

# McCain, Murtha apply lessons of Vietnam



SEN. John McCain (R, Ariz.) and U.S. Rep. Jack Murtha (D, Pa.) recently restored my faith in Congress. Unlike the Republican majority that continues to parrot the Bush administration's repeated insistence that our nation must "stay the course" in Iraq, Murtha and McCain have raised serious concerns about the on-going U.S. presence there.

While it would be convenient for the hawks to dismiss the criticisms as "uneducated" or "unpatriotic," Murtha and McCain will not be ignored, largely because of their honorable military service in Vietnam

Vietnam was the most unpopular and longest war in the nation's history. The United States lost almost 58,000 men with far more wounded and maimed. Domestic reform slowed and then stopped, stifled by the \$150 billion cost of the war, which deeply divided the society and brought an end to the consensus that had sustained U.S. Cold War policies since World War II.

Despite the enormous costs, the United States failed for the first time in its history to achieve its stated war aim - to preserve a separate, independent, noncommunist government in South Vietnam. By April 1975, the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam ruled the entire nation.

Although Vietnam was not the same ideological or military conflict as the war on terrorism, it taught McCain and Murtha about the realities of combat.

## COMMENTARY

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McCain was a Navy pilot assigned to Attack Squadron 163 onboard the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Oriskany. On Oct. 26, 1967, his Skyhawk was shot down during a strike on Hanoi. McCain, severely injured, was captured and confined to a Hanoi prison. There, he was repeatedly abused because North Vietnam refused to abide by the Geneva Conventions.

Recently, McCain, facing a hostile Republican administration on the topic of torture, insisted that "the abuse of prisoners harms, not helps, our war effort." It not only produces "bad intelligence" because "under torture a person will say anything to relieve his suffering," but also "endangers our own troops who might someday be held captive." Those words came from personal experience.

Abu Ghraib made the United States look like the "enemy" in the eyes of the international community. Perhaps the Bush administration and its supporters on Capitol Hill will heed McCain's sage advice.

Murtha, a highly decorated former Marine, volunteered for service in Vietnam in 1966-67 and nearly died in combat. He knows what an "unwinnable war" is because he fought one.

Recently, Murtha, a respected hawk and the ranking Democrat on the Defense Appropriations Committee, called for "full withdrawal" of U.S. forces from Iraq in six months. He insisted that many of those troops are "de-

moralized and poorly equipped" and, after more than two years of war, are "impeding Iraq's progress toward stability and self-governance."

When he was roundly criticized by Republicans on the floor of the House, Murtha admitted the obvious, that "the public turned against this war before I said it." He should know. Pennsylvania's 12th District, which he represents, is full of small, working-class towns populated by the folks who tote the guns and die in combat. While the wisdom of his proposal is highly questionable, his integrity is not.

To be sure, an immediate withdrawal would result in a full-scale civil war among Kurdish, Shiite and Sunni factions. Since the United States destroyed Iraq's old system of government, it has a moral and legal obligation to restore some semblance of stability before the military leaves the region. However, Murtha is absolutely correct in his belief that the situation is "unwinnable" and our troops are simply "sitting ducks" for terrorist attacks.

It takes courage to stand up against the party line on Capitol Hill and at the White House. Perhaps that's why it took two decorated Vietnam veterans to do it. Finally we have a couple of public servants who have learned from the mistakes of the past. How long will it take the others to do the same?

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