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## Deception de Jour and Déjà Vu

January 3, 2002

*“You gave your body parts—even your lives. We were taught to respect those in power. Those same officials lied to you and many others.”—from a message left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Christmas, 2002.*

—and from a mother about her veteran son, one of the “lucky” ones to survive, *“I am 85 and don’t know how much longer I will see him suffering with his pains and nightmares.”*

I, too, am having nightmares and flashbacks, even though I completed my active duty as an infantry intelligence officer before the war in Vietnam. I can trace them to my ringside seat at the crafting of U.S. policy toward Vietnam and today’s feeling of déjà vu, which I cannot shake as I watch the unfolding of U.S. policy toward Iraq.

From 1964 to 1968 I was the principal CIA analyst of Soviet policy toward Vietnam and China. In U.S. government circles the conviction prevailed that the Vietnamese Communists were the cat’s-paw of an expansive USSR determined to establish Soviet hegemony over Southeast Asia. Despite the gaping fissures already apparent in international Communism, the movement was still seen largely as a monolith led by Moscow.

Trading on this widespread perception, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, embarrassed by his abortive attempt to place missiles in Cuba, confronted President Kennedy with a more elusive challenge. Khrushchev warned that the USSR had now chosen “wars of national liberation” as the preferred method to bury the West.

In Washington a knee-jerk effort was launched to find such a war. The president’s closest advisers picked Vietnam, even though this meant pushing aside the experts who knew the conflict in Vietnam to be primarily a civil war of nationalists (who happened also to be Communists) vs. puppets of French colonialism.

The U.S. reaction gradually took form as a U.S.-led “counter-insurgency” effort against those Communist-led “wars of national liberation.” That rhetoric not only got us into Vietnam, but also made it politically impossible, in President Lyndon Johnson’s eyes, to get us out.

As U.S. forces sank deeper into the quagmire, policymakers in Washington resorted to wishful thinking. Influential statesmen like Averill Harriman offered the hope that, since the Soviets had bigger fish to fry with the U.S., they could be counted upon eventually to “use their influence” in Hanoi to help us find a graceful way out.

It took no great incisiveness on my part to discern that for historical and contemporary reasons, the USSR could bring precious little influence to bear on the Vietnamese Communists, even had it wanted to. Russia had sold them down the river at the Geneva Conference in 1954. They would not again be cheated out of victory. If necessary, they could do without the token supply of arms they were getting from the USSR.

I could never be sure that Harriman and others actually believed what they said about the prospects for enlisting Russian help in “restraining” Hanoi, but I became more and more aghast as I watched them act as though they actually did believe it. As it turns out, I didn’t know the half of it.

### The Nuclear Card

Recently declassified documents bring more flashback—and flash-forward. These show that in the fall of 1969, President Nixon put U.S. forces on worldwide nuclear alert in what he (aptly) called a “madman” strategy aimed at scaring the Soviets into “using their influence” to force Vietnamese Communist concessions at the negotiations in Paris.

Last month (December) the Bush administration openly threatened to use nuclear weapons against Iraq, if Iraq uses chemical or biological weapons against U.S. troops. All U.S. intelligence agencies agree that Saddam Hussein probably will, in fact, use chemical and/or biological weapons if we invade Iraq, which is precisely what our country appears ready to do. Is this new “madman” strategy not the stuff of nightmares?

The U.S. misadventure in Vietnam was prompted initially by ignorance, hubris, and antiquated notions of Communist cohesiveness. But lies also played a central role. When Johnson used the North Vietnamese patrol boat “attack” on a U.S. warship in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964 to justify launching an air war on the North and intimidating Congress into giving him *carte blanche*, he knew quite well there had been no such attack.

And three years later, if the U.S. forces commander in Vietnam, Gen. William Westmoreland, had not lied about Vietnamese Communist troop strength (he knew there were twice as many as he was counting), the war could have been stopped before the disastrous Vietnamese Communist Tet offensive in early 1968.

And the Vietnam Memorial would be less than half the size it is today.

### **On Iraq, lies are flying fast and furious before the first shot is fired—as in:**

- U.S. has persuasive evidence that Iraq was involved in the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001
- Iraq poses a more immediate danger to the U.S. than North Korea does
- Iraqis can produce a nuclear weapon “in less than a year”
- U.S. nuclear threats will deter Iraq from using chemical/biological weapons  
NOTE: That worked in 1991, but only because the president’s father had the good sense to halt the troops on the road to Baghdad, sparing Saddam Hussein
- U.S. troops have adequate protection to fight in a chemical/biological warfare environment. (See, for example, the General Accounting Office report of Oct. 1, 2002, “*Chemical and Biological Defense*”)
- Oil plays no role in U.S. policy decisions  
NOTE: Crossword puzzle entry: The difference between Iraq and North Korea; 3 letters

Sadly, this by no means exhausts the list of lies that have left most Americans frightened but resigned to an unnecessary war that could include the use of nuclear weapons. Palliatives include Pentagon suggestions that leaflets will persuade Iraqi soldiers not to fight, and that Iraqi generals will remove Saddam Hussein as soon as U.S. forces set foot in Iraq. I would not risk one soldier’s life to test that kind of wishful thinking.

Secretary of State Colin Powell, the only top administration leader with combat experience needs to lead President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, and Deputy Defense Secretary Wolfowitz down to the Vietnam Memorial to read the messages there.

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“If any question why we died  
Tell them, because our fathers lied.”  
—Rudyard Kipling

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“Once a policy has been set, all subsequent activity becomes an effort to justify it...For the ruler it is easier, once he has entered a policy box, to stay inside. For the lesser official it is better, for the sake of his position, not to press evidence that the chief will find painful to accept. Psychologists call the process of screening out discordant information “cognitive dissonance,” an academic disguise for “Don’t confuse me with the facts.””

—Barbara Tuchman, “*The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam.*”