

AUGUST 17

Someone tell Frank Rich the war isn't over

On Sunday, the New York Times published a piece by Frank Rich under the headline "Someone Tell the President the War Is Over." The article was a flurry of well-placed jabs about the Bush administration's lies and miscalculations for the Iraq war. But the essay was also a big straw in liberal wind now blowing toward dangerous conclusions.

Comparing today's war-related poll numbers for George W. Bush with those for President Lyndon B. Johnson, the columnist writes: "On March 31, 1968, as LBJ's ratings plummeted further, he announced he wouldn't seek re-election, commencing our long extrication from that quagmire." And Rich extends his Vietnam analogy: "What lies ahead now in Iraq instead is not victory, which Mr. Bush has never clearly defined anyway, but an exit (or triage) strategy that may echo Johnson's March 1968 plan for retreat from Vietnam."

But Rich does not linger over the actual meaning of the "plan for retreat" and the "long extrication" – which meant five more years of massive U.S. military assaults in Vietnam, followed by two more years of military aid to the Saigon government while fighting continued. The death toll during that period in Vietnam? Tens of thousands of Americans, perhaps a million Vietnamese people. That "extrication" was more than merely "long."

Rich's narrative does not just skitter past five years of horrific carnage inflicted by the U.S. government in Vietnam – and elsewhere in Indochina – after the spring of 1968. His storyline is also, in its own way, a complacent message that stands in sharp contrast to the real situation we now face: a U.S. war on Iraq that may persist for a terribly long time. For the Americans still in Iraq, and for the Iraqis still caught in the crossfire of the occupation, the experiences ahead will hardly be compatible with reassuring forecasts made by pundits in the summer of 2005.

Mocking President Bush's assertion on Aug. 11 that "no decision has been made yet" about withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, Rich concludes: "The country has already made the decision for Mr. Bush. We're outta there."

But of course Americans are not outta there. And President Bush reasserted last Thurs-

day that withdrawal of U.S. troops is contingent on the U.S.-allied Iraqi forces achieving standards of performance and self-sufficiency that are little more than mirages.

Yes, eventually, U.S. troops may leave Iraq. But, in the summer of 2005, for commentators to declare the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Washington's latest imperial war to be a virtual *fait accompli* makes about as much sense as it would have in the spring of 1968.

Even after the commander in chief gives an order to begin systematic withdrawal of U.S. troops – and we're very far from such a presidential order today – there is likely to be continuation of massive U.S. military actions in Iraq. And even an actual sharp reduction of American troop levels on the ground hardly ensures a drop-off of Pentagon-inflicted violence. During the three years after July 1969, when President Nixon announced that the burden of fighting Communist forces would shift to Washington's South Vietnamese ally, the White House cut U.S. troop levels in Vietnam by more than 85 percent. During that same period, the tonnage rate of U.S. bombs falling on Vietnam actually increased.

Today, while the U.S. warfare in Iraq continues unabated, the message that "we're outta there" is pernicious. It looks past the ongoing need to demand complete U.S. withdrawal (if "we're outta there," why bother to protest?) and stands aloof from the very real political battles that will be fought to determine just how long or short the bloody "extrication" process will last.

We're not "outta there" – until an antiwar movement in the United States can grow strong enough to make the demand stick. And we're not there yet. Not by a long shot.

