WARS OF CHOICE: MOTIVES AND JUSTIFICATIONS IN THE VIETNAM AND IRAQ WARS

Author:
Andrea G. Ortu

Faculty Sponsor:
Marianna Sullivan,
Department of Political Science

ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

The Iraq and Vietnam Wars, both controversial, were similar in origins, justifications, and motives. The Kennedy and Johnson Administrations framed the Vietnam War as pivotal to maintaining world peace and combating communism. Using and exaggerating the domino and credibility theories, officials instilled fear in the public to garner support for continued military involvement.   Likewise, forty years later, the Bush Administration linked terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and the horrific events of September 11, 2001 to justify war with Iraq. Although both eras were turbulent and worrisome times for the international community, America's leaders manipulated facts, ignored government intelligence, and deliberately escalated the conflicts for self-serving reasons. Political credibility, geopolitical advantages, economic incentives, and imperialism were at stake in both conflicts, and are the underlying reasons for fighting in Iraq and Vietnam. Initiated unnecessarily, justified deceitfully, and motivated self-interestedly, both were wars of choice.

John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson used the credibility and domino theories to justify American involvement in Vietnam. The Cold War, with the threat of nuclear weapons, which came close to being deployed during the 1962 Cuban Missile crisis, was of great concern. Kennedy and Johnson were both apprehensive of the spread of communism and willing to use force to counter it. Kennedy and his advisers applied the domino theory, first articulated during the Eisenhower administration, to the countries of Southeast Asia. The fall of one nation to communism, it was feared, would lead to further losses.[1] Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara claimed that "The fall of South Vietnam to Communism would lead to the fairly rapid extension of communist control, or complete accommodation to Communism, in the rest of mainland Southeast Asia and in Indonesia."[2] McGeorge Bundy concurred; if America did not achieve its objectives in South Vietnam, "almost all of Southeast Asia [would] probably fall rapidly under Communist dominance, accommodate to Communism . . . or fall under the domination of forces not now explicitly Communist but likely . . . to become so."[3]

Even as these statements were being made, contrary evidence existed. A Central Intelligence Agency report argued that countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand were unlikely to be influenced even if South Vietnam became communist.[4] Unfortunately, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations ignored CIA estimates that contradicted the domino theory. According to Gareth Porter, Bundy was cognizant that Defense Department claims were directly contradicted by both the CIA and the State Department.[5] As the domino theory was questioned by legitimate organizations, it was modified by its proponents until eventually the credibility theory became the major justification for both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. As a vital member of the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), the United States promised to protect the South East Asian region from the threat of communism.[6] When the United States perceived the communist threat to South Vietnam's independence as imminent, the U. S. insisted that it was obliged, as a member of SEATO, to stand up to the North Vietnamese. Failure to act, it was believed, would cause the international community, especially the chief communist powers, the U. S. S. R. and China, to conclude that the United States was weak, and did not honor its treaty agreements. Allowing the North Vietnamese to invade the South would undermine America's international credibility, and subsequently put America's safety in danger.

Forty years later, the Bush administration used the domino and credibility theories to justify invading Iraq. Donald Rumsfeld, like McNamara before him, was an influential Secretary of Defense. In 2006, he opened his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee by defending the American presence in Iraq:

We need to be realistic about the consequences. If we left Iraq prematurely, as the terrorists demand, the enemy would tell us to leave Afghanistan and then withdraw from the Middle East. And if we left the Middle East, they'd order us and all those who don't share their militant ideology to leave what they call the occupied Muslim lands from Spain to the Philippines.[7]

Rumsfeld obviously hoped to raise fears that without the United States' intervention in Iraq, terrorists would gain control of more and more territory. This warning recalls those made by Bundy and McNamara, both ardent domino theory advocates. As during the Vietnam era, such claims were grossly exaggerated. While these results were *possible*, no evidence indicated that they were *probable*. Moreover, the Bush administration touted a reverse domino theory—that American involvement in Iraq would spread democracy outward in the region.

The United States also applied an elaborate version of the credibility theory to Iraq. International terrorism, the events of September 11, and Saddam Hussein, if not addressed, would weaken the international power of the United States. The Bush administration repeatedly strove to link Iraq to terrorism, September 11, and weapons of mass destruction. Bush consistently accused Saddam of refusing United Nations weapons inspectors, and publicly suggested that the Iraqi leader was hiding something.[8] Saddam, Bush officials claimed, had used lethal gas against Iraqis and hoped to create new weapons to use against his enemies, the United States and Israel.[9] In addition to these unsupported and massaged charges, officials declared that Iraq harbored international terrorists, thus tying the attacks of September 11 to a country which had little, if nothing at all, to do with the hijackings. Evidence that al Qaeda members were kept safe in Iraq was "shaky at best," but the administration still presented these claims as ironclad.[10] Furthermore, the Bush administration made them knowing that they would frighten the public, encouraging it to support the war.

Believing that not responding to the events of September 11, 2001, would betray the United States as weak and ineffective, the Bush administration invaded Afghanistan. While September 11 may have been a justification for starting the war, expanding the war to Iraq required other reasons: threats of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Officials claimed that the United States' credibility—its honor, prestige, safety, and power—depended on the maintenance of democracy and on its determination to combat terrorism.

The Bush administration presented Iraq as a nation that brutalized its own people, harbored terrorists, and sought to attack both the United States and Israel. Despite the dearth of tangible evidence, the administration continued to link Iraq and al Qaeda rhetorically. In reality, Saddam and al Qaeda were ideological opponents. Moreover, according to United Nations inspectors, no weapons of mass destruction were hidden in Iraq nor was there evidence that Iraq had tried to obtain such weapons. But the Bush administration ignored intelligence that contradicted their goals and undermined public support for their actions.

The justifications for the Vietnam War were seriously flawed. The Central Intelligence Agency had repeatedly informed the Johnson administration that most Southeast Asian countries were not in danger of falling like dominos to communism, even if North Vietnam won. The credibility theory was also exaggerated. Officials led the public to believe that not intervening in Vietnam would represent an abandonment of America's SEATO obligations. But this fear was irrational. Britain and France, SEATO members which had already been involved in colonial misadventures in Southeast Asia, were not eager to recommit themselves for reasons of credibility.

The Kennedy, Johnson, and Bush administrations all exacerbated international situations to initiate war. Johnson continued America's involvement in Operation 34A, a cooperative venture beginning in the early 1960s that assisted South Vietnamese attacks on North Vietnamese naval bases.[11] The North Vietnamese understandably felt threatened by 34A, and, it was widely assumed, had attacked the destroyer *Maddox* in retaliation for such covert missions.[12] Even Lyndon Johnson was convinced that the initial attack was a response to OPLAN 34A.[13] Although the United States' covert operations goaded

the Vietnamese, the public and Congress were informed that the North Vietnamese had acted without provocation. As a result of the Tonkin Gulf incidents, Congress was persuaded to pass the Tonkin Gulf Resolution giving complete authority to the president, and America was off to fight a war.

A similar situation occurred in Iraq. Immediately after September 11, the Bush administration sought to link Saddam Hussein to the attacks.[14] Any way that the fear invoked by September 11 could be connected to Iraq's regime was sufficient evidence to convince the public to go to war. The United States used evidence from Britain that Iraq tried to obtain "significant quantities" of uranium from Africa to support its WMD claims.[15] When this evidence proved false, the U. S. tried to tie Saddam Hussein's abuse of Iraqis to potential violence against Israel and the United States.   Each time these claims were disproved, officials came up with others. The Bush administration was looking for a way to war in 2001.

The real reasons for entering both conflicts included needs to project military and political strength, to promote America's economic interests, and to extend the nation's sphere of influence. In Vietnam and Iraq, the credibility of officials was at stake. No political leader was willing to sacrifice his career and credibility by withdrawing from the conflict. No one wished to be accused of "losing" Vietnam as earlier leaders had supposedly "lost" China. Additionally, there were economic advantages to having allies in Southeast Asia. China was now communist, revolutions were imminent in Indonesia and Malaya, and Japan had struggled since World War II.[16] The underdeveloped world became a focal point of the United States, which, in the late 1950s, concluded that Southeast Asia was a "critical theater in . . . related efforts to contain communism and to effect the economic recovery of the developed, noncommunist nations of Western Europe."[17] The United States sought to make Southeast Asia productive again, believing that Japan, with American assistance, would remain anticommunist and eventually become the economic engine of East Asia. Eisenhower was convinced that Japan, as long as it had a healthy trade relationship with the United States, would ally itself with the West. Despite its disapproval of the Vietnam War, Japan welcomed America's involvement in Asia for the economic benefits.

In Iraq, political credibility, geographic advantages, and economic incentives also were motives for war. During George H. W. Bush's presidency, United Nations forces stopped short of invading Baghdad after they had expelled Iraqi troops from Kuwait. George W. Bush felt a personal stake in the later war with Iraq. It offered him an opportunity to complete what the Republican right had criticized his father for not doing. Other members of the administration had a political stake in the war as well, not wishing to look weak in the face of an international threat. Plus, members of Bush's cabinet, such as Cheney and Rumsfeld, who felt that America showed a lack of determination in Vietnam, wished to compensate for this alleged failure by exerting force. Of course, oilmen such as Bush and Cheney also had economic incentives for involving the United States in Iraq.

It was relatively easy for the Bush administration to generate public support for invading Iraq. Many were still horrified and enraged over the September 11 attacks. The war allowed officials, such as Donald Rumsfeld, to appear strong, patriotic, and morally virtuous as they spoke of America's history and its ideals of freedom and democracy: "Americans didn't cross oceans and settle a wilderness and build history's greatest democracy only to run away from a bunch of murderers and extremists who kill everyone that they cannot convert and to tear down what they could never build." For the Secretary of Defense, the U. S. was fighting for "good" and against "evil."[18]

Americans in 2003, as in 1965, believed in fighting for "good" causes and assumed that the nation had the moral authority to impose its vision of "right" and "wrong." But behind this rhetoric lies the ideology of imperialism. In effect, the United States acted imperially by entering nations and spreading its economic, political, and social ideals—often for its own gain. In Iraq, the U. S. has attempted to impose its political and moral standards on a nation with an entirely different history, culture, and institutions.

Furthermore, geopolitics played a large role in inspiring the Iraq War. Political tensions with Saudi Arabia were rising, meaning that the United States needed a new military and political ally in the Middle East. Plus, the supply of oil was a major economic benefit of involvement in Iraq. And if the United States wished to "spread democracy" in the region, Iraq provided a foothold from which to do so. The United States and Saudi Arabia struggled with their alliance after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The

U. S. first came to Saudi Arabia in 1933, in search of oil.[19] Since then, hundreds of thousands of Americans have lived and worked there, bringing with them modern Western technological culture. In return, Saudi Arabia provided America with a stable source of oil and a reliable ally. Tensions, however, began to rise over the Arab-Israeli conflict. While America sided with Israel, most Saudis regarded it as a terrorist state and the Palestinians as "blameless targets and martyrs."[20]

The events of September 11, 2001, damaged the two countries' relationship. Many Americans were outraged that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudi Arabian and had taken orders from the Saudi Osama bin Laden.[21] After years of ignoring their fundamental ideological differences and the Saudis' tolerance of extremism, Americans finally "subjected Saudi Arabia to intense scrutiny, and . . . did not like much of what they saw."[22] Thus, Iraq became a potential Middle Eastern alternative that might reduce the U. S.'s need to cater to Saudi Arabia while advancing America's political and economic objectives in the Middle East.[23]

Emily Rosenberg notes that September 11 "justified an expanding American empire" in the Middle East.[24] Yet, government officials, such as George W. Bush (in 2002), have always denied its existence: "America has no empire to extend or utopia to establish."[25] America's empire differs from earlier ones that depended on colonization and conquest. Now an empire can extend itself not only through military power, but with economic and cultural intrusion and by the rhetoric of human rights and democracy.[26]

Over the last century, the United States has sought to export its political system, featuring a written constitution and emphasizing the supremacy of law. It has also promoted and protected its capitalist, corporate interests,[27] sometimes behind the guise of the rhetoric of self-fulfillment and self-reliance.[28] While the "moral evaluation of empire gets complicated" when one of its objectives is freedom of the oppressed, the main point is that for moral reasons or otherwise, an American empire still exists.[29] The United States still feels destined to lead the rest of the world and entitled to influence other cultures, economies, and governments.   The Vietnam and Iraq Wars, both wars of choice, exemplify the imperial tendencies of the modern United States.

NOTES

[1] Robert K. Brigham, *Iraq, Vietnam, and the Limits of American Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), 3.
[2] Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young, eds., *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 92.
[3] Gardner 93.
[4] Gardner 95.
[5] Gardner 93.
[6] David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 117.
[7] Gardner, 1.
[8] Brigham, 28.
[9] Brigham, 28.
[10] Brigham, 28.
[11] Jeffrey W. Helsing, *Johnson's War/Johnson's Great Society: The Guns and Butter Trap* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 23.
[12] H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 123.
[13] McMaster, 121.
[14] Gardner, 99.
[15] Brigham, 30.
[16] Wolf Mendl, *Japan and Southeast Asia: The Cold War Era, 1947-1989, and Issues at the End of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 411.
[17] Mendl, 411.
[18] Gardner, 1.

[19] Thomas W. Lippman, *Inside the Mirage: America's Fragile Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2004), 3.

[20] Adam Garfinkle, "American Foreign Policy Cannot Change Saudi Arabia," in *The World's Hot Spots: Saudi Arabia*, ed. Adrian Sinkler (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2003), 72-79.

[21] Lippman, 325.

[22] Lippman, 326.

[23] Andrew J. Bacevich, "Gulliver at Bay: The Paradox of the Imperial Presidency," in *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam*, eds. Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young (New York: The New Press, 2007), 124-135.

[24] Emily S. Rosenberg, *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003),186.

[25] Michael Ignatieff, "The American Empire" in *The New York Times Magazine*, January 5, 2003, 22.

[26] Ignatieff, 24.

[27] Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 26.

[28] Brzezinski, 27.

[29] Ignatieff, 24.