

“AFGHANISTANIZATION;” THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION’S USE OF THE VIETNAM ANALOGY

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In order to make sense of the world, leaders constantly rely on heuristics to make decisions and process events. Commonly, they reference events of the past in order to understand current situations. This allusion of past events—the use of “historical analogies”—allows leaders to define the risks of a situation and formulate policy (Khong, 10). Throughout American history, presidents have utilized historical analogies, often previous wars, when making policy decisions in order to learn from past conflicts and to avoid repeating the same foreign policy mistakes. Continuing this tradition, the Obama Administration frequently cited the Vietnam Analogy, which can both prescribe both conflict escalation and also avoidance, with regard to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. In this paper, As such, I will argue that the Obama White House’s pervasive employment of the Vietnam Analogy can help explain the policy strategy of “escalate and exit” in Afghanistan (Sanger, 28).

SECTION ONE: PRESCRIPTIONS OF THE VIETNAM ANALOGY

The Vietnam analogy provides two, chief, albeit somewhat -contradictory, policy prescriptions: the first, commonly known as “Vietnam syndrome,” warns against foreign military intervention, especially in the absence of U.S. vital interests. The second, which Khong names the “massive force syndrome,” prescribes the use of overwhelming force from the onset of foreign conflict in order to squash the enemy (259). At different points during the Obama Presidency, it appears that the Administration invoked and utilized each of these prescriptions, as Obama ramped up forces in Afghanistan only to retrench and cut U.S. losses. The Vietnam War, one of the most costly American wars both in terms of monetary spending and human lives, served as a cautionary tale for U.S. decision-makers. Much of the Vietnam War involved unfamiliar guerrilla warfare and nebulous objectives. This resulted in an exhausting, unsuccessful, and drawn-out military intervention. Thus, “Vietnam warns against intervention in politically messy Third-World conflicts, especially those fueled by nationalism and waged asymmetrically” (Record, 166). As a result, successive U.S. presidents have vowed to avoid Vietnam War-like conflicts since the conclusion of the Vietnam War in 1975.

The first interpretation of “no more Vietnams means that the United States should abstain from intervening in areas of dubious strategic worth, where the justice of both the cause and of the means used are likely to be questionable, and where the United States is unlikely to win” (Khong, 258). This line of analogical reasoning prescribes the avoidance of conflict. In the case of Obama, however, the question was

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not whether or not to intervene, but whether to remain involved in an inherited war. In this context, then, the Vietnam syndrome prescription can also translate to “cutting U.S. losses” by exiting war. In contrast, “massive force syndrome” stipulates that “the mistake the United States made was not to have fought harder. That the United States lost because it chose not to fight harder, not because the war was unwinnable” (Khong, 258). Therefore, this prescribes “removing [unrealistic military] constraints and doing whatever is necessary to win in future conflicts” (Khong, 259). The use of this interpretation would encourage escalation of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. As the lessons of Vietnam can both prescribe avoidance (or withdrawal) from conflict as well as intensification of war, even in name, it is clear that both of these interpretations of the Vietnam Analogy played a role in the “escalate and exit” strategy of the Obama White House. With the objective of exit in mind, the Administration chose first to utilize the teachings of massive force syndrome to quell the insurgency in Afghanistan in order to then withdraw military forces, as dictated by Vietnam syndrome.

SECTION TWO: SELECTION OF THE VIETNAM ANALOGY

Having explained the policy prescriptions provided by two predominant interpretations of the Vietnam Analogy, I will now explicate why the Obama Administration favored the Vietnam Analogy in regard to Afghanistan. In any process of analogical reasoning, there are two major heuristics for analogy selection: representativeness and availability. Most likely, both of these played roles in the Obama Administration’s use of the Vietnam Analogy. First, I will explore the representativeness heuristic, in which decision makers select analogies “on the basis of superficial similarities between the prospective analogue and the situation it is supposed to illuminate” (Khong, 217). Therefore, policymakers will interpret surface-level similarities as confirmations of the validity of a particular analogy for a given situation.

In many respects, apparent similarities manifest between the wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan. In both situations, “the United States waged a protracted counterinsurgency campaign against a foreign non-state actor on behalf of a corrupt and incompetent local government” (Miller, 461-462). Furthermore, the U.S. employed similar tactics in order to combat the insurgencies: “both involved what the US military calls ‘foreign internal defense’ and ‘security assistance’ alongside civilian efforts to foster good governance to support US war efforts.” (Miller, 462). In Vietnam, the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments instituted Civil

Operation and Rural Development Support (CORDS) to pacify and win over the civilian population (Phillips), while in Afghanistan, the U.S. government launched “clear-hold-build” missions in attempts to flip the Afghan public in favor of the American presence by guaranteeing the population’s security (Sambanis et al., 805). These superficial likenesses, therefore, may suggest that “the United States could learn useful lessons about how to wage counterinsurgency warfare in Afghanistan by examining its performance in Vietnam” (Miller, 462). The surface similarities between Vietnam and Afghanistan likely influenced the Obama White House to utilize the

Vietnam Analogy in the development of Afghan policy.

In addition to representativeness, the availability with which the Vietnam Analogy was recalled added to the potency of its policy prescriptions. A number of variables contributes to the availability of an analogy to policy makers. These include first-hand, formative, or generational experience. First, Vietnam serves as a particularly vivid analogy for those in the Obama Administration as many Obama officials, (aged roughly in their 50s through 70s), experienced the Vietnam War during their "formative years," defined as ages 12-29 (Schuman and Corning, 81). However, although experiences during these "critical years" are especially influential, Schuman and Corning prove that even those who did not experience the Vietnam War during their formative years—which include Barack Obama, born in 1961—still choose the Vietnam Analogy over the World War II Analogy. In fact, those born between 1957-1961 are 62.8% more likely to utilize the Vietnam Analogy over the World War II Analogy. Furthermore, Americans born 1906-1986, which encompasses the vast majority of government officials, favor the Vietnam analogy, albeit to varying degrees (83). Furthermore, Democrats (84%) are even more likely to opt for the Vietnam Analogy than Republicans (41%) (Schuman and Corning, 84).

Though Schuman and Corning's 2006 study primarily discusses analogy selection for the Iraq War, it nonetheless serves as a valuable reference for the analogy selection for both of the wars Obama inherited in the Middle East. As the Obama Administration is a Democratic administration composed of many officials generationally affected by the Vietnam War, this research implies that Obama officials were more likely to invoke the use of Vietnam in regard to their decisions in the Middle East.

Moreover, a number of noteworthy White House officials in the Obama Administration had first-hand experience with the Vietnam War. First, Richard Holbrooke, who served as Obama's Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, got his first assignment as a junior Foreign Service officer in Vietnam in 1962 (Woodward, 84). Holbrooke repeatedly cited his past experiences, including Vietnam, (among others), as a Foreign Service officer in reference to Afghan policy. Thus, Holbrooke's early experience with Vietnam heightened his accessibility to the Vietnam Analogy. Notably, the Obama Administration also consulted Henry Kissinger with regard to Afghanistan. As he was heavily involved in the Vietnam War, the lessons of Vietnam greatly affected Kissinger's view and policy guidance. In response to Obama's fixation on exiting Afghanistan, Kissinger advised: "you should never be negotiating a peace when the opposing force knows you're leaving" (qtd. in Sanger, 123). This appears to be in line with Nixon's policy of escalating military force in order to bring the North Vietnamese to the negotiation table, a policy in which Kissinger, himself, played a large role. Finally, both National Security Advisor James Jones served as a Marine and also Secretary of State John Kerry served in the Navy in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. These are only four examples of Obama advisors with significant personal experience in the Vietnam War, though there were presumably others across

different departments within the Administration. These men's accessibility to the Vietnam Analogy is of importance, as each had direct access to the President. Accordingly, both accessibility and representativeness heightened the probability that the Obama Administration used the Vietnam Analogy when forming policy in Afghanistan.

SECTION THREE: THE VIETNAM ANALOGY IN OBAMA'S "ESCALATE AND EXIT" FROM AFGHANISTAN

Likely due to the availability of the Vietnam Analogy to members of the Obama Administration and its perceived representativeness to Afghanistan, the Administration repeatedly invoked the Vietnam Analogy informing discussions of Afghan foreign policy. As Miller remarks, "the Vietnam analogy returned in 2009 with the change of administrations and a review of US policy and strategy in Afghanistan" (451). Particularly telling of this Administration's reliance on the Vietnam Analogy, Obama and his aides circulated a copy of the book *Lessons in Disaster*, which documents Lyndon B. Johnson's decision-making in Vietnam, "determined to avoid turning their inherited wars in Afghanistan and Iraq into a Vietnam-style morass" (Liptak). Exhibited by the circulation of *Lessons of Disaster*, it is evident that there was a culture and encouragement of "learning from the past," specifically from Vietnam, within the Obama White House.

Although Obama, himself, publically avoided the use of the Vietnam Analogy, prominent members of his administration frequently cited Vietnam. When the administration was debating the extent of the 2009 troop surge in Afghanistan, "Vice President Joe Biden was 'more convinced than ever that Afghanistan was a version of Vietnam,' and when Obama was about to order more troops he warned that the US might get 'locked into Vietnam'" (Miller, 451). Similarly, Holbrooke warned President Obama that "history should not be forgotten" as he had learned that "guerrillas win in a stalemate" (Woodward, 97). Moreover, "Clinton's deputy of State, Jim Steinberg, had privately told her he was worried they were on the path to another Vietnam. There was an 'open-endedness' to the mission" (Woodward, 250). And, when John Kerry, a Vietnam veteran, assumed the role of Secretary of State during Obama's second term, he routinely referenced Vietnam, noting: "I think [Obama] understood the lesson of Vietnam, and more" (qtd. in Liptak). Finally, Vali Nasr, a special adviser to the President's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, claimed that Mullah Omar, the Afghan Taliban Leader, "is the Ho Chi Minh of the war," pointing to the infectivity American forces to put down the insurgency despite apparent superior military capabilities (qtd. in Sanger, 120). Taken together, these examples offer some insight as to the prevalence of the Vietnam Analogy during the Administration's deliberations on the topic of Afghanistan. This analogy was not only used once or by a single individual during the administration, but floated repeatedly around the subject of Afghanistan.

Many of the references to Vietnam surround discussion of the 2009 troop surge in Afghanistan, revealing that these policy-makers utilized the Vietnam analogy

to assess the stakes and dangers associated with remaining in the ongoing conflict as well as to rule out other options (Khong, 10). In particular, Holbrooke, Biden, and Steinberg cited Vietnam in order to express concern that, if not handled responsively, the conflict in Afghanistan would turn into “another Vietnam,” a protracted and costly conflict. Therefore, in the context of the troop surge decision, leaders cited the Vietnam analogy to support an immediate ramp-up of troops, in line with “massive force syndrome,” over slower options. When debating the deployment timeline, Holbrooke, Clinton, Mullen, and Petraeus endorsed the immediate deployment of 17,000 troops over a more graduated installment or further strategy review (Woodward, 97). Therefore, in this key decision, Holbrooke, Biden, and Steinberg’s warnings of another Vietnam proved powerful in emphasizing the danger of a “light” intervention, which could prolong the conflict and result in a stalemate. Instead, they cited Vietnam to support a forceful, immediate installment of all 17,000 troops. During the 2009 troop surge decision, the Administration used the Vietnam Analogy to illuminate the costs of ongoing war and eliminate other policy options, resulting in an “escalation” strategy in attempts of speeding an “exit” to the conflict and safe U.S. withdrawal.

Although the Obama administration initially used the Vietnam Analogy to prescribe escalation in Afghanistan, evidenced by officials’ talk of Vietnam in the 2009 troop surge decision, the Administration then took the lessons of “Vietnam syndrome” in order to attempt a peaceful exit from the region. As Obama’s primary goal was to exit Afghanistan, he only utilized the approach of “massive force syndrome” in hopes of curtailing an already-lengthy war. Thus, Obama hoped that by the end of the troop surge, US forces would have diminished the insurgency enough for the Afghan government to regain control, providing thefor U.S. the opportunity for withdrawal once and for all. Obama wanted “the military effort in this new approach [to] focus on creating ‘conditions for a transition’, as well as ensuring ‘a civilian surge that reinforces positive action’ in Afghanistan” (Aslam, 141). This aim of transition closely mirrors Nixon’s approach of Vietnamization. Like Nixon, who aimed to return power back to the South Vietnamese Government, Obama wanted to transition control from American military forces back to the Afghan Government and President Hamid Karzai (Sanger, 28). Ultimately, aligning with “Vietnam syndrome,” Obama wanted what he called an “exit strategy” from Afghanistan (Woodward, 253). Thus, throughout his presidency, Obama followed both primary policy prescriptions dictated by the Vietnam Analogy— first “massive force,” followed by “Vietnam syndrome”— in order to achieve a Nixonian, Vietnamization-like policy strategy for “escalate and exit” in Afghanistan.

In contrast to my psychological approach highlighting analogical reasoning, some scholars may take a structural approach to explaining Obama’s foreign policy in Afghanistan. Peter Trubowitz highlights the importance of “slack” in presidents’ foreign policy flexibility, claiming that “leaders have little geopolitical slack when... security is scarce and their state is exposed and vulnerable to foreign intimidation and aggression” (19). According to this definition, Obama had very little geopolitical

slack due to the U.S. commitments in the Middle East, forcing him to conduct a “realist” strategy to minimize the U.S. security threat. Furthermore, incorporating the domestic arena, Trubowitz argues that “during the Cold War, successive presidents... so feared a domestic political backlash for ‘losing a country to communism’ that they attached value to places of little intrinsic geostrategic interest” (18). One might argue that this argument can thus be transferred to the War on Terror: Obama ramped up the intervention in Afghanistan due to avoid the domestic backlash that would come with being “soft” on terrorism. However, though these arguments explain the “escalate” aspect of Obama’s strategy, they neglect to explain Obama’s fixation on “exit.” For Obama, exit—a “realistic ramp-down of troops”—was his primary concern (Woodward, 253). Thus, a structural, realist argument alone does not prove satisfying in understanding Obama’s obsession with withdrawal. However, when combined with a psychological approach incorporating the use of the Vietnam Analogy, it is possible to understand why Obama, cognizant of the dangers of ongoing war, so wanted to avoid further involvement in Afghanistan, only agreeing to ramp up his military commitments in order to achieve his primary objective of exit.

SECTION FOUR: CONCLUSION

A close examination of both the Obama Administration’s policy and language surrounding Obama’s “escalate and exit” strategy in Afghanistan reveals pervasive use of the Vietnam Analogy. Obama’s policy in the Middle East adhered to the policy prescriptions provided by the Vietnam Analogy. Massive force syndrome helps explain the rationale between the immediate troop surge in 2009, while Vietnam syndrome may underlie Obama’s persistent desire to exit the Middle East. Combined, these policy prescriptions explain Obama’s “escalate and exit” approach to Afghanistan. Throughout his presidency, Obama enacted policies that closely mirrored Nixon’s in Vietnam: both presidents ramped up their military presence in their respective wars. Both presidents, too, desired to ultimately return control to the host governments in attempts to achieve some idea of what Nixon coined “peace with honor.” In place of bombing raids, which Nixon ordered in Laos and Cambodia, Obama ordered drone strikes in Afghanistan in Pakistan. With these parallels, Obama’s policy of “escalate and exit” appears to be a modern version of Vietnamization, what I would call: “Afghanistanization.” Thus, it is possible that Obama did “take the lessons of the past too seriously,” as Miller warned, as now both Vietnam and Afghanistan serve as examples of messy and largely unsuccessful wars (453). Though it is still too soon to know the lasting effects of Obama’s policy, the continuing unrest in the Middle East implies that even those that do learn from history may still be “doomed” to repeat it.

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