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With Jeb Bush as president, another era of unwinnable wars?

By H.A. Goodman, contributor



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Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush (R) appeared on Fox News recently and was **asked**, "Knowing what we know now, would you have authorized the invasion?" President George W. Bush's brother answered: "I would have, and so would have Hillary Clinton, just to remind everybody." Therefore, one can only assume that he understood the question and that Bush answered honestly (even though he now claims misunderstanding).

Bush's words clearly indicate that he would have still invaded Iraq, even "knowing what we know now." Therefore, he's essentially warning Americans that another Bush administration will have no reason to refrain from future counterinsurgency wars like Iraq and Afghanistan. This type of mentality is not only dangerous, but could usher in yet another era of unwinnable conflicts in the Middle East and around the globe.

Neoconservative author Max Boot once stated in a *Foreign Affairs* interview that "If we could avoid getting involved in wars, I think everybody would be happier." This logic, however, ignores the fact that Jeb Bush's brother could have easily avoided invading Iraq and creating a threat far greater than Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. In fact, the decision to invade Iraq led not only to immense sectarian bloodshed between Sunni and Shiite, but also the **evolution of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria** (ISIS), and all the costs incurred upon our country's military. American troops have been in what Richard K. Betts calls "**constant combat**" longer than at any point in U.S. history, resulting in **one in five veterans** facing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), **record-high suicide rates** and an **enormous Department of Veterans Affairs backlog**. Since counterinsurgency conflicts pit powerful armies against militarily weaker guerrilla forces (thus mitigating the immense advantages of a greater power), *USA TODAY* states that "Somewhere between more than half to two-thirds of Americans killed or wounded in combat in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have been victims of IEDs [improvised explosive devices] planted in the ground."

Counterinsurgency expert John Nagl believes that destroying ISIS in Iraq would take "**a generational commitment**" of U.S. involvement, comparing it to our over 60-year presence in Germany and Japan. However, postwar Japan and Germany never resulted in counterinsurgency conflicts where we struggled for local support or witnessed sectarian civil wars. As **defined** in the U.S. Army's *Tactics in Counterinsurgency*, "Counterinsurgency is a competition with the insurgent for the right to win the hearts, minds, and acquiescence of the population." What America faces today isn't a rehash of post-World War II; it's a world that George W. Bush helped create by ignoring the lessons of Vietnam and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

By 1954, France had lost **55,000 soldiers** and spent \$2.7 billion trying to regain control of Indochina from Ho Chi Minh and Viet Minh forces. Rather than learn from France's defeat, the U.S. **dropped more bombs** on North Vietnam than were dropped on Germany, Italy, and Japan during World War II. **According to** Edward Miguel and Gerard Roland in *The Long Run Impact of Bombing Vietnam*, "the bombing of Vietnam was the most intense bombing episode in world history."

Echoing Miguel and Roland, the BBC **states** that "By the end of the conflict, America had unleashed the equivalent of 640 Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs on Vietnam." As a result of bombings and other forms of warfare, including Agent Orange (**resulting in cancer** for U.S. veterans and Vietnamese civilians), **1.1 million** North Vietnamese and Vietcong soldiers died, in addition to around 2 million civilians. During the Vietnam War, **58,220 American soldiers** died, **303,704 Americans** were wounded, and from 1965-1975, America spent **\$111 billion** on the war effort.

Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese army in 1975.

Nonetheless, we refused to learn from the French loss in Indochina or our own involvement in the Vietnam War. George W. Bush invaded Iraq and, according to Brown University's Costs of War, **133,000 civilians** have been killed by direct violence since the invasion and around 1.5 million Iraqis are still displaced from their homes. In terms of U.S. losses during both Iraq and Afghanistan, **6,847 American soldiers** have died; the Department of Defense states that **over 50,000 Americans** have been wounded; and Rebecca Ruiz in *Forbes* writes that **1 million Americans** have been injured in both wars. The financial cost of both wars is currently **\$6 trillion** according to Harvard University, amounting to **\$75,000** for every household in America without a peace dividend that normally balances out the cost of traditional wars like World War II.

After all this human sacrifice and financial cost, ISIS now controls **80 percent of Iraq's Anbar province**.

Contrary to the belief that President Obama lost Iraq, *The Wall Street Journal* wrote in 2010 that "[former Iraqi] Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki ruled out the presence of any U.S. troops in Iraq after the end of 2011." After the Iraqis asked the U.S. to leave, al-Maliki **ordered the arrest** of his Sunni vice president and Sunni and Shiite militias continued to **wage civil war**. Our "allies" in Iraq worked against U.S. interests.

Navy Rear Adm. John Kirby **said** that in Iraq, "we left them capable and competent to the threat that they faced," but all the training and American support was "squandered by the [al-]Maliki government over the last three, three and a half years." Retired Army Lt. Gen. Daniel Bolger, in a *TIME* magazine interview regarding his landmark book, *Why We Lost*, **said**: "Don't be so arrogant and think you're going to reshape the Middle East." Bolger also explained **why we never needed to fight** these counterinsurgency wars: "They should have been limited incursions and [then] pull out — basically like Desert Storm. ... This enemy wasn't amenable to the type of war we're good at fighting, which is a Desert Storm or a Kosovo." Like the views of Kirby and Bolger, Vietnam veteran and renowned author Phillip Caputo says that while Vietnam was indeed a quagmire, Iraq is "**proving that sand is stickier than mud.**"

What should frighten all Americans is another Bush presidency that equates freedom with fighting counterinsurgency wars against any number of the 40 major terrorist groups in the world today. ISIS is only one of them and like al Qaeda before it, sending American ground troops to battle IEDs and insurgents will only lead to another offshoot organization. Jeb Bush has already warned voters in his latest Fox interview that he can't even learn from recent history. We shouldn't expect him to recall the lessons of the French or our own troops in Vietnam, the Soviets in Afghanistan or other failed counterinsurgency conflicts.

Goodman is an author and a journalist.

TAGS: Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Iraq War, Afghanistan War, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ISIS, Jeb Bush, George W. Bush, Nouri al-Maliki, Middle East

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