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## **The Wrong Conversation About Iraq**

**by Frank Nicosia**

Democrats and Republicans, pundits, retired military, the media, and other critics of the Iraq war are having the wrong conversation about how to leave Iraq. They and others, including most of the Democratic candidates for president, focus on the Bush administration's lack of "success." We should withdraw or "redeploy" our troops, they assert, because Bush's policy is not working because there has been no "victory." This is similar to the discourse before and after the American withdrawal from Vietnam some three decades ago.

The danger of framing the conversation in terms of a "failure to succeed" is that the lessons that must be learned from past policy, from these two wars, are not learned. And when the impulse to wage war against another country that poses no threat to us once again takes hold of America's leaders, the only lesson they will be likely to draw from the past will be how to "win" this time around. Planning will be better, they will reason. This time they will "succeed."

Virtually missing from these conversations are the moral and legal failures (crimes) of U.S. officials in opting for war in the first place. That so many politicians, pundits, and media icons led the charge for invading Iraq after the experience of Vietnam, and that most Americans followed, is not surprising. For the question of the illegality and immorality of American policy in Vietnam was soon lost in the resentment and recriminations about losing a war many felt should have been won. The rush to invade Iraq might have been avoided had Americans confronted their recent history of legal and moral failure in Vietnam.

With all of the revelations about the decision-making process that led to the invasion of Iraq more than four years ago, few now accept the phony allegations about WMDs or fantasies about Saddam Hussein and 9/11. Indeed, most Americans, even many in Congress, now realize that the administration and its allies in both political parties lied to Americans, that Iraq was a threat to no one, and that the war reflects its promoters' imperial delusions. Yet the demand for change in Iraq policy is based almost entirely on the argument that Bush's policy is not working. Moreover, the growing chorus of official dissent places responsibility for that failure, for bloody carnage and civil war, at the feet of Iran, Syria, and the Iraqis themselves. What better way to

avoid accountability for the dissenters' own failures, legal, moral, or otherwise? In this line of argument, everyone but America is responsible for the mess. Therefore, logic would have it that the United States can simply leave and do it "right" the next time.

Earlier this year, retired Gen. John Batiste reasoned that the deception used to go to war is irrelevant. He seemed content to decry the way the war has been fought and the absence of "victory," rather than America's unprovoked aggression in the first place. This is all reminiscent of the aftermath of Vietnam when the criminal behavior of the Johnson and Nixon administrations in waging the war faded from the discussion.

When German leaders were tried at Nuremberg after World War II, they were not charged with incompetence, poor planning, or failure to win. Rather, the charges were based on legal and moral principles that prohibited wars of aggression and other crimes. They were meant to punish the guilty, force the German people to confront their past and learn the right lessons from it, and avoid another "stab in the back" myth such as the one propagated after Germany's defeat in World War I.

If we are to avoid another failure to learn from history, as our failure to do so after Vietnam made the Iraq folly more likely, Americans must engage in the right conversation about this war. That conversation must center on the lies officials and opinion makers used to take an unquestioning mainstream media and passive American public into an illegal war of aggression. The United States must leave Iraq not because it failed to win, but because it was legally and morally wrong to go there in the first place.

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