

Turning the Tide

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In such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people, not to be on the side of the executioners.
-- Albert Camus

Editors' Note

Greetings, Reader:

This is the first issue of the very first volume of *Turning the Tide*, one of many contributions to the grassroots media efforts now sweeping across the planet.

The aims of this publication are to provide coverage, limited though it may be, on pressing social, political, and economic issues that receive little to no attention in corporate media; to help facilitate informed discussion about such matters (with an emphasis on South Texan currents when possible); and finally, to provide a voice and organizational apparatus for students committed to helping disintegrate poverty, classism, racism, sexism, war, and other deep-rooted institutional failures.

Because this is our first issue, our access to content and writers has understandably been limited. As such, this issue is a special edition, and is given over entirely to an interview with historian James Carter.

At the moment, it is unclear how often *Turning the Tide* will be produced. We would prefer to make this a monthly ordeal, but that requires reader participation. If you would like to contribute to *Turning the Tide*, then we invite you to write for us; likewise, we welcome letters to the editors, comics, poems, etc.

To contact or visit us online, see back page for details. Thank you for reading.

- The Eds.

From Vietnam to Iraq: Interview with James Carter

by DC Tedrow

James Carter is an assistant professor of history at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. His research focuses on U.S. foreign policy and the early days of the Vietnam War, and this month will be speaking as part of a panel discussion at this month's Historians Against the War Conference, hosted by the University of Texas-Austin, on Feb. 17-19. Below, Dr. Carter discusses some of his research, including comparisons between the Vietnam and Iraq wars, war profiteering, and state building.

Could you describe your research interests?

My research interests are U.S. foreign policy with an emphasis on Vietnam, and I study Vietnam—it is the subject of my dissertation—from a state-building perspective, and that leads me into all sorts of other interests. Lately, I've been compelled to figure out more about corporate involvement in warfare, and not just because of what's going in Iraq, but because that was substantial in Vietnam also.

So, my interests are becoming actually more and more broad. It's not just the study of a war, it's actually studying structurally what states do when they go to war, particularly the United States, and how it conducts warfare, in whose interests and for what reasons.

There's been a lot of commentary lately to the effect that Iraq is another Vietnam, and we've seen this since at least 2004. What are the comparisons, if any, between Iraq and Vietnam?

I'm one of those people who makes those comparisons. But it's important to recognize there are compelling differences also. Iraq is not another Vietnam in many respects. Military, it's not another Vietnam. But on the other hand, it seems to be unfolding in a parallel kind of way, in terms of policy. The administration, for example, seems to have trapped itself in one particular kind of policy that most people find ineffective.

What's happening is, U.S. involvement in Iraq is becoming increasingly militarized and security based. At the same time, the overall effort is ostensibly to build a nation. That's precisely what happened in Vietnam: It began as a nation-building scheme, or a state-building program, and it devolved into a military campaign because the former was unsuccessful. The problem there, as I see it—and this is exactly what happened in Vietnam—they could never get themselves out of that. Once they decided to place more emphasis—this is Kennedy and Johnson—on security kinds of needs, they could not reverse that trend. They could only excel. That policy continued to fail throughout the sixties. They couldn't reverse that trend and get back to state building. They couldn't reverse it and pull the military out, and just do state building stuff. The problems are innumerable with having a policy that is both military oriented, or security oriented, and that is attempting to build a state at the same time.

In the case of Iraq, it's very, very troubling what's happening because it seems to me that the state-building features are not even taken all that seriously. There is a tremendous absence of oversight. There is heavy corporate involvement. And even though there was corporate involvement in Vietnam, at least it was relatively efficient. I'm a critic of that involvement—that corporate role in Vietnam—for other reasons, but it was efficient. They decided to use a very small consortium of companies with great reach, but it's a consortium over which they retained a good deal of control. In Iraq, it's a bonanza. There are dozens and dozens of corporations all vying for attention and contracts, and even more numerous subcontractors.

And so what's happened is, the security situation continues to precipitously decay over time, it's just bad and has stayed bad, and it's not getting any better. And the state-building process, which was supposed to unfold, which they've spent some 20 billion dollars on, has turned into a real opportunity for corporations to insure themselves long-term involvement in the foreign policy structure of the country, but they don't actually do anything. They're not actually completing projects. And when they are completing projects, it's about half—the latest numbers are 55 percent or so or projects completed. Of those completed, they've not been attached to

other projects in a way that would create an infrastructure.

So that has completely fallen down. And then that feeds back into the military side of it. When there's a high level of unemployment, when there are pronounced levels of infections and diseases of various kinds, when there are tens of thousands of injured people without an adequate medical infrastructure, that then causes problems of security. You've got lots of disenchanting people, unemployment, no opportunities. It feeds into an insurgency. It's just cyclical, and there's no end in sight for it at the moment. Perhaps they'll pull it out, but it seems unlikely at the moment.

What does state building entail, though? A lot of people have pointed out that, in a place like Iraq, which is rich with oil and presumably why we went there, you really don't need a whole lot of people to run oil fields. So there's no strong incentive to help the population out.

Right. This was the case in Vietnam, although for very different reasons. Iraq was among the most modern of all Arab states—fairly recently. The physical infrastructure has been decayed, dilapidated, deteriorated because of inattention and warfare, heavy bombardment...

Sanctions.

Yeah. It's been reduced to essentially a traditional state in terms of its physical infrastructure—its transportation network, electric grid, potable water system. That's state building. That's what it is to rebuild the state. You're probably right. They could probably get oil out of Iraq, although they haven't achieved pre-war levels with that yet. They could probably do that with minimal personnel. What they can't do, though, is make Iraq a democratic modern state without rebuilding all that infrastructure. People need to believe that their government is legitimate, which is a critical problem now. They need to believe that the trains will run on time, as it were; that things are reliable, that if you drop a letter in the mailbox it'll end up where it's supposed to go, if you send your kid to school he won't be shot. That there are opportunities for jobs, and for housing, and for these kinds of things. That's all the infrastructure. It's the stuff that matters where the rubber meets the road. People need to believe that this system is being created.

That appears not to be the case. I would separate that completely from oil infrastructure. That's a whole other thing—a lot of corporations are going to want to do that, and maintain that. State building is about "winning the hearts and minds." What that really means is building an infrastructure that people can depend upon, that makes their lives more secure, that creates a modicum of safety and opportunity for people. There are dozens and dozens of features or exponents of what this would look like, but they have not so far been able to put that together. And it doesn't appear that that's around the corner. The latest out is that they've not met any of their objectives for state building, at least in terms of building a physical infrastructure. And the fallout for that, again, is lack of security, high rates of unemployment, high rates of infectious disease, and on and on and on. It doesn't make for a happy population.

You've written on some of the key players involved in both wars. Could you discuss some of this?

Are they the same, or are some of them the same, at least?

There's a good deal of continuity from one to the next. And this actually surprised me a little bit... I didn't expect to find quite as much parallel there. The corporations involved are very similar. There are some key players that are involved. Rumsfeld, for example, was pretty deeply involved as a critic during the Vietnam period. And he criticized the very features of Vietnam policy that are being played out again in Iraq. And very, very explicitly so. Numerous times he was critical of the handling of Vietnam.

On the one hand, you sort of dismiss that as partisan politics. And I'm sure that's part of it. On the other hand, he was one of dozens and dozens of congressional critics of Vietnam by the late sixties. So they were just saying what was real to everyone. To do otherwise would be to willfully avoid reality.

In terms of the corporate involvement: By the time Brown and Root is heavily involved in Vietnam, which doesn't really come until August '65, they've already partnered with Halliburton. Halliburton's already bought them. Brown and Root's heavily involved in Vietnam, which is probably the best-known story about corporate involvement in Vietnam—Brown and Root and the infamous tiger cages they built. But their involvement is actually much more extensive than that. They were part of that consortium, along with a company called Morrison-Knudsen. Morrison-Knudsen was the lead contract sponsor, and they enjoyed 40 percent of the profits, courtesy of that role, beginning in '62. And their profits were tremendous, although they all at the time denied that they were making any profits. They actually said publicly they were losing money, courtesy of their role in Vietnam. Later, Brown and Root's profits turned out to be 385 million dollars, and that was approximately 20 percent of the total.

The consortium's contract was ten years long there. They put something like 2 billion dollars in construction projects on the ground in Southern Vietnam. They built absolutely everything: housing, hospitals, roads, bridges, canals, ports, airfields. Huge, completely independent military infrastructure—bases and the like. Morrison-Knudsen a few years ago changed its name to Washington Group International. It was some kind of merger with Raytheon, I think. They're now contracted for something like 500 million dollars in Iraq, and it may be Iraq and Afghanistan combined, but they're in the pipeline as well. And there are lots of others. Bechtel, Vinnell, CACI, Blackwater, etc. You find this pretty clear trajectory that they're involved not just in Vietnam, and again in Iraq, but they're involved in lots and lots of what a General Motors executive called "brushfire wars" during this period. That tells you something about the structural nature of war. My study of state building in Vietnam led me to heavy involvement of corporations because they were in charge with doing that state building. And then I discovered in other episodes. For example, Morrison-Knudsen, the others as well, was deeply involved in places like India, Iran, Afghanistan. And all these companies were deeply involved all over the world. Those are the top five or six contractors: companies like Morrison-Knudsen, Brown and Root, J.A. Jones, Bechtel, Vinnell. These were huge corporations, even in the '60s.

So I kept going to figure out, how does this work? Why are these same companies showing up? And I find them emerge—this was well be-

fore the invasion of Iraq when I was doing all this stuff—they show up again in Iraq. That was no accident - that's not accidental. It speaks volumes to the marriage between politics and corporate interest. There's a revolving door of employment between these three - the Department of Defense, the political arena, elective office, whether it's congress or the executive branch, and the corporate world. So they have cultivated, very insidiously, and have maintained these relationships over many years. So there's no mystery at all as to why these same usual suspects keep showing up over and over again in these wars, from Vietnam to Iraq. And there are many other examples, but that, I believe, is one of the most telling realities of waging this kind of warfare, this completely open-ended, virtually privatized warfare.

And there are a number of utilities for this if you look at it from a political perspective. It's good political capital that you involve your corporate friends, and you make sure they're pleased, they get contracts, and they maintain their relationships. And it keeps the door open to opportunity for all of those who operate in those circles. Those are to me the most striking parallels. But it's not as if it's just Vietnam and Iraq. They didn't go away. This has been a long, long trajectory, and I think what's happened is, what used to get called 'war profiteering' very derisively in the 1930s and after the First World War, that has now become virtually institutionalized, so that you always have on retainer these people who are around to go and get involved in various kinds of policy adventures at a moment's notice. It's become institutionalized. So they no longer have to rely on declarations of war and an open bid, or a bidding process, in order to get their contracts. Brown and Root, for example, secured the LOGCAP contract. They're set. They don't work for the army in perpetuity all around the world.

That's something Prof. Chomsky points out all the time. He says that, at the end of World War II, they realized that, unless you pour a lot of money into high tech industry and the military, there's going to be another depression. So it's kind of, "Well, we might lessen it if we just keep doing this." How complicit do you think the DOD is in all this?

They know what they're doing. There as politically savvy as any other entity. They know how to influence policy, they know how to write up plans, they know how to forecast the potential for a global conflict, and they know in what terms to express U.S. national interest and they know who they're talking to. In many cases in the Pentagon, the people who write these studies and analyses of the global environment will be formerly elected officials or corporate heads or military officials. They all speak a common language. It doesn't have to necessarily be an indictment of these people, but it's critical to understand that they all speak a common language because they operate in the same world. It isn't as if you or I are writing a policy proposal for the White House and we cross our fingers and hope that they would give us a hearing. The Defense Department already knows very well what they're thinking, and

what they would view as feasible and what they would view as non-sense or unreasonable. There's a common language there, so you can foreword your proposals and be sure of a hearing, if it fits into the ways in which they're already thinking about the world. It helps certainly that Dick Cheney is the vice president and what are called the 'neocons' have moved into positions of influence and write these policies, or rely for these policies on like-minded think-tanks.

There's a joke floating around that the difference between the Vietnam and Iraq wars was that President Bush actually had a plan to get out of Vietnam. Do you think the U.S. has any serious exit strategy for leaving Iraq?

You know, I don't. But I don't think they're all that concerned about that. This is another potential parallel with Vietnam. It's supposed to be a low-intensity conflict, and its open ended, and it's just going to last for a number of years. They're ambivalent about what the results are going to be, and they're sort of hedging their bets. The same thing happened in Vietnam.

I don't think they want an exit strategy in the way that we think about that. An exit strategy, for most people, they would define it in terms of coming up with a specific plan that gets us out of Iraq. I think that's what people are generally thinking about when they think of an exit strategy. I don't think they think about it in those terms. I think they would like to keep it low intensity, keep the number of American deaths to a minimum, but place no time limit on how long they are there. What they want, ultimately, is influence in the region. I think all the rest of it is politics and window dressing. What happens is this: After a point, because of the nature of American political culture, involvement in Vietnam or Iraq or any similar kind of open ended conflict becomes more important in the domestic political sphere than it does for the Iraqis themselves. It becomes more important to Americans in the domestic political context. The Bush people think about this in terms of their own political survival. To some extent this has already happened in Iraq, and it didn't happen in Vietnam until ten or twelve years of involvement. They think about it in terms of credibility: political credibility and international credibility. What will the neighbors think, and what will it do to the party if we change policy significantly? You don't want to go firing people, deputies all over the State Department, or shuffling the cabinet around. It'll look bad. You'll have to make some public statement and recognize that you're wrong, and begin to really curtail your ambition. It'll make you weak and vulnerable to political attack. That becomes the way in which it's discussed domestically and much more so than the more important question: are we really doing for Iraq what we promised to do?

That's dangerous. That's really, really dangerous. It will cease to matter what happens in Iraq, and it will become more important what happens domestically as a result of Iraq. Our credibility, our potential to get elected, there's a danger that we might lose the senate or the house if this becomes such a volatile thing. Unfortunately, those become the most important and most talked about features of the U.S. role rather than, are we really doing in Iraq what we set out to do? And that should determine everything else, rather than politics

else, rather than politics determining the role in Iraq. For example, Nixon doesn't actually plan to get out of Vietnam. Nixon's goal is to return Vietnam to that low intensity level so that it can be maintained indefinitely. He planned to hand over the keys to South Vietnam to his successor. The trick was, and he almost pulled this off, get the troops out so that you don't have all these body bags coming home, and then strike a deal with Russia and China so that you can begin to tone down the heated rhetoric of the Cold War and you can begin to put more pressure from those states onto Vietnam. But you begin to conduct the war differently - at the same time, he dramatically ramps up the air war. So the destruction increases, but domestically he does a really politically savvy thing in getting all those American boys back home. So he diffuses the domestic political situation but the war itself will be continuous and the destruction of Vietnam ongoing.

Didn't they try to train the Vietnamese to fight the Vietnamese? Aren't they trying to push for a Vietnamization of Iraq?

They've been doing that for a long time. Critics of the war did not take Vietnamization all that seriously. Nixon was not the first to say that. In the 50s that was the ambition - to create an army of Vietnamese people that could do this fighting. Only when they could not did the Americans go in. And the people on the ground knew they could not. For years they knew they could not. They couldn't train enough of them, they were corrupt and incompetent, there was tremendous graft running right through what was called the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. So Vietnamization was just "changing the color of the corpses."

And in part, that's what Nixon wanted - to reduce the number of Americans in Vietnam, so that Walter Cronkite isn't grousing about it. It's not about substantially changing policy so that the Vietnamese below the 17th parallel could stand on their own and fight the good fight. That's not what he had in mind.

In his famous farewell address, Eisenhower warns Americans to beware of the then-emergent military-industrial complex. Your thoughts?

Eisenhower is an interesting fellow. - It's completely bipartisan who uses Eisenhower. Eisenhower, on his way out the door, issued this warning. And I think he was serious about the warning, that it had become overwrought, that they had created a monster, and it was going to run its own course.

And Eisenhower was a general, not just a politician.

And that's critical too. In '46, before he was the president and when he was a general, he actually advocated that very thing. Nobody points to that. The farewell address is much more widely known. But in '46 in a series of memos, he advocated establishing a network between the university, defense people, politics, and the corporate world. Because, in his view of things, in order to have a global military posture it was going to be necessary to utilize all these large features of the state just to gather the adequate resources, to have research opportunities, and access to people who can conduct this research in the universities. And then they have corporate support for production, support in the political realm in terms of policy, and then they have military kinds of analysis from the Pentagon.

And he thought it would be very complex, worldwide. That is, in the post-war period they knew that American involvement in the world was going to be dramatically ex-

panded. It would be necessary to expand all this, and to create a relationship, a kind of harmony, among these key sectors in order to make this do-able - to make it efficient, to make it feasible. So in the immediate aftermath of the war, he's recognizing that this is needed. And then only later, after he's served a couple terms as president, does he realize that this is dangerous, that it's a threat to democracy.

I don't know how much of that is real. I don't know how much of that is altruistic. I don't know how much of that is politicking. He's on record in other places also in the 50s as very dissatisfied with the McCarthyite strain of the red scare. Not an opponent on the whole, but an opponent of the kind-of hyperbole. I think that's what he's expressing in that farewell address: that it's become a little bit too much. I wouldn't characterize Eisenhower as an opponent of the creation of that harmony, because he hadn't always been. He was an advocate of that. I think he just sees it as completely run amok by '61. And I think he's right, and his words have not been heeded at all. And it's now much more pervasive than was the case when he issued his famous warning.

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