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Vietnam has ominous echoes for president stuck in unwinnable war

John Swain

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Influential voices in America are warning Barack Obama that he is in danger of sliding into a Vietnam-style quagmire in Afghanistan that could bog down his presidency just as Vietnam ruined Lyndon Johnson's.

In the 1960s, Johnson believed he had no choice but to fight communism in Vietnam; 40 years on, Obama has portrayed Afghanistan as a war of necessity to defeat terrorism.

“The similarities to Vietnam are ominous,” Wesley Clark, the retired general and former commander of Nato, wrote in the New York Daily News. “There, too, an insurgency was led and supported from outside the borders of the state . . . There, too, sanctuaries across international borders stymied US military efforts.”

Clark's comments came as Obama prepares to receive a request from his top commander, General Stanley McChrystal, for more troops.

In Vietnam, Johnson followed his generals' advice and escalated the conflict, but this led to vastly higher losses. The war ended in 1975 with an ignominious American withdrawal and communist victory after 59,000 Americans and at least 3m Vietnamese had been killed.

Afghanistan is not on the same scale. While America is due to have 68,000 troops in the country by the end of the year, it had more than 500,000 on the ground in Vietnam.

At the peak of the Vietnam war the Americans were losing 400 soldiers a week. In Afghanistan they have lost 739 since 2001. But US casualties are rising sharply.

The Taliban are nothing like as united, well organised or as powerful a force as the Vietnamese communists. But there is one worrying similarity that will not be lost on Richard Holbrooke, Obama's special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, who served as a young diplomat in Saigon in the 1960s.

Rufus Phillips, Holbrooke's boss in Vietnam and author of Why Vietnam Matters, said that a 1967 rigged election in South Vietnam had proved to be the "most destructive and destabilising factor of all". He was in Kabul as an observer for the recent presidential elections.

Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai has been compared with Ngo Dinh Diem, the discredited South Vietnamese leader, not least by David Killcullen, the Australian counterinsurgency expert who is an adviser to the American military.

Karzai, he said, was seen as ineffective and his family as corrupt. He had alienated a substantial portion of the population and seemed out of touch with reality: "That is all the sort of things that were said about President Diem in 1963."

Diem was murdered in 1963 in a military coup encouraged by the CIA.