

**Why and How We Fight US Wars Final Paper: Choose three US wars from the Revolution to today. Why and how were they fought? What lessons are relevant today? Cite references.**

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POS 3931: Why and How we Fight US Wars

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In the following paper, I will discuss the U.S. Wars in Vietnam, the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan and describe why and how they were fought. I will then for each of them, extract lessons that are still relevant today.

## **VIETNAM**

The Vietnam War was fought between communist North Vietnam and non-communist South Vietnam from 1955 to 1975, with U.S. ground support from 1965. It was a long and gruesome war that claimed the lives of 58,220 U.S. servicemen and saw three presidents come and go (National Archives, 2008).

So why was the U.S. concerned with Vietnam? Predominantly because of the domino effect, the idea that the fall of one nation to Communism inspires subsequent uprisings in neighbouring countries. Ho Chi Minh's North Vietnam was supported by communist China and the leaders of the U.S. believed that if the North was able to take Vietnam in its entirety, communist uprisings in Laos and Cambodia would ultimately succeed – which they later did. At first, the U.S. occupied an advisory role. The military presence the U.S. had in Vietnam between 1955 and 1964 was designed to assist the South Vietnamese military with training and strategy, but by 1965, U.S. Marines had landed on the beaches of Da Nang. U.S. direct involvement in Vietnam was triggered by the Gulf of Tonkin Incident. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 1964, the U.S.S. Maddox was attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo carriers, after firing warning shots while conducting a surveillance operation off the North Vietnamese coast (Moyar, 2007). Two days later Maddox returned to the Gulf of Tonkin, this time with U.S.S. Turner Joy, and declared once again that it was under attack. While it is now known that the 'attacks' on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August were nothing more than a misunderstanding (NSA, 2006), President Lyndon B. Johnson was keen to use the

events at Tonkin as justification for an increased presence in Vietnam. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of August 1964, Congress approved the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. This gave the president the ability to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression” (National Archives, 1964). This marked the beginning of the U.S. War in Vietnam.

The War in Vietnam was fought in distinct stages. Through mass bombing runs called Operation Rolling Thunder, through increased ground operations after March 1968, through Vietnamization after 1969 and through tactical bombing at the end of the war. However, at all stages of the war, chains of commands were distorted. Bombing calls were regularly made from the White House which resulted in sub-optimal decision making on the ground in Vietnam (Draude, 2024).

Furthermore, the war was fought with strategic narcissism. This is because the U.S. believed that they would be able to easily pacify any resistance to their control, without considering a strategy for withdrawal or compromise. This meant that the U.S. were effectively fighting a losing war. While important actors at the time such as General Westmoreland, tried to advocate for body count as a metric for success, the American public were not convinced by this logic. This issue was exacerbated by the huge loss of American lives, and the eventual fall of South Vietnam to the North in 1975.

This forms the central lesson from Vietnam – never go to war without strategy. Not only were people angry in the U.S. that their husbands and sons were dying in a war for a distant land, they were enraged by the fact that their loss signified no gain in the war. Furthermore, the lack of strategy in Vietnam meant that leadership was disjointed and ineffective. This lack of central authority harboured the conditions that allowed the events at My Lai to transpire. The lack of strategy of in Vietnam is what

ultimately lost the support of the American public, and by proxy, the War. It is also what lost the support of the Vietnamese people. How were they to support the U.S.'s actions when Operation Rolling Thunder accounted for the deaths of 34,000 civilians (CIA, 1967)? Therefore, reason and strategy must prevail over hubris when deciding whether to, and how to, fight wars.

### **PERSIAN GULF WAR**

The Persian Gulf War, or Gulf War (as it is more commonly known) was fought from August 1990 to February 1991 by a coalition of Western and Arab forces against Saddam Hussein's occupying Iraqi military in Kuwait.

The Gulf War was triggered by Iraq's invasion of its bordering southern neighbour, Kuwait, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 1990. This came after increased tensions between Iraq and Kuwait in the years leading up, due to unpaid Iraqi debts amassed during the Iraq-Iran War. Tensions between Iraq and Kuwait peaked on July 18<sup>th</sup> when Hussein accused Kuwait of stealing oil from the Al-Rumaylah oil field, a day after he accused the small oil-rich nation and the United Arab Emirates of intentionally exceeding OPEC export quotas, which he claimed was driving down oil prices (Murphy, 1990). Resistance to Iraq's invasion was limited, as even though Kuwait was economically wealthy due to its oil production, its military was small. Kuwait's army of around 20,000 men was quickly trampled by Iraq's military of 950,000 personnel, who formed the fifth largest military in the world at the time (Broder, 1990). On the 6<sup>th</sup> of August, the UN Security Council imposed a ban on all trade with Iraq and on the 10<sup>th</sup> of August, 12 of the 21 Arab League countries passed a resolution condemning the invasion. In response, Hussein declared Kuwait the 19<sup>th</sup> province of Iraq. Fearing that Hussein would inevitably expand further south into

Saudi Arabia, giving him control of 40% of the world's oil reserves, the U.S. corroborated with Saudi Arabia to establish a large military presence in the Gulf. The UN Security Council, sympathising with the U.S.'s fears, passed Resolution 678 which sanctioned the use of force if the Iraqis had not left Kuwait by the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 1991 (UN, 1990). On the 12<sup>th</sup> of January 1991, the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution was passed and on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January 1991, Desert Storm commenced.

The Gulf War was fought with "four simple principles" in mind: to force the immediate and complete withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, to restore the legitimate Kuwaiti government, to stabilise the region and to protect American lives (Bush, 1990). Desert Storm commenced with a coalition air operation on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January and by the 28<sup>th</sup>, the US had gained full air supremacy. The air operation was followed by a naval operation which sought to defend the six U.S. aircraft carriers in the Gulf, to eliminate the small Iraqi Navy, to clear Iraqi mines and to threaten an amphibious assault on Kuwait City. This campaign was successful too and the last Iraqi Navy units were sunk and captured on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February. Crucially, Saddam and the Iraqi military were entirely convinced by the threat of a U.S. amphibious assault and had set up their forces around the Kuwait coastline accordingly (Tystad, 1992: 18). This is what made the ground operation between the 24<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of February, Desert Sabre, so effective. Within four days, coalition forces managed to force the Iraqi military out of Kuwait using a two-pronged attack along the south coast and through the Iraq desert in the West. This forced Hussein to accept a cease-fire on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February. This marked the end of the Gulf War.

One of the central lessons that is relevant today from the Gulf War is the effectiveness of strategy. While the U.S. could have marched on to oust Hussein and

invade Iraq, they chose not to. They met all of their criteria by liberating the people of Kuwait and lost remarkably few servicemembers doing so, 147 U.S. lives. This decision was crucial, as H.W. Bush was able to keep the majority of Arab countries on the side of the U.S. and bring relative stability to the region. Another important lesson that is relevant today is the power of surprise and deception. A direct amphibious assault on Kuwait City would have been costly to American lives due to the remaining Iraqi mines in the Gulf and the difficult coastal terrain. However, by deceiving Iraqi forces into preparing for an amphibious assault, coalition forces were able to easily outmanoeuvre the larger Iraqi force. This showed that victory is not always achieved through brute force, but sometimes through initiative and deception.

## **AFGHANISTAN**

The U.S. War in Afghanistan was the longest in American history. It was fought from October 2001 to August 2021 by a coalition predominantly consisting of American and British forces.

The War in Afghanistan was triggered by the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001. President Bush claimed that the leader of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, was responsible and demanded that the Taliban extradited him. Instead, the Taliban who were in control of Afghanistan at the time and had been hosting bin Laden in exile, told the U.S. that they would not hand him over.

This response prompted the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan which lasted from October to December. The invasion consisted of both airstrikes and direct ground operations, where coalition forces assisted the Northern Alliance (an armed Afghan oppositional group) to oust the Taliban entirely from rule in Afghanistan (PBS, 2021). This stage of the war is generally seen as a decisive victory for the U.S., but over the

next 20 years coalition forces would slowly lose their grip on control in Afghanistan. Eventually in 2021, U.S. forces withdrew leaving the Taliban with control over more land than ever before. So, what went wrong?

The general consensus among theorists like Craig Whitlock is that the U.S. was too ambitious in its aims. After securing Afghanistan from the Taliban, coalition forces installed a pro-democracy interim leader, Hamid Karzai and helped to draft a new Afghan constitution. However, both of these decisions came back to bite the U.S.

“Even American soldiers who had no familiarity with Afghan history and culture before they arrived said it became obvious that trying to impose a strong, centralized government was foolish” (Whitlock, 2021:38).

The U.S. underestimated both: the challenges of installing a democracy in a country where it has never occurred and the challenges of getting geographically isolated, ethnically diverse tribes, to agree to be ruled by a central authority. In fact, Karzai's Presidency, while democratic inspired even greater resistance from the Taliban as Karzai's government was seen as weak, susceptible to corruption and not hard-line Islamist enough. Furthermore, the no-nonsense approach to counterterrorism that the U.S. and NATO forces adopted further isolated tribal communities. This disillusionment with U.S. aims was exacerbated by an estimated 46,319 Afghan civilians killed in crossfire over the twenty years (Bateman, 2022). The culmination of these effects eventually led to the Taliban overthrowing the central government in August 2021. However, the central government's grip on control was always waning from the minute it was installed in 2001.

Therefore, the most important lesson to extract from the War in Afghanistan for today, is to understand the culture of countries you are fighting for. While the U.S. went into the war well-intentioned, they attempted for 20 years to impose a regime that would not work. U.S. leaders ignored ethnic, social and cultural differences and instead believed that Jeffersonian Liberal Democracy could be installed anywhere. This was a gross miscalculation, and life today is no better for the average Afghan than it was twenty years ago. This shows that when going to war, states must consider cultural contexts. Dr Basimah Rowe argues that through cultural awareness, we can come to common understandings. Without cultural awareness however, we can never truly communicate (Rowe, 2024).

To conclude, I have explained why the U.S. went to war in Vietnam, Kuwait and Afghanistan, how the U.S. fought these wars, and extracted relevant lessons from each conflict. To summarise these lessons: we must always fight with a clear strategy in mind, we must never underestimate the power of surprise and we must always consider cultural contexts. Leaders should wage war in adherence to these lessons if they seek to avoid making the same mistakes as their predecessors.



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