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Déjà Vu All Over Again in Afghanistan

by William Astore and Tom Engelhardt

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It didn't take long. Only 11 days after Barack Obama entered the Oval Office, a [Newsweek cover story](#) proclaimed the Afghan War "Obama's Vietnam." And there wasn't even a question mark. As John Barry and Evan Thomas wrote grimly in that January piece, "[T]here is this stark similarity: in Afghanistan, as in Vietnam, we may now be facing a situation where we can win every battle and still not win the war — at least not within a time frame and at a cost that is acceptable to the American people." In the two and a half months since that piece appeared, the President and his advisors have, in fact, [doubled-down](#) on what is increasingly the [Af-Pak War](#) — with the expanding fighting in Pakistan's tribal borderlands [helping to destabilize](#) that regional nuclear power. As a result, it would hardly be surprising if "Obama's Vietnam" became an ever more [common refrain](#) in the year ahead.

In a number of ways, however, the Af-Pak War couldn't bear less of a relationship to the Vietnam one. After all, this time around there is no superpower enemy like the Soviet Union or regional power like China supporting and arming the Taliban (or, for that matter, like the United States, which supported and armed the *mujahideen* to give the Soviets their own "Vietnam" in Afghanistan in the 1980s). In Vietnam, the U.S. faced a North Vietnamese professional army, well-trained, superbly disciplined, and supplied with the best the Soviets and Chinese could produce, including heavy weapons; while the guerrilla organization we fought in South Vietnam, which Americans knew as "the Vietcong," had widespread popular support, was unified, dedicated, well structured, and highly regimented.

The ["Taliban,"](#) on the other hand, is a rag-tag, under-armed set of largely localized militias adding up to only perhaps [10,000-15,000](#) armed fighters, loyal to a range of leaders, including the pre-2001 Taliban leadership headed by Mullah Omar, various former *mujahideen* commanders of the anti-Soviet War, or sometimes just local warlords. Even where firmly lodged itself, the Taliban's support in rural Afghanistan, as far as can be told

from what [opinion polls exist](#), is at best unenthusiastic, and based largely on its ability to bring some safety to rural areas the corrupt central government has no control over, and above all, on its ability to present itself as the only real opposition to a foreign military occupation of the country.

Unlike the Vietnamese, the Taliban are largely incapable of bringing down American and NATO planes or helicopters, attacking big American bases, or massing for major offensives of any sort. While growing in strength [by every measure available](#), what they are largely capable of doing, in military terms, is blowing things up via roadside bombs or suicide attacks (which is, of course, no small thing). As a result, American casualties, while serious and [possibly due to rise](#) this year (along with [Afghan civilian casualties](#)), are exceedingly modest if measured by a [Vietnam-era yardstick](#).

In other words, in scale, the Af-Pak War is unlikely ever to become a real "Vietnam" (Obama's or otherwise). Looked at another way, however, this war may have the capacity to inflict upon the U.S. the kind of defeat that the Vietnamese, for all their strength and nationalist fervor, were incapable of. In a sense, Af-Pak threatens to be, in the personalized terms the American media often favors, not "Obama's Vietnam," but "Obama's Afghanistan" — that is, our version of the defeat we once helped inflict on the Russians which played a role in breaking the back of the Soviet empire. The U.S. suffered a genuine defeat in Vietnam and its army nearly collapsed in the process, but the American empire and the American economic system stood in no mortal danger from it.

By the end of 2009, the cost of the Iraq War — that is, of putting down another set of rag-tag insurgents — will [pass](#) that of the Vietnam War and, in dollars spent, stand second only to World War II in U.S. history. Add to that the rising expense of a never-ending Af-Pak War and — in the worst of economic times — you have the equivalent of a vast financial hemorrhage, an economic sinkhole. In short, if "Obama's war" proves a "quagmire," it may not be a Vietnamese-style one.

In one way, however, the Af-Pak War has borne, and continues to bear, a certain eerie resemblance to the Vietnam one: in the manner in which Americans have chosen to fight it. Not surprisingly, as retired lieutenant colonel and TomDispatch regular William Astore points out in the following striking piece, in this we resemble ourselves 40 years ago. As a result, for anyone who remembers Vietnam, much of our military's "new thinking" on counterinsurgency warfare, which has gotten such media praise, looks old and tired indeed. But let Astore take up the tale from here. *Tom*

Mary McCarthy in Vietnam, Barack Obama in Afghanistan

Seven Lessons and Many Questions for the President By William Astore

In 1967, outraged by the course of the Vietnam War, as well as her country's role in prolonging and worsening it, [Mary McCarthy](#), novelist, memoirist, and author of the bestseller *The Group*, went to Saigon, then the capital of South Vietnam, to judge the situation for herself. The next year, she went to the North Vietnamese capital, Hanoi. She wrote accounts of both journeys, published originally in pamphlet format as *Vietnam* (1967) and *Hanoi* (1968), and later gathered with her other writings on Vietnam as a book, *The*

Seventeenth Degree (1974). As pamphlets, McCarthy's accounts sold poorly and passed into obscurity; deservedly so, some would say.

Those who'd say this, however, would be wrong. McCarthy brought a novelist's keen eye to America's activities and its rhetoric in Vietnam. By no means a military expert, not even an expert on Vietnam — she only made a conscious decision to study the war in Vietnam *after* she returned from her trip to Saigon — her impressionistic writings were nevertheless insightful precisely because she had long been a critical thinker beholden to no authority.

Her insights into our approach to war-fighting and to foreign cultures are as telling today as they were 40 years ago, so much so that President Obama and his advisors might do well to add her unconventional lessons to their all-too-conventional thinking on our spreading war in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

What were those lessons? Here are seven of them, each followed by questions that, four decades later, someone at President Obama's next press conference should consider asking him:

1. McCarthy's most fundamental objection was to the way, in Vietnam, the U.S. government decided to apply "technology and a superior power to a political situation that will not yield to this." At the very least, the United States was guilty of folly, but McCarthy went further. She condemned our technocentric and hegemonic form of warfare as "wicked" because of its "absolute indifference to the cost in human lives" to the Vietnamese people.

Even in 1967, the [widespread](#), at times indiscriminate, nature of American killing was well known. For example, U.S. planes dropped roughly 7 million tons of bombs on Vietnam and parts of Laos and Cambodia during the war, nearly five times the tonnage used against Germany during World War II. The U.S. even waged war on the Vietnamese jungle and forest, which so effectively hid Vietnamese guerrilla forces, spraying roughly 20 million gallons of toxic herbicides (including the dioxin-contaminated [Agent Orange](#)) on it.

In her outrage, McCarthy dared to compare the seeming indifference of many of her fellow citizens toward the blunt-edged sword of technological destruction we had loosed on Vietnam to the moral obtuseness of ordinary Germans under Adolf Hitler.

Questions for President Obama: Aren't we once again relying on the destructive power of technology to "solve" complex political and religious struggles? Aren't we yet again showing indifference to the human costs of war, especially when borne by non-Americans? Even though we're using far fewer bombs in the [Af-Pak highlands](#) than we did in Vietnam, aren't we still morally culpable when these "precision-guided munitions" miss their targets and instead claim innocents, or hit suspected "terrorists" who suddenly morph into [wedding parties](#)? In those cases, do we not seek false comfort in the phrase, *C'est la guerre*, or at least that modern equivalent: unavoidable [collateral damage](#)?

2. As Richard Nixon campaigned for the presidency in 1968 by calling for "peace with honor" in Vietnam, McCarthy offered her own warning about the dangers that arose when the office of the presidency collided with an American desire never to be labeled a loser: "The American so-called free-enterprise system, highly competitive, investment-conscious, expansionist, repels a loser policy by instinctive defense movements centering in the ganglia

of the presidency. No matter what direction the incumbent, as candidate, was pointing in, he slowly pivots once he assumes office."

Questions for President Obama: Have you, like Vietnam-era presidents, pivoted toward yet another surge simply to avoid the label of "loser" in Afghanistan? And if the cost of victory (however defined) is hundreds, or even thousands, more American military casualties, hundreds of billions of additional dollars spent, and extensive collateral damage and blowback, will this "victory" not be a pyrrhic one, achieved at a price so dear as to be indistinguishable from defeat?

3. Though critical of the U.S. military in Vietnam, McCarthy was even more critical of American civilian officials there. "On the whole," she wrote, they "behaved like a team of promoters with a dubious 'growth' stock they were brokering." At least military men were often more forthright than the civilians, if not necessarily more self-aware, McCarthy noted, because they were part of the war — the product, so to speak — not its salesmen.

Questions for President Obama: In promising to send a new ["surge"](#) of State Department personnel and other civilians into Afghanistan, are you prepared as well to parse their words? Are you braced in case they sell you a false bill of goods, even if the sellers themselves, in their eagerness to speak fairy tales to power, continually ignore the Fantasyland nature of their tale?

4. Well before Bush administration officials boasted about creating their own reality and new "facts on the ground" in Iraq, Mary McCarthy recognized the danger of another type of "fact": "The more troops and matériel committed to Vietnam, the more retreat appears to be cut off — not by an enemy, but by our own numbers. To call for withdrawal in the face of that commitment... is to seem to argue not against a policy, but against *facts*, which by their very nature are unanswerable."

Questions for President Obama: If your surge in Afghanistan fails, will you be able to de-escalate as quickly as you escalated? Or will the fact that you've put more troops in harm's way (with all their equipment and all the money that will go into [new base](#) and airfield and road construction), and committed more of your prestige to prevailing, make it even harder to consider leaving?

5. A cursory reading of *The Pentagon Papers*, the famously secret government documents on Vietnam leaked to the *New York Times* by Daniel Ellsberg, reveals how skeptical America's top officials were, early on, in pursuing a military solution to the situation in South Vietnam. Nevertheless, knowing better, the "best and brightest," as journalist David Halberstam termed them in his famous, ironic book title, still talked themselves into it; and they did so, as McCarthy noted, because they set seemingly meaningful goals ("metrics" or "benchmarks," we'd say today), which they then convinced themselves they were actually achieving. When you trick yourself into believing that you're meeting your goals, as Halberstam noted, there's no reason to reexamine your course of action.

Questions for President Obama: Much has been written about an [internal struggle](#) within your administration over the wisdom of surging in Afghanistan. Now, you, too, have called for the setting of ["benchmarks"](#) for your new strategy's success. Are you wise enough to set them to capture the complexities of political realities on the ground rather than playing to

American strengths? Are you capable of re-examining them, even when your advisors assure you that they are being achieved?

6. In her day, Mary McCarthy recognized the inequities of burden-sharing at home when it came to the war in Vietnam: "Casualty figures, still low [in 1967], seldom strike home outside rural and low-income groups — the silent part of society. The absence of sacrifices [among the privileged classes] has had its effect on the opposition [to the war], which feels no need, on the whole, to turn away from its habitual standards and practices — what for? We have not withdrawn our sympathy from American power and from the way of life that is tied to it — a connection that is more evident to a low-grade G.I. in Vietnam than to most American intellectuals."

Questions for President Obama: Are you willing to listen to the common G.I. as well as to the generals who have your ear? Are you willing to insist on greater equity in [burden-sharing](#), since once again most of the burden of Iraq and Afghanistan has fallen on "the silent part of society"? Are you able to recognize that the "best and brightest" in the corridors of power may not be the wisest exactly because they have so little to lose (and perhaps much to gain) from our ["overseas contingency operations"](#)?

7. McCarthy was remarkably perceptive when it came to the seductiveness of American technological prowess. Our technological superiority, she wrote, was a large part of "our willingness to get into Vietnam and stay there... The technological gap between us and the North Vietnamese constituted, we thought, an advantage which obliged us not to quit."

Questions for President Obama: Rather than providing us with a war-winning edge, might our [robot drones](#), satellite imagery, and all our other gadgetry of war seduce us into believing that we can "prevail" at a reasonable and sustainable cost? Indeed, do we think we should prevail precisely because our high-tech military brags of "full spectrum dominance"?

One bonus lesson from Mary McCarthy before we take our leave of her: Even now, we speak too often of "Bush's war" or, [more recently](#), "Obama's war." Before we start chattering mindlessly about Iraq and Afghanistan as *American* tragedies, we would do well to recall what McCarthy had to say about the war in Vietnam: "There is something distasteful," she wrote, "in the very notion of approaching [Vietnam] as an *American* tragedy, whose protagonist is a great suffering Texan [President Lyndon Baines Johnson]."

Yes, there is something distasteful about a media that blithely refers to Bush's or Obama's war as hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans suffer. For American troops, after all, are not the only ones paying the ultimate price when the U.S. fights foreign wars for ill-considered reasons and misguided goals.