



Faculty Forum



You Cannot Conceive The Many Without The One
-Plato-

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The Lessons of History: Ireland, Vietnam, and Iraq

**By
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What are the lessons of history? During many years of studying and writing about twentieth-century Ireland, I recall seeing many parallels between the struggle for Irish self-government in the first World War period and the futile American involvement in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Rearing up before me now are the similarities in both of those episodes and the US's intrusion into Iraq.

In the case of Ireland, the conflict was in a European context. The dominant English position in the so-called British Isles was resisting the demand for secession from the United Kingdom of a community of people who sought to achieve a separate political, as well as economic and cultural, identity. The conflict, centering around the period of 1919 to 1922, involved propaganda, political mobilization, elections, boycotts, and violence.

It appeared to many that this was a very unequal contest. The British Empire, having just survived the crisis of World War I, was now in the process of extending its control (through the devise of League of Nation "mandates") to the Middle East, including Iraq. Britain, highly industrialized with a population ten times that of Ireland, had provided very effective legislation to deal with chronic Irish problems in land, education, and housing. Moreover, Ireland was not only fully integrated in the British parliamentary system of government but was on the verge of gaining a long delayed form of internal self-government, called Home Rule.

For all of that, the Sinn Fein ("We Ourselves") movement effectively attained its principal objective of political independence. Its success was not absolute (partition, oath of allegiance, etc.), but how often does that happen? With a predominant British identity, most of the province of Ulster (about sixteen percent of the land area but one-third of the population) remained part of the United Kingdom. Constitutional limitations on political independence were gradually stripped away, with this position being evidenced in the neutrality of the Irish State in the second European war.

How did the Irish do it? Having gained great public support in parliamentary and local elections, the Sinn Fein movement boycotted the existing UK administration

and formed its own government. This “shadow” government was often derided by its opponents, but it secured the allegiance of most Irish people as the instrument to proceed to the next stage of political development. Its underground militia, the Irish Republican Army, crippled the existing police force and employed guerrilla warfare against the efforts of the British Army to re-impose control.

Because of its huge responsibilities in an expanding empire and the need to drastically reduce military spending, the British Army was substantially weakened. Lacking an overwhelming military force to impose control in Ireland, the British Government ultimately resorted to mercenaries, the “Black and Tans” and “Axies,” to augment both the police and army; Winston Churchill said their purpose was to provide some “rough handling” of their opponents. I see this measure as a forerunner to the CIA’s auxiliaries in Vietnam and the “contract workers,” hired guns, in Iraq. The British effort in this regard was hugely counter-productive.

During the course of the struggle, the British forces employed imprisonment, spies, murder, prisoner abuse, and torture, along with propaganda and political posturing. Without a base of popular support, all of these activities ultimately failed. When British public opinion in 1922 swung against the Government’s campaign in Ireland, the British had to get out.

In terms of Vietnam, America embroiled itself in an Asian civil war, a decidedly alien world to North American people. But the USA was a super-power, with vast financial, industrial, and military resources. A substantial number of Vietnamese supported American objectives. The opponents, the Viet Cong, were seen as “little

men in black pajamas” who could be chased into the hills. If necessary, we could bomb them into submission. It didn’t work out that way because we did not learn from the British experience. The factors that doomed American efforts there—arrogance, ignorance, and denial—had all figured in the British approach to suppression of the Irish rebellion.

The US Government clearly possessed the military might to surpass the fumbling French effort in Vietnam and success would be determined by a firm policy commitment. While he was president, John F. Kennedy avoided taking the plunge there and told some of his closest associates that he wanted to end US involvement after the presidential election of 1964. I have wondered if Kennedy ever took into consideration the Irish experience. I know that he was well read in Irish history and had visited that country five times. He was in Vietnam as early as 1951 and had his wife Jackie translate French reports on the situation there. Certainly Charles DeGaulle warned him of a potential Vietnamese quagmire. (Around that time the French novelist Joseph Kessel told me of his experiences as a journalist there, commenting, “We killed them by the truckload and it didn’t do any good. You will have the same experience.”)

Kennedy’s successor, Lyndon Johnson, was both arrogant and, in regard to the rest of the world, ignorant. He prided himself on his ability to drive legislation through Congress, but Vietnam called for different skills and tactics. Johnson’s concentration was almost exclusively on domestic affairs; and his indifference to foreign affairs, except as to how they impacted domestic events, was costly to himself, the country and Vietnam as well. Denying the nature of the conflict—something that certainly was

not limited to Johnson, but was the “accepted wisdom” of most of the leaders of this country. They saw the Vietnam problem as being a situation where Vietnamese communists were determined to bring all of their country under their control. Further, communist success in South Vietnam would be followed (the domino effect) by the spread of communism throughout the rest of Southeast Asia.

This was not the predominant view of most Vietnamese. Their perspective was that the conflict was not only part of a social revolution (eliminate landlords, return land to the peasants, etc.), but also a movement to expel foreign control and influence—first the French, then the puppet government of South Vietnamese and then the Americans. The name of their umbrella organization—the National Liberation Front—was an apt description because of the broad base extending beyond communist control.

American denial resulted in the U. S. military dropping four times as many bombs on Vietnam as in all of World War II, spreading 50,000 tons of the Agent Orange defoliant, killing a million people (including 64,000 Americans), and wounding and mutilating another million, including, of course, thousands more American soldiers at the financial cost of hundreds of billions of dollars. All for nothing!

The same factors—arrogance, ignorance, and denial—that stymied British efforts in Ireland and the American campaign in Vietnam are again in operation in Iraq. We now know that the leading proponents of invasion of Iraq in the Bush Administration foresaw a quick, decisive strike. It is not by chance that Britain is the only important ally of the U. S. in this intervention. A major factor in forging the British Empire—a brilliant house of cards—was British as-

sumption of cultural, political, and technological superiority. Indeed, after the first European war, British politicians created the state of Iraq, controlled it directly until 1932, and then indirectly until the revolution of 1958. With the ending of British domination had come the ending of British control of Iraqi oil. Toppling Saddam Hussein would shore up the position of the Arab sheikdoms—the United Arab Emirates—along the southern fringe of Arabia which are sheltered by the British military. Destroying the threatening Arab military entity, that Iraq had become would also bolster the shaky position of the Saudi dynasty in Arabia, an American protectorate. The status of Israel would also be strengthened as crushing of militant Arab nationalism surely would make the Palestinians more amenable, however reluctantly, to accepting a weak, shadowy, political entity.

American ignorance of the Middle East is understandably great. Deals cut between American oil companies and desert sheikdoms do not provide an understanding of the culture, experience, and realities of the great majority of Arab people. The Bush Administration chose to listen to tales provided by paid informants about the situation in Iraq. Where was the CIA expertise? The invasion of Iraq had nothing to do with efforts to prevent terrorist attacks either in the US or elsewhere. The British perspective remains dominated by imperialist assumptions that belong to the faded days of empire. The brutal Israeli responses to Palestinian violence seem only to throw more fuel (oil?) on the fire. If the United States really wanted to do something constructive in the Middle East, it is capable, by means of supreme commitment and pressure, to bring about a compromise settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. This is something that the leaders of both sides

cannot agree to (due to the opposing pressures among their people) yet know it is the only practical solution. The U. S. could achieve this reconciliation, but doesn't; there always seem to be other problems that come to the fore—one of which is that there is no oil in that part of the Middle East!

Until the mid-twentieth century, the European imperialist nations of Britain and France used any and all methods to deny the reality and legitimacy of the Arab demand for freedom from foreign domination. In Ireland, the British Government declared it was seeking to do good for that country and was only employing violence to put down a murderers and defeat irresponsible political hotheads. The propaganda organs of the US Government exhausted themselves arguing that this country was only trying to help the Vietnamese people in their efforts to fend off total Communist control. The principal forms of American denial in Iraq concern the refusal to recognize the Arab demand to be left alone and an incomprehension of the rise of Moslem fundamentalism.

In my study of world history, I cannot recall an example of one country quickly conquering another, then shortly pulling out. So far, American experience in Iraq seems to confirm that view. Is this an example of Uncle Remus and the Tar Baby where you can get caught in a situation that you can't get out of? There are lessons of history to be learned, but not if the past is viewed through the lens of arrogance, willful ignorance and denial.

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