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Yes Congress, Afghanistan is Your Vietnam

By Andrew J. Bacevich
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Just shy of fifty years ago on November 7, 1967, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by J. William Fulbright, Democrat of Arkansas, met in executive session to assess the progress of the ongoing Vietnam War. Secretary of State Dean Rusk was the sole witness invited to testify. Even today, the transcript of Rusk's remarks and the subsequent exchange with committee members make for depressing reading.

Responding to questions that ranged from plaintive to hostile, Rusk gave no ground. The Johnson administration was more than willing to end the war, he insisted; the North Vietnamese government was refusing to do so. The blame lay with Hanoi. Therefore the United States had no alternative but to persist. American credibility was on the line.

By extension, so too was the entire strategy of deterring Communist aggression. The stakes in South Vietnam extended well beyond the fate of that one country, as senators well knew. In that regard, Rusk reminded members of the committee, the Congress had "performed its function...when the key decisions were made"—an allusion to the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, a de facto declaration of war passed with near unanimous congressional support. None too subtly, Rusk was letting members of the committee know that the war was theirs as much as it was the administration's.

Yet Fulbright and his colleagues showed little inclination to accept ownership. As a result, the back-and-forth between Rusk and his interrogators produced little of value. Rather than

illuminating the problem of a war gone badly awry and identifying potential solutions, the event became an exercise in venting frustration. This exchange initiated by Senator Frank Lausche, Democrat from Ohio, captures the overall tone of the proceedings.

Senator Lausche: “The debate about what our course in Vietnam should be has now been in progress since the Tonkin Bay resolution. When was that, August 1964?”

Senator Wayne Morse (D-Ore.): “Long before that.”

Senator Albert Gore, Sr. (D-Tenn.): “Long before that.”

Senator Fulbright: “Oh, yes, but that was the Tonkin Bay.”

Senator Lausche: “For three years we have been arguing it, arguing for what purpose? Has it been to repeal the Tonkin Bay resolution? Has it been to establish justification for pulling out? In the three years, how many times has the Secretary appeared before us?”

Those hearings, those debates, in my opinion, have fully explored all of the aspects that you are speaking about without dealing with any particular issue. Now, this is rather rash, I suppose: If our presence in Vietnam is wrong, [if] it is believed we should pull out, should not one of us present a resolution to the Senate[?] [Then] we would have a specific issue. We would not just be sprawled all over the field, as we have been in the last three years.”

Put simply, Senator Lausche was suggesting that Congress force the matter, providing a forum to examine and resolve an issue that had deeply divided the country and that, Rusk’s assurances notwithstanding, showed no signs of resulting in a successful outcome. No such congressional intervention occurred, however. As a practical matter, Congress in 1967 found it more expedient to defer to the wishes of the commander in chief as the exigencies of the Cold War ostensibly required.

So the Vietnam War dragged on at great cost and to no good effect. Not until the summer of 1970 did Congress repeal the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Even then, the gesture came too late to have any meaningful impact. The war continued toward its mournful conclusion.

To characterize congressional conduct regarding the Vietnam War as timorous and irresponsible is to be kind. There were individual exceptions, of course, among them Senator Morse who had opposed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and Senator Fulbright who by 1967 openly regretted his vote in favor and recognized Vietnam for the disaster it had become. Collectively, however, legislators failed abjectly.

Well, with the passage of a half century, here we are again, back in the soup (or perhaps more accurately, the sand). With the United States currently mired in the longest armed conflict in the nation’s history—considerably longer than Vietnam—Senator Lausche’s proposal of 1967 just might merit a fresh look.

Of course, the Afghanistan War (ostensibly part of a Global War on Terrorism) differs from the Vietnam War (ostensibly part of the Cold War) in myriad ways. Yet it resembles Vietnam in three crucial respects. First, it drags on with no end in sight. Second, no evidence exists to suggest that mere persistence will produce a positive outcome. Third, those charged with managing the war have long since run out of ideas about how to turn things around.

Indeed, the Trump administration seems unable to make up its mind about what to do in Afghanistan. A request for additional troops by the senior U.S. field commander has been pending since February. He is still waiting for an answer. James Mattis, Trump's defense secretary, has promised a shiny new strategy. That promise remains unfulfilled. Meanwhile, the news coming out of Kabul is almost uniformly bad. The war itself continues as if on autopilot. Lausche's "sprawled all over the field" provides an apt description of where the United States finds itself today.

Where is the Congress in all of this? By all appearances, congressional deference to the putative prerogatives of the commander in chief remains absurdly intact—this despite the fact that the Cold War is now a distant memory and the post once graced by eminences like Truman and Eisenhower is now occupied by an individual whose judgment and attention span (among other things) are suspect.

A citizen might ask: What more does the Congress need to reassert its constitutional prerogatives on matters related to war? Surely there must be at least a handful of members who, setting aside partisan considerations, can muster the courage and vision to offer a rash proposition similar to Senator Lausche's. Doing so has the potential not only to inaugurate debate on a conflict that has gone on for too long to no purpose, but also to call much needed attention to the overall disarray of U.S. policy of which Afghanistan is merely one symptom. Otherwise, why do we pay these people?