

The End of the Vietnam Paradigm?

Joshua Muravchik

SINCE the triumphant end of the war against Iraq, the predictions of those who had opposed it have become the object of much merry ridicule. For example, the *Washington Times* greeted the American victory with a daily feature inducting various false prophets into the "Desert Storm Hall of Shame." The *New Republic's* Jacob Weisberg, in a similar exercise, wrote: "Never in the field of human conflict have so many been so wrong about so much, so publicly." And in the same jocular spirit, the *Washington Post* observed that "the hand-wringing of the doomsayers" now "all seem[s] farcically gloomy."

Though most of the people cited in these articles deserve the ridicule, the accompanying merriment tends to point in the wrong direction, as if the lesson were about the human propensity to folly or the hubris of experts. The true lesson here, however, concerns a certain world view which has dominated the Democratic party and much of our foreign-policy debate since Vietnam.

One part of that world view was an assessment of Communism. It taught that Communism was less evil or less dangerous than the postwar architects of America's "containment" policy had believed. To be sure, no one this side of Jesse Jackson or the Institute for Policy Studies believed that Communist regimes were actually beneficent, but a great many people discovered that Communists were nationalistic, intent on modernizing their countries, willing to take help where they could find it, and, although rigid or severe, not appreciably worse than whatever anti-Communist force happened to be arrayed against them. The people who had learned this lesson, said President Jimmy Carter, counting himself among them, had overcome the "inordinate fear of Communism."

All this new wisdom of the 1960's and 70's was washed down the drain by the revolutions of 1989. From Leipzig to Tiananmen Square to Managua, the people living under Communism delivered a single message, and, moreover, its gist was confirmed by Communist officials in Moscow and

Budapest and even by a few in Hanoi. The message was that Communism was every bit the human catastrophe that the much reviled cold warriors had said it was—a living hell of oppression, repression, penury, and injustice. And we even learned from voices within the Kremlin itself that Soviet foreign policy had been just as predatory as the cold warriors had charged, and not merely a frightened, defensive response to our own threatening gestures, as some of the most assiduous teachers of "the lessons of Vietnam" had explained.

Yet even as this part of the Vietnam paradigm was being laid to rest, the argument was becoming moot, for the bitter truths about Communism were rediscovered only in the course of its collapse. There was, therefore, very little accounting. Now that Communism had lost its bite, it seemed churlish to dwell on the errors of those who had prematurely overcome their fear of Communism. Moreover, the doves could point out that the sudden implosion of the Soviet empire showed that it had been more fragile than the hawks ever imagined, although this did not quite counterbalance the fact that the implosion had come just when the United States was practicing policies toward the Soviet Union exactly the opposite of what the doves had recommended.

In any event, the collapse of this part of the Vietnam paradigm still left in question what would become of the other parts. These included the idea that the use of force had lost its utility. Even small countries, it seemed, could find the means to thwart large ones. This was held to be especially true for America because of the peculiar ineptness of our armed forces, which were hopelessly top-heavy and paralyzed by inter-service rivalry. And even in the unlikely event that America could employ force successfully, we would so alienate other people that the victory was bound to be pyrrhic. Further, economic power had become more important than military power, and the costs of arms and war made the whole undertaking almost inevitably self-defeating. This was compounded by the fact that military expenditures necessarily came at the expense of domestic "priorities," the neglect of which would weaken our society, rendering any foreign success hollow. America could avoid these pitfalls only if it were

JOSHUA MURAVCHIK is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and the author of *Exporting Democracy: Fulfilling America's Destiny* (AEI Press).

less interventionist and more tolerant of perspectives different from our own.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1991 created the first international crisis since the fading of the cold war and the first test of the lingering hold of the Vietnam paradigm. In the first weeks after August 2, it seemed that the hold had been broken. Most politicians and commentators, including liberal Democrats, supported President Bush's decision to send troops to Saudi Arabia in response to the Iraqi invasion. But throughout the fall, opposition mounted steadily, especially within the liberal community in general and the Democratic party in particular, so that by January, when Congress voted on authorizing the use of force, all the old arguments of the last twenty years could be heard in full cry once again—and this time they were even being echoed, for one reason or another, by a number of cold-war hawks.

THUS—to begin with the issue of how long the war might last—Jimmy Carter's Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, cautioned that “we might find ourselves alone in a hard and dirty war that could be won, but not quickly. . . .” Another former State Department official, George Ball, exhorted Americans to “frontally face the fact that a war will be anything but the quick and easy one its proponents suggest.” And Mark Shields of the *Washington Post* reminded us that “faith in a short, decisive war remains the most persistent of human illusions.”

In a like vein, Tom Wicker of the *New York Times* wrote: “It will not be a quick or bloodless operation, and it might not even be successful.” Nine days after the fighting began, Wicker's colleague, Anthony Lewis, declared that “The war is going to be longer and uglier than most Americans at first believed.” This seems to have been taken to heart by the editors of the trendy magazine *Spy* who, given the exigencies of lead-time, went to press with an April issue featuring a report that the war was dragging on and turning sour. “Were We Nuts?! A Tidy Five-Day Gulf War?” read their cover headline.

Spy's misplaced certitude reflected a widely shared contempt for the American military. So blunt, for example, did Tom Wicker find America's lance that he assumed it could be used only for bluffing—and not even for this, for who would believe the bluff? “The President . . . is trying to convince Saddam Hussein that he faces a choice between war and retreat,” said Wicker. “The trouble with this strategy is that it relies on convincing the Iraqi leader of something inherently improbable.”

For his part, Senator Bill Bradley (D., NJ) scoffed at the military utility of the additional troops sent to the Gulf in November, and asked: “Is inter-service rivalry once again driving military decisions?” Only one day into the air war,

John Steinbruner of the Brookings Institution wrung his hands over the possibility that such inter-service rivalry would lead to an ill-considered pounding of Iraq. “We have to keep the army and marines on a short leash,” he intoned, “. . . self-restraint looms as a larger problem than the Iraqi opposition.”

For self-restraint to become our key problem after just one day of fighting might seem to suggest that our military had done at least something right in designing new weapons. Yet in the very same essay Steinbruner urged us not “to draw any final conclusions about high-tech warfare from our performance.” Echoing this point two weeks into the war, former Senator Gary Hart debunked the emerging “myth . . . that ‘high-quality’ weapons have proved their superiority over ‘low-quality’ weapons.” Only a few days earlier, Anthony Lewis had warned that bombing would prove no more effective than it had in Vietnam because “the Iraqis have had five months to go underground . . . perhaps as deep as the Vietnamese.”

While others merely denigrated the abilities of the American military, Senator Daniel P. Moynihan (D., NY), whose conversion from hawk to dove had long preceded the Gulf crisis, took it upon himself to represent our military and political leaders as pathologically bellicose:

Suddenly our institutions are acting as if to say, “Oh my God, we missed World War III. Maybe we can have it now here. Not there but here.” . . . That borders on the edge of the disturbed. Dr. Strangelove, where are you now that we need you?

IN THE run-up to the fighting there was also much confident forecasting of (in Anthony Lewis's words) “ghastly American casualties.” Others were more specific. The syndicated columnist team of Evans and Novak—a surprising recruit to the ranks of the doves—revealed that “the Pentagon's private estimate” was “a minimum of 20,000 American casualties.” Apparently the Defense Department could not keep its numbers straight because another inside-dope columnist, Jack Anderson, reported that “top-secret Pentagon estimates” anticipated “as many as 30,000 dead in 20 days.” *Newsweek* more temperately expected 5,000 dead and 15,000 wounded in the first ten days. But Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D., MA) declared that “the 45,000 body bags the Pentagon has sent to the region are all the evidence we need of the high price in lives and blood we will have to pay,” and then he offered his own calculations based on “military experts”: “At least 3,000 American casualties a week, with 700 dead, for as long as the war goes on.”

Former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger (another cold-war hawk turned dove) pontificated

that "in the event of an all-out assault on entrenched Iraqi positions, the casualties may be expected to run into several tens of thousands." Senator Carl Levin (D., MI) drew on his many years in the Armed Services Committee to predict "the deaths of thousands of American soldiers." Congressman Jim Moody (D., WI) informed his colleagues that a "minimum of 18,000 U.S. casualties, 3,000 dead" was a "certainty" if "fighting does include a ground war . . . and it could go far higher. One credible estimate capped it at 45,000 American casualties." Finally, Joshua Epstein of the Brookings Institution developed a "model" which enabled him to forecast with scientific precision: 3,344 to 16,059 casualties including 1,049 to 4,135 deaths. (An unbowed Epstein later told the *Washington Post* that the failure of his forecast was the fault not of his model but of the Iraqis.)

Edward N. Luttwak of the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), perhaps the most surprising opponent of the President's policy, and one of the most relentless, laid out a scenario based on assumptions he himself ridiculed for their "extreme" and "excessive" optimism. First he posited "a very elegant operation starting way to the west of Kuwait . . . to cut off the Iraqi forces in Kuwait." Then he added the assumption that "the softening-up air operations [would be] extremely effective and achieve the highest results ever achieved by any such [operation]" and that U.S. air supremacy would prevent any Iraqi counterstroke. "Let us further assume that all of our equipment works perfectly, all of our operational plans are very cunning, and all of our tactics are sound." Even so, Luttwak concluded:

If we allow only the casualties incidental to a perfect operation, that is people stepping on mines, stepping on our own unexploded munitions . . . if we assume only casualties caused by very brief fire fights with stragglers and holdouts, material accidents, mechanical accidents, etc. . . . then one must still estimate several thousand killed in action or permanently maimed, with the inevitable quotient of MIA's.

On top of the terrible losses we would absorb on the battlefield, it was said, we would suffer around the globe at the hands of terrorists under Saddam Hussein's command. As Evans and Novak saw it:

It is probable that after Bush orders the first shot fired, anything that looks American throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe could come into the cross hairs of a rifle sight or be blown up by a car bomb. . . . However swift and total a U.S. victory over Iraq may be, terror will be one of its most unpleasant and least avoidable adjuncts.

And as for the absence of terrorist acts during the months of crisis that had already elapsed, Evans and Novak explained that this only "displays Saddam Hussein's iron control."

COMPOUNDING the grievous price that the war would exact, it would also backfire. First, it would cause our allies to desert us. "President Bush has imperiled the international coalition," said Senator Bradley upon the November announcement of further American troop deployments to the Gulf. War "risks destroying the fragile international alliance that is united against Iraqi aggression," said Senator Levin. "The present coalition supporting sanctions may be difficult to hold together over time, but a war could divide the coalition even more quickly," said Senator Kennedy. "The United States is likely to become estranged from many of its European allies," said another erstwhile hawk, the former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski.

By fighting Iraq, furthermore, we would provoke the enmity of the entire Arab or Muslim world. Senator Bradley foresaw that

a massive United States military victory in Iraq, killing tens of thousands of Arabs, would make the United States the main enemy of millions of Arabs for generations. It wouldn't be just Iraqis, Iranians, and Islamic zealots referring to our nation as the Great Satan or seeing the United States as a mortal threat. It would be many well-meaning people throughout the Arab and Islamic world.

"What value will the victory hold if we have permanently embittered a generation in the Arab world?" demanded Senator Paul Wellstone (D., MN). So too former President Jimmy Carter:

In the aftermath of the war, no matter what the outcome might be, an allied invasion will be viewed simplistically as a devastating attack by United States forces against the people of Iraq and Kuwait. Religious sensitivities among Muslim believers in all countries will be further aroused because of the dramatic presence and actions of Western powers in their holy lands.

In the same vein, George Ball observed that war would "leave the United States in the position of a pariah in the whole Middle East, with not a single friend except Israel." And Anthony Lewis worried that "military victory will turn to political ashes" since "millions of Arabs, whether they like Saddam Hussein or not, will react to an Iraqi defeat with feelings of despair, anger, resentment of America."

Just as the Arabs would come to hate us, they would come to love Saddam Hussein. Mark Shields reported that visits to the Gulf during the fall had convinced Democratic Senators Bob Graham (FL) and Richard Shelby (AL) that the Iraqi ruler had "captured the imagination of the Arab masses." Judith Kipper of the Brookings Institu-

tion concurred: "If he can stay alive during a war, he will emerge a hero of the Arab street. There's no question about it."

Even after the fighting had begun, and America's battlefield success was evident, these alarms continued. Brzezinski expected "a global wave of sympathy for Iraq." A month into the fighting, Wicker was sure that

On the important propaganda front . . . Saddam Hussein is proving a tough opponent who's scoring points just where it's most important for him to make them . . . the Middle East, the third world, and perhaps in Europe and Moscow.

And as the fighting neared its climax, Stanley Hoffmann of Harvard explained that even in victory

the coalition's ability to establish a new order in the Mideast may be impaired by the deep sympathy many Arabs will continue to feel for Saddam Hussein . . . as the champion of resistance to . . . America.

NOT only would the war alienate our allies and embitter the Arabs, it would have an analogous effect here at home. "If George Bush takes the nation into war in the Middle East," announced Wicker, "he's likely to find out that its people will be anything but united in his support." Brzezinski warned of "bitter domestic divisions" that "could easily degenerate into ugly recriminations." And the columnist Carl Rowan declaimed: "I tell you, if [Bush] moves . . . right after January 15, this will be one of the least-supported wars that we've had, including Vietnam."

Domestic strife, it was further predicted, would be exacerbated by disruptions of oil supplies. According to Senator Kennedy, "A war could also do enormous damage to the world economy, sending oil prices twice as high as they are today, with potentially harsh and disruptive consequences for all nations." Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D., ME) also foresaw "a greatly disrupted oil supply and oil price increases." And Christopher Flavin of the Worldwatch Institute spelled out the economic consequences in more detail: "Worldwide gasoline rationing, . . . the financial collapse of developing countries, outright failure of the economic reforms in Eastern Europe, and a severe shock to the world banking system."

Beyond fostering domestic strife, war would bring instability to the Middle East and perhaps the whole world. "The devastating consequences," said Jimmy Carter, "will be . . . for decades to come, in economic and political destabilization of the Middle East region." Senator Mitchell also anticipated "increased instability in the Persian Gulf region [and] long-lasting Arab enmity against the United States." Senator Wellstone asked "what good will victory be if we destabilize

regimes in Egypt, Jordan, and the North African states?" And Brzezinski worried that the most likely result of Bush's policy would be "geopolitical chaos in the region."

Indeed, said the critics, war would destroy the very "New World Order" that Bush had invoked as the goal of his policy. Wicker: "A U.S. attack on Iraq . . . would destroy the new possibilities for collective security in a post-cold-war world." Senator Tom Harkin (D., IA): "Rather than responding with brute force and military power, we need a new world order wherein we respond to the Saddam Husseins of the world with . . . economic and diplomatic isolation." Stanley Hoffmann: "Collective security will be the casualty, not the winner" of a war and "the cost of allowing [Saddam Hussein] to save face if he leaves Kuwait [in exchange for concessions] may be far less than blowing him away, and of blowing away in the process the future of collective security."

Princeton's Richard H. Ullman offered an alternative approach to collective security:

The ground rules of the New World Order should be plain. The unilateral use of military power to change state borders, to seize economic resources, and to right perceived wrongs is unacceptable. Governments that violate these rules will be punished. Punishment will take the form of economic pressure, applied internationally, that would be certain, severe, sustained, and enforced—pressure that would not work tomorrow or the next day, but would work eventually.

INDEED, the idea that economic sanctions would succeed in driving Iraq out of Kuwait became the standard theme of opponents of force. On this point, Democratic Congressman Richard Gephardt of Missouri was especially emphatic: "Iraq is under siege, cut off from all the world and all supplies. . . . The question is not whether he will give up, but when." Senator Kennedy went further, insisting that sanctions were not only

the best means at the least cost to persuade Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait. Sanctions are also the most realistic policy for achieving the long-run goal of dismantling Saddam's present and future arsenal of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons and ensuring that none of these weapons is ever used again.

Others made more cautious claims. James Schlesinger contended that in time sanctions would succeed in freeing Kuwait, but not if that objective were enlarged with demands for dismantling Iraqi weapons or requiring reparations. Cyrus Vance contended that "the sanctions are biting, and . . . if given adequate time . . . they can bring about a peaceful solution of this problem." But Vance also explained that the solution he had in mind envisioned "an international conference

... convened by the UN Secretary General [to] ... consider *both* security in the Gulf and Arab-Israeli peacemaking" (emphasis in original).

Brzezinski, so often at odds with Vance when they were both in the Carter administration, agreed with him about sanctions and negotiations. Although he favored sanctions, Brzezinski opposed an "airtight, seatight blockade ... to strangle Iraq into complete capitulation" because "Saddam Hussein would then lash out." Instead he advocated "a protracted squeeze with some porousness in it, so that there is time for negotiations."

Many others joined Vance and Brzezinski in seeking a negotiated, compromise solution. Jimmy Carter declared that Iraq must abide by UN resolutions, but that "other disputes, compatible with this bottom-line demand, can still be negotiated, preferably among Arab leaders with Western backing" in which "reasonable concessions [will be] required by all contending parties." Governor Mario Cuomo of New York was quoted as saying: "You could negotiate something that ... leaves them a little bit on the water, leaves them a little bit of the oil, and then puts in a United Nations task force." Cuomo later complained that his words had been taken out of context, but there was no such doubt about the stand of former Senator George McGovern who proposed that

If Saddam agrees not only to withdraw his forces but to forgo the further development of chemical and nuclear weapons, Iraq might be granted an opening to the Persian Gulf and sole control over Rumailah, an important oilfield.

And Stanley Hoffmann evoked the Cuban missile-crisis settlement as a model for a deal in the Gulf:

Just as we did not formally "reward" the Soviets for removing their missiles from Cuba by linking their retreat to the removal of American missiles in Turkey, yet we removed them afterward, we could suggest to Iraq that we would be willing to initiate (1) an international conference on the Arab-Israeli conflict; (2) an arms-control conference aimed at ending the shipment to the region of certain categories of weapons and at inspecting the nuclear and chemical facilities of all the Middle Eastern states; and (3) arbitration between Iraq and Kuwait, but only after Iraq's evacuation of its neighbor.

Like Vance and Hoffmann, virtually everyone who advocated negotiations endorsed the idea of linking the occupation of Kuwait to the Arab-Israeli conflict. "There is no way to separate the crisis in the Gulf from the Israeli-Palestinian question," proclaimed Jimmy Carter, by way of proposing "a carefully crafted peace conference under the bilateral sponsorship of the United States and the Soviet Union." Carl Rowan chimed

in with, "We must have a comprehensive international conference to deal with not only Kuwait, but the future of Palestinians, the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, and much more." George Ball proposed "something similar to the Congress of Vienna for the Middle East" to cover "the Palestinian issue" as well as "numerous boundary issues" and "disarmament" and "security." This, he thought, "would enable Saddam Hussein to claim a little credit for it," thus affording him a "facesaver."

OTHER opponents of war took the position that America had no "vital interest" at stake. Still another former hawk, Senator Sam Nunn (D., GA) said:

We have an obligation as leaders to distinguish between important interests which are worthy of economic, political [responses] and interests that are vital, that are worth ... calling ... on our young men and women in uniform to sacrifice, if necessary, their lives.

Senator Joseph Biden (D., DE) asked:

Just what interests are at stake here? We have heard from the administration a number of suggestions: oil and our way of life. The principle of collective security. The stability of the Middle East.

But on examination, no argument can be sustained that any vital American interest is now in jeopardy.

Senator J. Robert Kerrey (D., NE) declared that "rather than threatening war ... we should tell Iraq and the world we believe the wholesale loss of American and Arab lives is too great a price to liberate Kuwait." With exemplary candor, he drew the conclusion that "driving Iraq from Kuwait, as important and worthy as it is, should no longer be the first principle of our ... policy" because it "tends to force us into a corner." Likewise, Charles Peters of the *Washington Monthly* argued that

the invasion [of Kuwait] is worth our best efforts to enforce the embargo—which could thoroughly sabotage Iraq's military, chemical, and nuclear potential—but that's all it's worth.

Some believed, as Anna Quindlen of the *New York Times* put it, that "we are going to war for oil," or that, as Senator Kennedy argued,

the principal reason driving the President's policy of war can be spelled out in three other letters: O-I-L. ... Not a single American life should be sacrificed in a war for the price of oil.

Still another line of argument concerned the relative balance of burdens between America and its allies. According to Senator Timothy Wirth

(D., CO), "We cannot and should not be policeman to the world." Senator Mitchell added:

Certainly, the United States has a high responsibility to lead the international community in opposing aggression, but this should not require the United States to assume a greater burden and a greater responsibility than other nations with an equal or even greater stake in the resolution of the crisis.

And Brzezinski maintained that "we should only go to war if the international community as a whole is prepared to go to war."

Still others cited America's domestic problems as a reason for opposing the war. Charles Peters, putting a class twist on a line that was more often expressed in terms of race, opined that "working-class Americans would be suckers to do the dying for America's ruling elite." Ron Walters of Howard University, citing the President's opposition to racial quotas, accused the Bush administration of

playing race politics in a manner that would continue to deny national resources to blacks, while black lives are disproportionately at stake as a result of his foreign policy. If no one will respect the nature of their sacrifice, then why should blacks especially be motivated to demand that their sons and daughters give it . . . ?*

And Edward Luttwak, sounding more like a liberal than like the conservative he usually is, decried the fact that engagement in the Gulf was "divert[ing] us from addressing the domestic problems that threaten the future of America far more fundamentally than Saddam Hussein ever could."

LOOKING carefully at all these arguments, we find that they reflect the major themes of the Vietnam paradigm. Thus, the argument for sanctions was in truth only a reprise of the Vietnam paradigm's aversion to the use of force, as well as its low opinion of the American military; the argument for compromise was little more than a reflection of its impulse toward appeasement; and the argument that America's "vital interests" were not at stake in Kuwait was but a recrudescence of its thrust toward isolationism. Although this is not the place for a lengthy rebuttal of these positions, suffice it to note that the champions of sanctions never sketched a plausible scenario in which Saddam Hussein would swallow the humiliation of bowing to Western terms before the coalition cracked; that any compromise would have allowed Saddam Hussein to emerge with his status and therefore his power enhanced; and that if the outright annihilation of a member nation of the UN and the seizure of control over a substantial part of the world's energy reserves did not qualify as an attack on our vital interests, then little else would.

Most of the people who harped on these themes, and made the predictions that flowed from them, were, as we have seen, the same liberal Democrats who had been saying much the same things about every global crisis since Vietnam. To be sure, there were a few exceptions: President Bush received essential support in the House from liberal Democrats like Stephen Solarz (NY), Dante Fascell (FL), and Les Aspin (WI). These men, however, had already established reputations for independence of mind on such issues as Cambodia (Solarz), Nicaragua (Fascell), or defense policy (Aspin). On the other hand, of those who had been consistent doves since Vietnam, hardly any backed the President—not even among strong supporters of Israel, notwithstanding the obvious Israeli interest in seeing Saddam Hussein's military machine smashed. (Indeed, a majority of the Jewish members of each house, most of whom are liberal Democrats, voted against the President.)

For the most part, even Democrats who were not dovish by predisposition tended to be dragged along by the enormous weight of dovish sentiment within their party (reinforced by the doves' unmatched penchant for cutthroat politics within the party caucus, recently displayed anew in the efforts to block the elevation of centrist Dave McCurdy to the chairmanship of the House Intelligence Committee). Just as Congressmen Jim Wright and Tom Foley and Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, all former officers of the hawkish Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM), had each fallen in line with the party majority, so now Senator Nunn, the premier "defense Democrat," took on the role of leading opponent of the use of force in the Gulf.

Outside Congress, Democratic activist Ann Lewis, a leader of Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign, figured prominently in the Committee for Peace and Security in the Gulf, which supported the use of force against Iraq, but none of the Committee's other members, except perhaps former Representative Tony Coelho, was a dyed-in-the-wool dove. Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post* was another rare dove who supported the President's policy. With the cold war over, he seemed to see the world with fresh eyes, like Rip Van Winkle awakening from his long sleep. Thus, taking George McGovern to task for opposing the war, Cohen wrote in ingenuous consternation: "Incredibly, the isolationist chicken has roosted in the Democratic Left."

And so it had, about twenty years earlier, together with its twin, pacifism, when the selfsame George McGovern carried the Democratic standard under the slogan, "Come Home, America," and the promise to cut defense expenditures by a third. True, in the present case there were not many adherents of absolute pacifism or isolation-

* See Arch Puddington's article beginning on p. 28 for a more extensive discussion of this line of argument.—Ed.

ism. But there were many who believed, as Stanley Hoffmann sympathetically paraphrased it in 1973, that the “irrelevance of military power to most of the goals pursued by states” is “increasingly obvious,” and also many who believed, as Richard Ullman wrote in 1975, that “American physical security would not in any immediate sense be affected by drastic changes in the internal political structure of any other state or states.”

The Gulf crisis showed that this perspective was still shaping our national debate. Indeed, far from having laid the Vietnam paradigm to rest, the end of the cold war seemed, as we have already noted, to have brought it new adherents—on the Right side of the political spectrum. With the Communist threat receding, some of them (like the columnist Patrick J. Buchanan) aimed to resurrect the traditional isolationism of the American Right. Others (like Luttwak) embraced the neo-isolationist view that economic issues have surpassed political-military factors in importance. Still others (like Evans and Novak) seemed motivated by a solicitude for Arab sensibilities quite similar to the solicitude many on the Left used to show for the sensibilities of third-world revolutionaries.

WILL, then, the Vietnam paradigm survive the Gulf War? The early signs are mixed. William Raspberry of the *Washington Post* set a standard of journalistic probity with a column titled “Eating My Hat” in which he criticized his own misreading of the Gulf situation. “It seems obvious,” joked Raspberry, “that President Bush developed his stunningly successful strategy by reading every recommendation of mine—and then doing just the opposite.” But Tom Wicker, whose errors of prognostication were unsurpassed, wrote a column defending himself, while such prominent Democrats as Nunn, Hamilton, and Cuomo have gone on insisting that sanctions alone might still have worked.

Others argue that the Gulf War has changed

nothing. To Anthony Lewis, a lesson of this war “is that neither the United States nor the world can afford to repeat it.” Eric Alterman of the leftist World Policy Institute declares that “the Vietnam syndrome remains in place” because “Saddam Hussein is a one-of-a-kind bad guy.” And Buchanan cites, in full credulity, a report that “Military officials in Moscow . . . have made derisive comments about the allied performance.” They may have made such comments, but it is hard not to believe they were whistling past the graveyard, just as Buchanan himself, along with Alterman and Lewis, may be doing.

Lewis’s anxiety showed through in another recent column in which he wrote:

One result, if it comes, would be a special disaster. That is the encouragement, in America, of the delusory belief that military power can solve the world’s problems.

Similarly, Ellen Goodman of the *Boston Globe*, confessed to

an unexpected, unrelenting worry about the meaning of an “easy” win. . . . Vietnam taught us to be reluctant about getting into another faraway war. What message will come from the Gulf? Don’t be afraid?

Meg Greenfield of the *Washington Post* decried “the merciless taunting assaults” to which Gulf doves in the war’s aftermath were being subjected for their errors. In response it is tempting to suggest that the errors of those who opposed the Gulf War be treated with the same gracious indulgence as were the errors of those who supported the Vietnam war. Be that as it may, it is important to understand why so many bright people could have made so many egregiously wrong predictions, and surely the explanation is that they were in thrall to some very wrong ideas that flowed from our Vietnam debacle. The question now is whether our triumph in the Gulf, and their embarrassment, will at last lay that destructive paradigm to rest.