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A Lesson From Vietnam for Obama's War in Afghanistan

By Joe Galloway

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It was half a century ago, on the night of July 8, 1959, that the first two American soldiers to die in the Vietnam War were slain when guerrillas surrounded and shot up a small mess hall where half a dozen advisers were watching a movie after dinner.

Master Sgt. Chester Ovnand of Copperas Cove, Texas, and Maj. Dale Buis of Imperial Beach, Calif., would become the first two names chiseled on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial — the first of 58,261 Americans who died in Vietnam during the next 16 years.

The deaths of Ovnand and Buis went largely unnoticed at the time, simply a small beginning of what would become a huge national tragedy.

Presidents from Harry Truman to Dwight Eisenhower to John F. Kennedy to Lyndon B. Johnson to Richard M. Nixon to Gerald R. Ford made decisions — some small and incremental, some large and disastrous — in building us so costly and tragic a war.

The national security handmaidens of those presidents, especially those who served Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford, were supposedly the best and brightest that Harvard and Yale and Princeton could contribute.

Presidents right up to today's like to surround themselves with such self-assured and certain men, men whose eagerness to find war the answer to most problems often grows in direct proportion to their lack of experience in uniform or combat.

This small history lesson can be read as a cautionary tale to President Barack Obama's team as they oversee an excruciating slow-motion end of one war, Iraq, and a pell-mell rush to wade ever deeper into another one in the mountains and deserts of remote and tribal Afghanistan.

The story grows out of a battle in the very beginning of the American takeover of the war in South Vietnam in the fall of 1965 when a defense secretary, Robert S. McNamara, counted the bodies and the beans and offered his president two directly opposing options.

In the wake of the Ia Drang Valley battles of November 1965 — the first major collision between an experimental airmobile division of the U.S. Army and regular soldiers in division strength from the People's Army of North Vietnam — President Johnson ordered McNamara to rush to Vietnam and assess what had happened and what was going to happen.

Up till then, just more than 1,000 Americans, mostly advisers and pilots, had been killed in Vietnam since Ovnand and Buis. Then, in just five days 234 more Americans had been killed and hundreds wounded in the Ia Drang. There weren't even enough military coffins in the country to handle the dead.

McNamara took briefings from Gen. William Westmoreland, the top U.S. commander in Vietnam, and from Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and assorted spy chiefs and diplomats. Then he flew to An Khe in the Central Highlands and was briefed on the Ia Drang battles by then Lt. Col. Hal Moore, who had commanded on the ground in Landing Zone XRAY in the Ia Drang.

On the plane home to Washington, McNamara dictated a Top Secret/Eyes Only memo to President Johnson dated Nov. 30, 1965. In that report he stated that the enemy had not only met but had exceeded our escalation of the war and we had reached a decision point. In his view there were two options:

—Option One: We could arrange whatever diplomatic cover we could arrange and pull out of South Vietnam.

—Option Two: We could give Gen. Westmoreland the 200,000 more U.S. troops he was asking for, in which case by early 1967 we would have more than 500,000 Americans on the ground and they would be dying at the rate of 1,000 a month. (He was wrong; the death toll would reach more than 3,000 a month at the height of the war). "All we can possibly achieve (by this) is a military stalemate at a much higher level of violence," McNamara wrote.

On Dec. 15, 1965, the president assembled what he called the "wise men" for a brainstorming session on Vietnam. He entered the Cabinet room holding McNamara's memo. He shook it at McNamara and asked: "Bob, you mean to tell me no matter what I do I can't win in Vietnam?" McNamara nodded yes; that was precisely what he meant.

The wise men sat in session for two days. Participants say there was no real discussion of McNamara's Option One — it would have sent the wrong message to our Cold War allies — and at the end there was a unanimous vote in favor of Option Two — escalating and continuing a war that our leaders now knew we could not win.

Remember. This was 1965, 10 years before the last helicopter lifted off that roof in Saigon. It's a hell of a lot easier to get sucked into a war or jump feet first into a war than it is to get out of a war.

There's no question that President Obama inherited these two wars, Iraq and Afghanistan, from the Bush/Cheney administration. But the buildup in Afghanistan and the change in strategy belong to Obama and his version of the best and brightest.

The new administration has dictated an escalation from 30,000 U.S. troops to more than 60,000, and even before most of them have actually arrived commanders on the ground are already back asking for more, and why not? When you are a hammer everything around you looks like a nail.

Some smart veterans of both Iraq and Afghanistan, on the ground now or just back, say that at this rate we will inevitably lose the war in Afghanistan; that the situation on the ground now is far worse than Iraq was at its lowest point in 2006 and early 2007. They talk of a costly effort both in lives and national treasure that will stretch out past the Obama administration and maybe the two administrations after that.

President Obama needs to call in the "wise men and women" for a fish-or-cut-bait meeting on his two ongoing wars. Let's hope that this time around, there's an absence of the arrogance and certainty of previous generations of advisers.

Let's hope that they choose to speed up the withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq and get out before the Iraqi people and leaders order us to leave.

Let's hope, too, that they weigh very carefully all the costs of another decade or two of war in Afghanistan.

Failing that, they should at the very least begin an immediate drive to increase the number of available beds in military and Veterans Administration hospitals, and expand Arlington National Cemetery and the national military cemeteries nationwide.