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WE'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE

BY [ANNA QUINDLEN](#) ON 10/30/05 AT 7:00 PM

NEWS

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a tapering wall of black granite cut into the grass of Constitution Gardens. Maya Lin envisioned a scar when she designed it, a scar on this land, which is exactly right. Maybe someday his security detail could drive George W. Bush over to take a look. He'll be able to see himself in the reflective surface.

The list of names etched into the wall begins with a soldier who died in 1959 and ends with one who died in 1975. Nearly 60,000 dead are commemorated here. It is the most personal of war memorials. You can touch the cold names with your warm fingers.

The president never wanted the war in Iraq to be personal. His people forbade photographs of coffins arriving home. They refused to keep track of how many Iraqis had been killed and wounded. When "Nightline" devoted a show to the faces of soldiers who had died, one conservative broadcast outlet even pulled the program from its lineup.

The president wanted this to be about policy, not about people. Even that did not go well. The policy became a moving target. First there were weapons of mass destruction

that were not there and direct links to the terrorists who attacked on September 11 that didn't exist. The removal of Saddam Hussein was given as the greatest good; it has been done. Then it became the amorphous goal of bringing freedom to the Iraqi people, as though liberty were flowers and we were FTD. The elections, the constitution, the rubble, the dead. Once again we were destroying the village in order to save it.

This all took an unfortunate turn for the administration during the president's vacation in August, when Cindy Sheehan showed up at his ranch. Say what you would about her politics or tactics, there was no doubt that she was a mother whose soldier son was now dead, and who wanted to know why. What was the cause, the point, the strategy? And suddenly many Americans started to realize that there was no good answer.

The Vietnam Memorial stands, in part, as a monument to blind incrementalism, to men who refused to stop, not because of wisdom but because of ego, because of the fear of looking weak. Not enough troops, not enough planning, no real understanding of the people or the power of the insurgency, dwindling public support. The war in Iraq is a disaster in the image and likeness of its predecessor.

During each election cycle, we ponder the question of whether character matters. Of course it does. Does anyone doubt that the continued prosecution of this war has to do with the personality of the commander in chief, a man who is stubborn and calls it strength, who wears blinders and calls it vision? When he vowed to invade Iraq, the advisers he

heeded were those who, like him, had never seen combat. The one who had was marginalized and is now gone. The investigation of who leaked what to whom, of what the reporter knew and how she knew it, may be about national security and journalistic ethics, but at its base it is about something more important: the Nixonian lengths to which these people will go to shore up a bankrupt policy and destroy those who cross them on it.

The most unattractive trait of the American empire is American arrogance, which the president embodies and which this war elevated. It is not simply that we have a good system. It is the system everyone else should have. It is the best system, and we are the best people. We can mend rivalries so ancient that they not only predate our nation but the birth of Christ. We will install the leaders we like in a country we scarcely understand, leaders who will either be seen as puppets by their people or who will eventually turn against us. We have been here before.

"In Vietnam we didn't have the lessons of Vietnam to guide us," says David Halberstam, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of that war. "In Iraq we did have those lessons. The tragedy is that we didn't pay attention to them." Or maybe only our leaders did not. The polls show the American people have turned on this war much more quickly than they did on the war in Vietnam. Of course, they are the ones who pay the price. Perhaps the leaders of the Democratic Party should take time off from their fund-raisers and visit the Vietnam Memorial, too. They should remember one of the most powerful men the party ever produced, Lyndon B. Johnson, and how he was

destroyed by opposition to the war in Vietnam and bested by those brave enough to speak against it.

At least Johnson had the good sense to be heartbroken by the body bags. Bush appears merely peevish at being criticized. Someone with a trumpet should play taps outside the White House for the edification of a president who has not attended a single funeral for the Iraqi war dead. As I am writing this, the number of American soldiers killed is 1, 992. By the time you read it, it may have topped 2, 000. Will I be writing these same things when the number is 3, 000, 5, 000, 10,000? If we are such a great nation, why are we utterly incapable of learning from our mistakes? America's sons and daughters are dying to protect the egos of those whose own children are safe at home. Again.



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