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Review - Others
The sum of all fears

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IN CANBERRA - NUMBERS play a bigger role than bullets in war, particularly when they pertain to the grisly equations of the number of friendly and enemy dead.

During the Vietnam War, Americans were treated to a regular deluge of enemy body counts in a bid to exhibit a measure of success in an unpopular conflict. But the pressure on military units to produce high counts led to inflated tallies.

The bloody battle for Hamburger Hill in May 1969, for example, was castigated for being a mere exercise in racking up enemy body counts. The battle - so named for the speed at which it churned up dead bodies - subsequently accelerated American efforts to withdraw from Vietnam.

After the Vietnam War, an entire generation of military officers and politicians displayed official disdain towards body counts.

Asked in November 2003 whether the number of enemy dead exceeded the US death toll, then defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld said: 'We don't do body counts on other people.'

Against this backdrop, it is significant that - for the first time since 2003 - the Bush administration has started giving out enemy body counts.

In late October last year, the United States military reported 20 insurgents killed in raids near the Syrian border. Six days earlier, a marine unit said that an estimated 70 insurgents had been killed in several air strikes.

The definitive body count came from President George W. Bush in December, when he spoke to a group of journalists in the Oval Office.

According to him, 'offensive operations' against 'terrorists and insurgents' had killed or captured nearly 5,900 in the period from October to the first week of December.

Analysts said the disclosure of the enemy body count was a bid to shore up waning public support for the war - a ploy with echoes of Vietnam.

Mr Bush said in October: 'Every day...I see who dies on our team. I don't see who dies on their team.'

'And so it gives you the impression that (American forces) are just there, they're kind of moving around, directing traffic, and somebody takes a shot at them and they're down. That's not exactly what's happening.'

Drawing parallels between Vietnam and Iraq is difficult.

While rivalry between the former Soviet Union and the United States set the geopolitical context for the former, a more fluid world environment frames the context for the latter.

The latest volte-face by the Bush administration, however, highlights how the American adventure in Iraq is taking on certain aspects of Vietnam.

Another similarity between Iraq and Vietnam is the close association between public opinion and the number of American casualties.

By early 2005, when American combat deaths in Iraq had hit 1,500, the percentage of respondents in a US survey on the war who considered the Iraq invasion a mistake was over 50 per cent (the toll had doubled to 3,000 by the end of last year).

Remarkably, this was about the same as the percentage who considered the war in Vietnam a mistake at the time of the 1968 Tet offensive - when nearly 20,000 soldiers had already died.

Political scientist John Mueller, of Ohio State University, calls this casualty sensitivity the 'Iraq syndrome'. Writing in the Foreign Affairs journal last month, Dr Mueller said: 'Casualty for casualty, support has declined far more quickly than it did during either the Korean War or the Vietnam War. And if history is any indication, there is little the Bush administration can do to reverse this decline.'

What the figures illustrate is that the American people have stopped believing in the Iraq cause.

Political scientists say the number of casualties is irrelevant. What is more important is whether Americans think a war is worth fighting.

'When is it going to stop? We're losing a lot of youngsters,' 82-year-old Ed Collins, who survived the assault on Normandy's beaches in World War II, told the Associated Press. 'I went in when I was 18; that was young, too. But we fought for something. Now we have no idea who we're fighting for and what we're fighting for.'

Mr Collins' statement is a succinct summary of the collective wisdom of generations of military strategists.

Famed strategist Carl von Clausewitz, whose writings have inspired generations of military officers and scholars, argued that war is the continuation of politics by other means. The late Chinese leader Mao Zedong had a starker definition: war is politics with bloodshed.

But Clausewitz qualified himself by saying that the political object must be worth fighting for. The equation: once the expenditure incurred in securing the object exceeds its worth, the object must be abandoned.

From the outset, Washington's political objective behind its 2003 invasion has never been clearly defined. It has varied from the toppling of Saddam Hussein to the search for weapons of mass destruction and the fight against terror.

(Cynics might argue that Washington's scaled-down objective in Iraq is restoring it to a state of antebellum - putting in place a somewhat authoritarian regime to maintain stability, but minus the threat to the region.)

Regardless, the bottom line is that, in the eyes of the American public, the political object in Iraq is looking increasingly unaffordable since the US death toll crossed the 3,000 mark.

As such, cogent arguments against an American withdrawal from Iraq are likely to be overtaken by domestic considerations - as per Vietnam and the war in Korea in the 1950s.

According to various doomsday scenarios, an American withdrawal could lead to - among other things - the implosion of Iraq, the takeover of Iraq by Iran, the rise of terrorist havens in the Middle East as well as irreparable damage to Washington's reputation as a superpower.

But Mr Bush needs only to look to history to see how domestic considerations could trigger moves of desperation.

Facing a prolonged stalemate in Korea in 1953 and waning support at home, president Dwight Eisenhower threatened to use nuclear weapons against China's Communists in a bid to end the war.

In 1969, president Richard Nixon also faced ailing domestic support for the Vietnam War. To coerce the Soviets and North Vietnamese back to the negotiating table, he sent a fleet of nuclear-capable bombers across the Arctic.

It is highly unlikely that Mr Bush will go ballistic the same way that Mr Eisenhower and Mr Nixon did.

But two things are for sure.

The implications of an American withdrawal would be severe. But going by the numbers, it will not be a matter of whether, but when.

The writer is pursuing a doctorate in strategic studies at the Australian National University.

A LOST CAUSE?

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MR ED COLLINS, 82, who survived the assault on Normandy's beaches in World War II

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