

The Oberlin Review

The Oberlin Lessons of Vietnam for America in Iran

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To the Editors:

While President Donald Trump claims an easy fix to the situation in Iran, the reality is more complicated and more familiar. Iranian officials have promised “crushing, broader, and more destructive” attacks in response, an attitude frighteningly reminiscent of Vietnamese resolve during the United States’ disastrous involvement in Vietnam.

Meanwhile, Pentagon officials have directly contradicted the White House’s public claims about the goals and progress of the war — the same pattern of misstatement and misrepresentation from the Department of Defense that drove the U.S. deeper into Vietnam.

It has now been over a month since the Iran conflict escalated. According to Pete Hegseth a month ago, “We are just getting started.”

We have heard that before.

Robert McNamara called it “the light at the end of the tunnel.” Hegseth calls it an “un-limited stockpile” of arms. The language is different, but the confidence is the same.

The parallels are not coincidental — they are a pattern:

Public Outrage at Oberlin

The echoes reach back to Oberlin. In October 1967, Oberlin College became a flashpoint of student resistance to Vietnam. When a Navy recruiter arrived on campus, students surrounded his car for four hours. The next day, protesters staged a sit-in blocking the placement office in Peters Hall where interviews were to be held. Author Weiner was among those protesting.

History is repeating itself with Oberlin students once again speaking out by holding teach-ins on the Iran War.

“I was very upset — I think many people were — and I think that is the correct response to be deeply angered at what our country has the gall to do,” College second-year Ezra Rudensky said regarding the war (“YDSAHosts Teach-In On Iranian History in Wake of U.S., Israeli Attacks,” *The Oberlin Review*, March 13, 2026). Shontel Brown, Ohio Democratic U.S. Rep. of Warrensville Heights, put it plainly.

“This President promised to end wars, not start new ones.”

No Congressional Approval

Under Johnson and McNamara, there was no congressional approval for the war. After the disputed Gulf of Tonkin attack in 1964, Johnson stated, “I further announced a decision to ask the Congress for a resolution expressing the unity and determination of the United States in supporting freedom and in protecting peace in Southeast Asia.”

Trump took a similar route, justifying the war by saying he “had a feeling” Iran was about to attack. Press Secretary Leavitt called it “based on fact.” No congressional authorization was sought.

Allies of Europe Nowhere to be Found

For the Johnson administration, the allies of Europe were nowhere to be found. French President Charles De Gaulle said in 1964, “I do not believe that you can win in this situation even though you have more aircraft, cannons, and arms of various kinds.”

British Prime Minister Harold Wilson warned in 1965, “I would be the last person to underrate or understate the grave dangers of the fighting in Vietnam escalating into a major land war in Asia.”

A similar situation is brewing with Trump and Europe with British PM Keir Starmer stating: “That won’t be, and it’s never been envisioned to be, a NATO mission.” German Chancellor Merz has taken the same position.

Trump has recently spoken out against his European allies declaring on Truth Social: “We no longer ‘need,’ or desire, the NATO Countries’ assistance — WE NEVER DID!” Now, Trump told NATO countries, “Get your own oil.”

“No boots on the ground”

In 1964 Johnson promised: “We are not about to send American boys nine or 10 thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.” These statements were lies, and by 1969, there were over 500,000 American troops on the ground.

Trump is making similar statements and has not ruled out ground troops: “I don’t have the yips with respect to boots on the ground — like every president says, ‘There will be no boots on the ground.’ I don’t say it.” However, there are over 50,000 troops already present in the Middle East, as well as thousands of Marines who are on their way. He’s threatening Kharg Island off Iran’s shore — in an approach alarmingly similar to Johnson’s, and one that might threaten vulnerable American troops.

The “Destruction” of the Enemy to Measure Success

Robert McNamara declared in 1962, “Every quantitative measurement we have shows we’re winning this war” — a claim based on body counts and statistical models that ultimately obscured the reality on the ground.

Pete Hegseth struck a similar note at a recent Cabinet meeting, boasting of more than 10,000 enemy targets destroyed and 150 naval vessels sunk and the defense industrial base shattered.

Our nation faces a greater risk today of a prolonged war: Iran controls the Strait of Hormuz, a chokepoint capable of triggering a global recession. McNamara and Johnson admitted they were wrong, but only after 58,000 Americans were dead. History only teaches those willing to listen.

– Robert Weiner, OC '69, and Griffin Cobb

Robert Weiner is a former spokesman in the Clinton and Bush White Houses and earlier for the House Government Operations Committee. He was senior aide to Congressmen John Conyers, Charles Rangel, Claude Pepper, Ed Koch, Senator Ted Kennedy, and Four-Star General/Drug Czar Barry McCaffrey.

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