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The Deja Vu Of No Accountability

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In the wake of the Vietnam War, none of those responsible for the lies and mistakes that took us to Southeast Asia and kept us mired in that conflict for more than a decade was held accountable in any way. To us - three former U.S. Army captains who served in the Iraq war - it is clear that not enough American politicians or military leaders learned the most important lessons from that era.

As a result, we are repeating the mistakes of Vietnam in our own time.

How quickly we forget our recent past. President Richard Nixon's resignation had little to do with his poor leadership in Vietnam. No general officers, including William C. Westmoreland, the commander in Vietnam, were ever held responsible. And tragically, no civilian leaders were held accountable either. Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara was even "laterally arabesqued" to assume the presidency of the World Bank.

The Bush administration has followed the same script of unaccountability, even appointing Paul Wolfowitz, one of the chief architects of the Iraq quagmire, to head the World Bank. Gen. George Casey, formerly in charge of all ground forces in Iraq and largely responsible for executing inept counterinsurgency warfare, was, like General Westmoreland after the 1968 Tet Offensive, promoted to Army chief of staff.

Consider this particularly disorienting irony: While touring the offices of a number of key leaders in the Pentagon in spring 2006, one of us noticed copies of H. R. McMaster's acclaimed book, *Dereliction of Duty*, at eye level on the bookshelves of many ranking officials. That book thoroughly outlines how President Lyndon B. Johnson, Mr. McNamara and the generals deceived the American people and failed to discharge their sworn duties. Do those Pentagon officials have no clue? Can they not see how Mr. McMaster's analysis of the Vietnam War damns their own incompetence and bungling?

Amazingly, there was even a copy of *Dereliction of Duty* in plain view in then-Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld's office. One would have hoped each copy of that book would have been thoroughly dog-eared by administration officials and generals alike, but the unfortunate conclusion is the contrary. For them, the book apparently is merely an addition to Pentagon décor.

In the interests of pushing our nation forward and out of Iraq, Congress should move away from legislation that rhetorically attempts to tie war budgets to withdrawal efforts. Rather, our leaders must get serious about accountability. They should insist upon the review of several retired general officers as candidates for censure. A number of active-duty generals should also be court-martialed and ultimately stripped of their stars and forced to retire.

Retired Gen. Ricardo Sanchez and active-duty Gen. Walter Wojdakowski top the list for these punitive measures for their failures in 2003 and 2004.

Last but not least, a congressional commission should investigate the improprieties and incompetence of several civilian leaders who served in Iraq, with L. Paul Bremer III and David R. Oliver topping the list. Mr. Bremer did next to nothing to ensure proper accountability of billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars toward reconstruction. Similarly, as chief adviser to the Iraqi Ministry of Finance, Mr. Oliver failed to implement any system of accounting and auditing for billions of Iraqi dinars - money that should have contributed to the development of the country rather than the insurgency.

Unless a republic holds its leaders accountable, it is doomed to be the instrument of negligence, private agendas and corruption. In ancient Rome, any citizen could accuse an official of misconduct and instigate a public trial. The common people were the most effective at using this tool, because the elites were too prone to shielding each other.

How is it with our U.S. House and Senate? Are they "of the people, by the people, and for the people," or are they too much the agents of monied interests? Why have they failed to act decisively? Do our legislators think that not holding military and civilian leaders accountable for their failures will ensure our security in the 21st century?

Former U.S. Army captains Jason Blindauer, Luis Carlos Montalvan and William "Jamie" Ruehl served in Iraq from 2003 to 2006