

Vindication in swift victory

The Australian, FEATURES; Pg. 11

Monday, December 10, 2001

By Richard Miniter

Many experts warned that the war against the Taliban would be another Vietnam. Now they have egg on their faces, says Richard Miniter

AS soon as the war on terrorism began in Afghanistan, the public heard dire warnings of "another Vietnam". No victory, no exit -- just soldiers in and body bags out. To anyone who disagreed with the grim consensus, the "another Vietnam" crowd would confidently remind the public: "No invader has won in Afghanistan since Alexander the Great."

Didn't turn out that way, did it? The mighty Taliban have lost their capital, their northern strongholds and now Kandahar over the weekend. Meanwhile, Osama bin Laden cowers in his cave, no doubt thinking about his 72 virgins in the afterlife while his ex-followers calculate how many wives you can buy in this life for the \$US25 million price on bin Laden's head.

Some say the old generals always fight the last war. The greying intellectoids are still fighting the war before the last war. Of course, they said the last war -- the conflict in the Persian Gulf -- would be "another Vietnam" too. Being wrong about that war didn't stop the great pontificators from trotting out their expert opinions on this one.

Intellectual accountability should matter. The press and public intellectuals have an important job to do: to bring perspective and insight to a public that is generally too busy to become experts in, say, Central Asian geopolitics. Instead, some have gotten lazy and continue to recycle their favourite insights from the psychedelic 1960s. Maybe they've watched Apocalypse Now too many times.

Let's launch the list of shame right now, starting in Australia. "The war itself [in Afghanistan] has already begun to create a certain *deja vu* of the Vietnam variety," Mike Carlton wrote in The Sydney Morning Herald. "You can almost hear the hoots of laughter from Hanoi," Carlton hooted. He managed to sound like a latter-day Hanoi Jane -- citing North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap as one of the "truly great generals of the 20th century" as he offered up the general's wisdom.

Then there was former spokesman for the Australian Defence Department, Brigadier Adrian D'Hage, who warned that the US-led campaign against the Taliban had "an eerie echo of Vietnam, when Australian soldiers were sent to fight the Vietcong". The war, he further complained, was "being planned by generals who have learned little, if anything, from history".

In the US, The New York Times's R.W. Apple asked: "Could Afghanistan become another Vietnam? Is the United States facing another stalemate on the other side of the world? Premature the questions may be, three weeks after the fighting began. Unreasonable they are not." And the Los Angeles Times warned: "The United States is not headed into a quagmire; it's already in one."

In Britain, the Financial Times ran a two-part article on the war in Afghanistan titled "Ghosts of Vietnam". The Guardian contributed: "This is our Vietnam." Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote "Are We Trapped in Another Vietnam?" in The Independent: "Evidently our leaders gambled on the supposition that the unpopularity of the regime would mean the bombing would bring about the Taliban 's rapid collapse. And they also seem to have assumed that it would not be too difficult to put together a post-Taliban government. This was a series of misjudgments."

Even corporate executives can fall into the "another Vietnam" quagmire. Andreas Schmidt, former chief executive of AOL Europe, told Fortune magazine: "Bombing has taken out the tanks, but people in Afghanistan will fight with knives. A prolonged ground war would be similar to Vietnam. If people don't remember that, this thing may be headed for disaster." Maybe he should stick to junk email.

But these pontificators were just giving their opinions and turned out to be wrong, right? Not exactly. They should have known better. After all, there are a number of key and obvious differences between the Vietnam War and the war on terrorism -- essential facts that made allied victory likely long before the first bomb fell in the Hindu Kush.

The Vietnam War was a contest of superpowers. Today all the leading powers are united against the Taliban and bin Laden, and the Taliban had no superpower or even regional power to train, arm, fund or defend them. Long before the tide turned, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld explained why the US would not be defeated like the Soviets. "I know a lot of people have been running around saying, 'Oh my goodness, the United States is in a quagmire. The Soviets were defeated in [Afghanistan]. And how can you get into that same mess?'

"The differences between the Soviet Union's situation and ours are dramatic, " he explained. "The Soviets wanted that country. We don't. They lived in the neighbourhood. We don't. They had a superpower opposing them. We don't."

Also, US smart bombs and predator drone planes meant there would be very few civilian casualties or downed pilots -- while plenty of terrorists would meet Allah. Such weapons didn't exist in the '60s. And the draft is abolished, so a large-scale protest movement was unlikely. Finally, the war on terrorism has an unquestionable legitimacy because the US was attacked and thousands of innocents died.

For some deep thinkers, a US quagmire in Afghanistan probably would have been welcomed. Playwright Philip Ellis embarrassed himself in The Canberra Times by praising the hijackers who killed thousands of New Yorkers as "very brave" men who "powerfully publicised the daily suffering of the Third World under the unfeeling market capitalism of the First World". American folk singer Joan Baez -- yes, she's still alive -- told a Turkish newspaper that President George W. Bush was "fighting because of an inferiority complex" and "this was creating an army of volunteers that will make the West their target".

Vice-President Dick Cheney gave the "another Vietnam" crew just what they deserve: no respect. In a recent speech in Washington, he said: "When you read the Washington press and see what all the pundits have to offer and some of the talking heads in Washington have to offer, it's nice at a

moment like this to be able to remind them that a lot of what they put out over the course of the last few weeks was just dead wrong."

Richard Minter is a senior fellow at the Centre for the New Europe in Brussels

Copyright 2001 Nationwide News Pty Limited
The Australian