag is an abdication of their responsibility. Why would we allow them to stay in office when they have not been responsible? We need to set a precedent so that future congresses will take their responsibility seriously.

The argument that Congress has to support the troops allows the executive branch to commit the troops and then demand support for the policy, no matter how wrong. This puts the cart before the horse, keeps the troops in a place they do not belong, and mandates useless suffering and death.

For those congressmembers who argue that they were misled into starting this war, they allowed themselves to be misled. There were many voices against this folly of ours, including many of our citizens and most of the countries on this planet.

If we fail to take a stand that punishes those responsible for this crime, it will only be repeated again.

During the American war against Vietnam, we marched on Washington to confront our government, express our dissatisfaction with their criminal policies, and call for an **immediate** end to the war and the return of our troops. On September 24<sup>th</sup>, we will be marching on Washington for the same reasons. I urge you to join us.

*Scott Camil is a Vietnam veteran. He testified about U.S. war crimes in Vietnam at the Winter Soldier investigation in 1971 in Detroit, a tribunal which is captured in the recently re-released film "Winter Soldier." Currently he serves as a counselor for the GI Rights Hotline and on the executive committee of The Suwannee St-Johns Group Sierra Club.*