

## Tom Dispatch

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# Tomgram: Empire of Stupidity

[**Note for Tomdispatch readers:** In the weeks when the first Gulf War was underway -- it seems a lifetime ago -- I began researching a book on the history of American triumphalism (which I came to call "victory culture"), especially as I had experienced it in my 1950s childhood. By the time I began writing, that war was years past; the General Schwarzkopf dolls had long disappeared from the toy store remainder tables, and the book seemed like little short of an autopsy of a once vital American myth -- the cherished belief that triumph over a less-than-human enemy was in the American grain, a birthright and a national destiny. It was published in 1995 as *The End of Victory Culture* and then I went about my business; but over the years, the book made its modest mark in the world (and in college courses).

I freely admit that I was taken off-guard when, in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, victory culture came roaring back with a literal vengeance. Even then, as I started working on the project that became Tomdispatch, I never doubted that the half-life of this version of victory culture would be short or, when the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq became obvious in 2002, that it would crash and burn in that country.

By May 2003, with Baghdad barely taken by U.S. forces, I was [already writing](#):

"Given a system that eats itself for breakfast, the second coming of America's victory culture should prove an ephemeral affair. I wouldn't bet that a year from now, no less a decade from now, kids anywhere in America will be playing GIs and Iraqis, or Delta Force and Afghans in their backyards or streets. And maybe we should all thank our lucky stars for that."

In 2005, Juan Cole (whose [Informed Comment](#) website was already a regular morning companion for me) and Matthew Lassiter, both professors at the University of Michigan, urged me to give a talk there, updating my book. Lassiter, in particular, cunningly convinced me to make the sort of public appearance I usually avoid. I can only thank both of them profusely. That talk launched me on a major update of the book and now, to my satisfaction, [The End of Victory Culture](#) has been reissued in a new edition that takes the collapse of American triumphalism from Hiroshima right through George W. Bush's Global War on Terror.

As in the essay below, I've often dipped back into the book -- wondering, most of the time, how I ever knew all that -- to crib from myself. I hope that those of you who read Tomdispatch regularly might want to take a plunge into the new edition and check out where my particular brand of anti-imperial thinking comes from and how it plays out in the present. You can read the new preface to the 2007 edition by [clicking here](#), check out praise for the book by [clicking here](#), or simply [click here](#) to buy it now. *Tom*]

## Seven Years in Hell

### On Body Counts, Dead Zones, and an Empire of Stupidity

By Tom Engelhardt

On August 22nd, breaking into his Crawford vacation, the President [addressed](#) the national convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, giving what is already known as his "Vietnam speech." That day, George W. Bush, who, as early as 2003, had sworn that his war on Iraq would "decidedly *not* be Vietnam," took the full-frontal plunge into the still-flowing current of the Big Muddy, fervently embracing Vietnam analogy-land. You could almost feel his relief (and that of his neocon speechwriters).

In that mud-wrestle of a speech, he invoked "one unmistakable legacy of Vietnam... that the price of America's withdrawal was paid by millions of innocent citizens whose agonies would add to our vocabulary new terms like 'boat people,' 're-education camps,' and 'killing fields.'" The man who had so carefully sat out the Vietnam War now proclaimed that Americans never should have left that land. As he's done with so much else, he also linked the Vietnam War by an act of verbal ju-jitsu to al-Qaeda and the attacks of September 11th. 9/11, too, turned out to be part of the "price" we'd paid for succumbing to "the allure of retreat" and withdrawing way back when. ("In an interview with a Pakistani newspaper after the 9/11 attacks," intoned the President, "Osama bin Laden declared that 'the American people had risen against their government's war in Vietnam. And they must do the same today.'")

Whatever brief respite his August embrace of Vietnam may have given him in the [polls](#), it involved a larger concession on the administration's part. Like its predecessors, the Bush administration and its neocon supporters simply couldn't kick the "Vietnam Syndrome" -- much as they struggled to do so -- any more than a moth could avoid the flame. Now, they found themselves locked in a desperate, hopeless attempt to use Vietnam to recapture the hearts and minds of the American people.

### **Entering the Dead Zone**

It's possible to track this losing struggle with the Vietnam analogy over these last years. Take one issue -- the body count -- on which we know something about administration Vietnam thinking. For Americans of the Vietnam era, a centuries-old "[victory culture](#)" -- in which triumph on some distant frontier against evil enemies was considered an American birthright -- still held sway. In Vietnam, when it nonetheless became clear that the promised frontier victory was, for the second time in little more than a decade, nowhere in sight, American military and civilian officials tried to compensate.

One problem they faced was that the very definition of victory in war -- the taking of terrain, the advance into hostile territory that signaled the crushing of enemy resistance -- had ceased to mean anything in Vietnam. In a guerrilla war in which, as American grunts regularly complained, you couldn't tell friends from enemies, no less hold a hostile countryside, something else had to substitute for the landing at D-Day, the advance on Berlin, the island-hopping campaign in the Pacific. And so the "whiz kids" of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's Pentagon and the military high command developed a substitute numerology of victory.

Everything was to be counted and the copious statistics of success were to flow endlessly up the chain of command and back to Washington, proof positive that "progress" was being made. The numbers looked convincing indeed. In fact, to believe loss possible in Vietnam, when by any measure of success -- from dead enemy and captured weapons to cleared roads and pacified villages -- Americans had such a decisive advantage, seemed nothing short of madness. Yet, to accept the figures pouring in daily from soldiers, advisors, and bureaucrats

was to defy the logic of one's senses. To make the endlessly unraveling situation in Vietnam madder still, the impending defeat did not seem to be a military one. Those who directed the war (as well as the right-wing in the post-war years) regularly claimed, for instance, that not a single significant battle had been lost to the Vietnamese enemy.

Sometimes it seemed that Americans in Vietnam did nothing but invent new ways of measuring success. There were, for instance, the eighteen indices of the Hamlet Evaluation System, each meant to calibrate the "progress" of "pacification" in South Vietnam's 2,300 villages and almost 13,000 hamlets, focusing largely on "rural security" and "development." Then there were the many indices of the Measurement of Progress system, its monthly reports, produced in slide form, including "strength trends of the opposing forces, efforts of friendly forces in sorties... enemy base areas neutralized," and so on. And don't forget that there were figures by the bushel-load on every form of destruction rained down on the Vietnamese enemy -- sorties flown, tonnage dropped, "truck kills," you name it. The efforts that went into creating numerical equivalents for death were endless.

For visiting congressional delegations, the commander of U.S. forces, Gen. William Westmoreland, had his "attrition charts," multicolored bar graphs illustrating various "trends" in death and destruction. Commanders in the field had their own sophisticated ways to codify "kill ratios"; while, on the ground, where, in dangerous circumstances, the actual counting had to be done, all of this translated, far more crudely, into the MGR, or, as the grunts sometimes said, the "Mere Gook Rule" -- "If it's dead and it's Vietnamese, it's VC [Vietcong]." In other words, when pressure came down for the "body count," any body would do.

Back in the U.S., much of the frustration that had gathered in the face of mounting years of claimed progress and evident failure would focus on the "body count" of enemy dead, announced in late afternoon U.S. military press briefings in the South Vietnamese capital, Saigon. For the element of the fantastic in those briefings (and the figures proffered), they came to be known among reporters as "the Five o'clock Follies."

In a war in which D-Day-like landings were uncontested publicity events and "conquered" territory might be abandoned within days, the killing of the enemy initially seemed nothing to be ashamed of and an obvious indicator of "progress" -- a classic word then and now. (Witness the upcoming Petraeus "progress report" to Congress.) As time went on, however, as success refused to make an appearance despite the claims that it was just around some corner, and as "defeat," a word no one cared to use, crept into consciousness (while American officials like National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger privately fulminated about the impossibility of losing a war to "a little fourth-rate power"), those dead bodies decoupled from the idea of victory. They began to seem like a grim count of something else entirely -- of, depending on your position at that moment, frustration, futility, brutality, tragedy, defeat.

The body count took on a grim life of its own. Detached from reality, yet producing the most horrific of realities -- and, among increasing numbers of Americans, a sense of shame -- it morphed into something like a never-ending Catch-22 of carnage. In this way, as the bodies piling up looked ever more like so many slaughtered peasants in a "fourth-rate" land, successive American administrations entered the dead zone.

Of course, if the statistics of slaughter had been accepted by all sides (then or now) as the ruling logic of the struggle, the United States would have won the war any day from the

mid-1960s on (or, in the present case, from March 2003 on). Instead, by the sacrifice of untold numbers of lives, the enemy somehow succeeded in capturing the only set of numbers worth having -- the numbers of weeks, months, years that the fighting went on.

### **Return of the Body Count**

Little wonder then that, in the beginning, the Bush administration was eager to avoid the body count, along with body bags and those disintegrative images of the Vietnam war dead coming home in full daylight in sight of television cameras; that it was eager, in fact, to avoid every aspect of a thoroughly discredited war. But here's the irony: From the moment the Afghan War began in 2001, no one had the Vietnam analogy more programmatically on the brain than the Bush team.

In this, they were no exception to the rule. Ever since the 1970s, the Pentagon and various administrations had been playing a conscious opposites game with what they imagined as Vietnam's failed practices in each of the many smaller interventions, invasions, and wars launched from the invasion of Grenada through the first Gulf War, Somalia, and the Kosovo air war.

The Bush administration began similarly, if more confidently, in opposites mode; for they expected that, as the sole superpower on a modest-sized planet with the mightiest military in sight, victory would be theirs in a "cakewalk", to use a winning word of that moment. It would also happen in the most obvious of ways -- the taking of the enemy capital, the destruction (or as they liked to say, "decapitation") of the enemy regime, and the long-term garrisoning of American forces on [gigantic bases](#) in the Iraqi countryside (not to speak of the [bouquets](#) that were to be thrown by thrilled Shiites at the feet of the invading "liberators"). Vietnam? They'd skip it entirely -- and all its notorious ways. As Gen. Tommy Franks, who ran the Afghan war, so famously [said](#): "We don't do body counts."

Jump almost five years to October 2006 and a President thoroughly frustrated by an inability to show "progress" in his war of choice, despite [proclaiming](#) that "major combat operations in Iraq" had "ended" in May 2003 and presenting a [National Strategy for Victory in Iraq](#) in November 2005. In an [outburst](#) to a group of sympathetic conservative journalists, he revealed just how much he yearned for the return of the body count: "We don't get to say that -- a thousand of the enemy killed, or whatever the number was. It's happening. You just don't know it," he exclaimed in frustration.

And why exactly couldn't the President reveal that figure -- of which he was inordinately proud -- to the American people? "We have made a conscious effort not to be a body-count team," was what Bush told the assembled journalists and pundits, indicating in the process how much conscious planning for Iraq as the not-Vietnam had actually taken place in the White House as well as the Pentagon. (Of course, as the *Washington Post's* Bob Woodward pointed out, the President privately [kept](#) a body count, "'his own personal scorecard for the war' in the form of photographs with brief biographies and personality sketches of those judged to be the world's most dangerous terrorists -- each ready to be crossed out by the President as his forces took them down.")

Not so long after Bush made his body-count comments, the body count itself returned as military spokespeople in Iraq and Afghanistan began releasing numbers of enemy killed in "coalition" military operations. Six months or so later, the body count has already become a

commonplace as typical recent headlines indicate: "U.S., Iraqis kill [33](#) insurgents"; "Over [100](#) Taliban Killed in Afghan Battle."

In his VFW speech, the President finally got to salve his own frustration. "In Iraq," he told his audience, "our troops are taking the fight to the extremists and radicals and murderers all throughout the country. Our troops have killed or captured an average of more than 1,500 al Qaeda terrorists and other extremists every month since January of this year."

Forgetting the absurdity of the figure (which, if accurate, would essentially mean al-Qaeda-in-Mesopotamia has been wiped out), let's just note that, as with the Vietnam analogy itself, the body count in administration hands arrives not as a substitute for victory, but as a way of staving off thoughts of defeat. The President, that is, picked up not where the body count started in Vietnam, but where those Five o'clock Follies left off.

In its own strange way, Bush's speech was an admission of defeat. Somehow, Vietnam, the American nightmare, had finally bested the man who spent his youth avoiding it and his presidency evading it. The President had finally mounted the tiger you are always advised not to ride and had officially entered the dead zone, where the bodies pile high and victory never appears, taking the rest of the country with him. It's clear that, barring some stunning development in Iraq (or perhaps an assault on Iran), whatever the "progress reports," whatever the debates, that's where we'll be until January 2009 when it will automatically become Hillary's or Barack's or Mitt's or Giuliani's war. (From the Vietnam years, we also know what happens when a president, who inherits a war, fears being labeled the person who "lost" it; we know just how hard it is to get out then.)

### **"The Greatest Force for Liberation the World Has Ever Seen"**

Arriving 30 years after the Vietnam War ended, the war in Iraq has turned out to be its spiritual twin in the American pantheon of disaster and defeat. But what a 30 years they were! In fact, if in all sorts of ways Iraq wasn't actually Vietnam, then the United States of 2003 wasn't the U.S. of the Vietnam era either. Not by a long shot.

The President's Vietnam speech was a clever historical montage, if you assume that no one remembers anything about the past. As it happens, almost every line of the speech has since been [analyzed](#), attacked, and dismembered by critics, pundits, and historians who do remember. But in all the commentary, one line -- perhaps the most striking -- slipped by uncommented upon. And yet it was the line that offered an entry ramp onto the royal road to understanding what exactly has changed in our country over the post-Vietnam decades, not to speak of the seven-plus years from hell of the Bush administration.

Here's what the President said to applause from the assembled vets:

"I'm confident that we will prevail. I'm confident we'll prevail because we have the greatest force for human liberation the world has ever known -- the men and women of the United States Armed Forces."

Let's stop on that breathtaking, near messianic claim for a moment. Try, as a start, putting it in the mouths of Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, or even Richard Nixon, no less Gerald Ford. Or try imagining Abraham Lincoln, in the midst of a great civil war that would indeed lead to the emancipation of the slaves, saying something of the sort; or

Dwight D. Eisenhower, a former general who had led a great "crusade" -- it was his word of choice for the title of his memoir -- to free Europe in World War II but would be the first to warn of a "military-industrial complex" as his presidency ended.

Past American presidents might perhaps have spoken of the "greatest force for human liberation" as being "the American way of life" or "the American dream," or American democracy, or the thinking of the Founding Fathers. But it took a genuine transformation in, and the full-scale militarization of, that way of life, for such a formulation to become presidentially conceivable, no less to pass unnoticed, even by fierce critics, in a speech practically every word of which was combed for meaning.

Now, read the speech [again](#) and you'll see that the line in question wasn't simply passing blather for an audience of vets, but a thematic summary of the thrust of the whole address, of, in fact, the very vision the Bush administration and supporting neoconservatives carried into office. Much has been said about the Christian fundamentalist nature of the administration, but if that had truly been the essence of these last years, the President would have identified Jesus Christ as that "greatest force."

Not that a distinction need be made, but this administration's primary fundamentalism has been that of born-again militarists, of believers in the efficacy of force as embodied in the most awe-inspiring, high-tech military on the planet. This was the idol at which its top officials worshipped when it came to foreign policy. They were in awe of the idea that they had at their command the best equipped, most powerful military the world had ever seen, armed to the teeth with techno-toys; already [garrisoning](#) much of the globe (and about to garrison more of it); already on the receiving end of [vast inflows](#) of [taxpayer dollars](#) (and about to receive staggeringly more of the same); already embedded in a sprawling network of corporate interests (and about to be [significantly privatized](#) into the hands of even more such corporations); already having divided most of the globe into military "commands" that were essentially viceroy-ships (and about to finish the job by creating a command for the "homeland," [NORTHCOM](#), and for the previously forgotten, suddenly energy-hot continent of Africa, [AFRICOM](#)).

In the wake of September 11, 2001, these fundamentalist believers in the power of One to twist all other arms on the planet managed to add a second Defense Department -- the [Department of Homeland Security](#) (with its own "[-industrial complex](#)") -- to the American agenda; they passed ever more draconian laws curtailing American rights in the name of "homeland security"; they went remarkably far in turning what was already an imperial presidency into something like a Caesarian commander-in-chief presidency; they presided over a far more [politicized](#) Defense Department (whose commanders today speak out, while in uniform, on what once would have been civilian political matters); they initiated far more sweeping means of government surveillance at home; they opened [offshore prisons](#), giving their covert intelligence operatives the possibility of disappearing just about any human being they cared to target and their interrogators permission to use the most [sophisticated kinds of torture](#). In short, they presided over a striking increase in the state's coercive powers, as embodied in a single, theoretically unrestrained commander-in-chief presidency and the first imperial vice-presidency in American history. (Of course, from the Reagan "revolution" on, the American conservative movement that first took power over a quarter of a century ago never meant to throttle the state, only the capacity of the state to deliver any services except "security" to its citizenry.)

How distant now is the American moment when a peacetime U.S. Army could still exist as

a minimalist force (as between the two world wars or even, to some extent and briefly, after the demobilization of World War II). Similarly, it is no longer possible for American politicians of either party to imagine any region of the globe as not part of our *national* security sphere or not an object of our attentions, not to say our duty, if push comes to shove (or far earlier), to intervene or make war. As a name, Bush's Global War on Terror was no more meant as blather than that "greatest force for liberation the world has ever seen."

By the time the top officials of this administration and their various neocon backers arrived in power in 2000, they had already fallen deeply in love with the all-volunteer U.S. Armed Forces and the semi-militarized land they were about to inherit. They fervently believed their own propaganda about what such a military could accomplish in the world, despite the cautionary lessons of history stretching from Vietnam back to what the Catholic peasants of Spain, the Sunni fundamentalists of their moment, did to Napoleon's vaunted armies of occupation. (They would, of course, hardly be the first ruling group to mistake their own propaganda for reality.)

Like all fundamentalist believers, like their eternally "resolute" President, in the face of the flood of disasters the Big Muddy of reality has delivered to their doorstep, they remain undeterred -- at least, those who are left. Changing their minds was never an option, though they might indeed still opt to double-down their bets and [launch](#) an attack on Iran before January 2009.

They truly believed that when you wrapped the flag of American exceptionalism, of American goodness, around the U.S. military, you would have the greatest force for liberation on the planet. Of course, they defined "liberation" in a way that coincided exactly with their desires for remaking the world. Hence, whenever democratic elections didn't produce the results they wanted, they simply rejected the results. In the bargain, they were convinced that, wielding that "greatest force," they could reshape the Middle East to their specifications, establish an unassailably dominant position at the heart of the oil heartlands of the planet, roll back the Russians even further, cow the Chinese, and create a *Pax Americana* planet. From their fervent unipolarity, they would, in fact, help to give premature birth to a [newly multipolar](#) world.

Because their faith was of the blind sort, they thoroughly misread the nature of power -- of what was powerful -- in our world. Among other disastrous miscalculations, they confused the power that lay in the *threat* of loosing the American military, for the actual act of loosing it (as they would soon find out to their chagrin in both Afghanistan and Iraq). Like the monotheists they were, they believed that a single God, personified by the military at their command, would sweep all before Him; that, with a "coalition of the willing" (that is, the submissive) but without the need for actual allies or peers, and so for restraints of any kind, they could take their God of force to the heathen at the point of a shock-and-awe cruise missile and that victory -- in fact, an endless string of victories -- would be theirs. How predictably wrong they were.

They did move far toward completing the strange process by which American society has, since World War II, been militarized without taking on the normal signs of militarization. We are now a nation armed for global war -- from under and on the sea, on the land, in the air, and from the heavens, in jungles and [urban jungles](#), in oil lands, wetlands, and arid lands. We are prepared to make war on the planet itself with an arsenal that is indeed a techno-wonder. As the President suggested in his speech, not thoughts of Thomas Jefferson,

but of the [latest wondrous armed robot](#) or Hellfire-missile-armed Predator drone are the true hallmarks of early twenty-first century American civilization.

The result of all this has been seven years of hell (so far) delivered by an administration of boys with lethal toys at their command (and the women who enabled them). The dwindling band now left presides over a militarized land that lacks a citizenry of warriors. Think Teutonic without the Teutons. The President caught the essence of America's odd form of militarization when, while launching his wars, he urged American citizens to show their mettle by [visiting Disney World](#) and spending up a storm.

A chasm, unimaginable when the U.S. still had a citizen's army, has emerged between American society and a military increasingly from [the forgotten towns](#) of the rural hinterland (as the lists of the dead regularly remind us) and new immigrant communities, an all-volunteer military that has become ever less like the public it defends, ever more mercenary (as huge ["quick-ship" bonuses](#) are used to attract the reluctant "volunteer") and ever more privatized. These days, the U.S. military and the vast mercenary legions of [private contractors](#) who accompany them to war are beginning to take on something of the look of the Roman imperial legions in that empire's last years when they were increasingly filled with Goths and other despised "barbarian" peoples from the empire's frontier regions.

As [David Walker](#), U.S. Comptroller and head of the nonpartisan Government Accounting Office, pointed out recently, the American government has also, in a remarkably short period of time, taken on the look of a faltering imperial Rome with "an over-confident and over-extended military in foreign lands and fiscal irresponsibility by the central government." And imagine -- it was only a few years ago that neocon pundits were [hailing](#) the U.S. as a power "more dominant than any since Rome." Think instead: The Roman Empire on [crack cocaine](#).

Looking back, it will undoubtedly be clear, if it isn't already, that, with the adherents of the cult of force at the helm of the ship of state, the world of fantasy took over and, even in imperial terms, what resulted was an empire of stupidity, hustling headlong down the slope of decline. That's often the way with blind faith, with anything, in fact, that prevents you from actually taking in the world as it is.

## Defeat

Recently, I watched a June Bug caught in a spider's web. It had evidently hit the web almost dead center; and, big as it was, had torn a hole in the fine filaments. Now, it dangled below the web, barely held (so it seemed) by a few strands of the spider's silk. A small brownish thing, glowing in the night light, the spider was working its way methodically around the madly struggling bug in what, for all the world, looked like the most unbelievable of contests. And yet, over time, the bug's flailing grew weaker, the filaments ever more numerous. By morning, with that bug fully wrapped, all its efforts long defeated, the visibly fantastic had turned into the most mundane of realities.

Now, what's left of an American fundamentalist cult of force, based on a prophesy of victory, led by naturals in the arts of destruction and deconstruction, but [incapable](#) of overseeing any task of construction or reconstruction anywhere on the planet or altering their path through the world, are faced with a word Americans have long proven themselves ill-equipped to handle -- defeat. Today, as in the past, it's a word you only use as a curse to

be laid biblically on your opponents. (Oppositional Democrats are reputedly now referred to privately in the White House as "[defeatocrats](#).")

The Bush administration is not alone in being unable to face the idea of defeat. Sometimes even crushed imperial states, blind with defeat, can't admit what's happening to them. Think of Japan in August 1945, facing a defeat so total that just about every one of its cities had been burnt to a cinder. Japan's leaders still couldn't say the word. When the emperor gave his surrender speech (and his previously god-like voice was heard for the first time by ordinary Japanese), he claimed that, well, things hadn't turned out quite as expected. You can search that speech in vain for an actual acknowledgement of defeat.

So imagine a country whose fundamentalist leader sits in an untouched office, where the crisis of the day seems to be a faltering of the home sales market or a foot under a stall in a public bathroom, where the young he's sent to their deaths have largely come from out of the way places, where the stock market remains reasonably buoyant, and the worst casualties are taken on holiday highways.

The Vietnam experience is instructive as to why Americans, however dismayed by another "unwinnable" war, might be pardoned for having trouble coming to grips with the nature of that loss. After all, when the last Americans were lifted off that Saigon embassy roof as North Vietnamese forces entered the southern capital, the "victorious" country lay in ruins. Perhaps three million of its people (not counting neighboring Laotians and Cambodians) had -- put in Iraq-era terms -- become "excess deaths" during the previous years of fighting; perhaps 9,000 of the South's 15,000 hamlets and villages were in ruins; something like 19 million tons of herbicide had been sprayed on the land by the U.S. Air Force, and unexploded ordnance was everywhere. There were an estimated 1 million war widows, 879,000 orphans, 181,000 disabled people, and 200,000 prostitutes. At least 1.5 million farm animals had been lost and Vietnam's modest industrial base lay in ruins.

The defeated superpower had lost 58,000 dead and 300,000 wounded, but what's now called "the homeland" (a militarized term of our era unknown in the 1970s), except for some wrecked urban ghetto neighborhoods, a few dead or wounded students on university campuses, modest numbers of injured protesters and policemen, and a dead post-doctoral physics student [in Wisconsin](#), lay remarkably untouched. The United States still remained the preeminent superpower on a two-superpower planet.

In the recent history of the reconstruction of war-torn lands, as with occupied Germany and Japan after World War II (as well as prostrate Europe via the Marshall Plan), Americans were supposed to generously offer help in rebuilding. But the land that now so desperately needed reconstruction was "the winner"; and Americans were still at heart a victory culture facing a losing war. Our war mythology had been built upon rare mobilizing defeats (think: the Alamo, Custer's Last Stand, or Pearl Harbor) that were destined to lead to ultimate victory. But what to do in the face of ultimate defeat? In one of the many strange reversals of the post-Vietnam years, Americans decisively turned their backs on the victorious land in ruins and began trying to reconstruct their own country, focusing not on some devastated environment but on the American psyche which, it was said, was suffering from something called the "Vietnam syndrome."

In relation to Iraq, we see a similar back-turning process underway. American politicians (mainly Democrats at this point) are already dumping the blame for Bush's War on Iraqis living in a devastated land that is now really little more than a series of bloodied, embattled

religious and ethnic fiefdoms. Already Iraq [by-the-numbers](#) has a Vietnam-like look of horror to it, complete with more than two million of its own wartime bus (instead of boat) people and its own monstrous "killing fields." When, in some relatively distant future, Americans finally do face reality and "retreat" from Iraq in whatever fashion, count on a desire to forget it all. But this time, it may not be so simple.

For a whole group of analysts and pundits, the words "Iraq" and "fiasco" have become synonymous, fiasco standing in (as in the bestselling book by the *Washington Post's* Tom Ricks) for how the post-invasion period was bungled by the Bush administration and Donald Rumsfeld's Pentagon. But the essential fiasco lay not in acts, however blundering and empty-headed, in Iraq, but in the fundamentalism of a militarized (corporatized and privatized) cult of armed imperial isolationists, who blindly drove the country to the edge of an imperial cliff (or beyond) and were incapable of changing course even when reality essentially spit in their faces.

Almost thirty years after Vietnam ended, the Bush administration made sure that Americans would have *déjà vu* all over again at least one last time. In the bargain, the President, Vice President, and their top officials ensured that "the greatest force... the world has ever seen" would be a hurricane not of liberation but of destruction, the geopolitical equivalent of Katrina.

As it happened, 30 years later, the planet had changed. American military power not only would fail (as in Vietnam) to conquer all before it, but the United States would no longer prove to be the preeminent force on the planet, just the last, lingering superpower in a contest that had ended in 1991.

When, finally -- 2010, 2012? -- we do pack up, head home from the Iraqi dead zone, and try to forget, it surely won't be as easy as it was 30-plus years ago (and, as the inability of our rulers to eradicate the "Vietnam syndrome" from their own brains indicates, it wasn't so easy even then). Whether or not, as the President claims, the crop of "terrorists" he's helped to grow will "follow us home," something will certainly follow us home. After all, when the troops return, if they do, they will return to a "superpower" that, in population life expectancy, [has plunged](#) from 11th to 42nd place in only two decades, and, in infant mortality terms, now ranks well below many far poorer countries.

Of course, by then, the President, Vice President, and those true believers still left in his administration will undoubtedly have entered the true American Green Zone, the one where a [lecture](#) to an audience of admirers can net you 75,000-100,000 greenbacks; where your story, no matter who writes it for you, will be worth millions; where your "library" can be a gathering place for "scholars"; and the "institute" you sponsor, a legacy recreating locus. It's a zone in which the accountant, not accountability, rules.

In the meantime, we live with all the pointless verbiage, the "debate" in Washington, the "progress reports," and the numerology of death, while the Bush administration hangs in there, determined to hand its war off to a new president, while the leading Democratic candidates essentially [duck](#) the withdrawal issue and the bodies [pile](#) ever higher.

It's important to remember, however, that there was once quite another tradition in America. Whatever our country was in my 1950s childhood, Americans were still generally raised to believe that empire was a dreadful, un-American thing. We were, of course, already

garrisoning the globe, but there was that other hideous empire, the Soviet one, to point to. Perhaps the urge for a republic, not an empire still lies hidden somewhere in the American psyche.

Let's hope so, because one great task ahead for the American people will be to deconstruct whatever is left of our empire of stupidity and of this strange, militarized version of America we live in. We can dream, at least, that someday we'll live in a world where one Defense Department is plenty, where militarized corporations don't have endless battlefields on which to test their next techno-toys, where armies are for the defense of country, not to traipse the world in a state of eternal war, and victory is not vested in imperial conflict on the imagined frontiers of the planet, but in "progress reports" concerned with making life everywhere better, saner, and more peaceable.

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[**Note:** Two recent essays which explore allied topics to those considered in this post are well worth checking out: "Destruction: American Foreign Policy at Point Zero" by [Gabriel Kolko](#) in which the historian wonders "why the U.S. makes the identical mistakes over and over again and never learns from its errors"; and "The Waning Power of the War Myth" by [Salon.com's](#) fine essayist Gary Kamiya on Bush's absolute "addiction" to American triumphalism. "[Bush] will go down," concludes Kamiya, "certain that he was right, living the Myth to the end. And because of his addiction to unreality, many more real people will die."]

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