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No, Afghanistan Is Not Really Vietnam All Over Again

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On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Afghan Taliban signed an agreement in Doha, Qatar, bringing the United States potentially closer to ending the war in Afghanistan than at any point in the conflict's eighteen-year history. After months of military escalations, negotiations, and recriminations, the United States agreed to a token withdrawal of several thousand forces by August 2020 and to remove all remaining forces by May 2021. The Afghan government had been cut out of the talks, but the United States also vowed to encourage it to release thousands of Taliban prisoners and to enter into its own negotiations with the Taliban in order to pave the way to a permanent ceasefire agreement. For its part, the Taliban agreed to negotiate with Kabul after the troop withdrawals began and to halt cooperation with Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups.[1]

The Doha Agreement may end up being a working roadmap to ending the Afghanistan war, but to military and diplomatic historians, it seems depressingly similar to another peace deal—the 1973 Paris Peace Accords that led to the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Vietnam and the eventual collapse of the South Vietnamese government two years later. The parallels between the two are numerous: Both deals were forged by a president who had vowed to end a war he inherited and then dramatically escalated aerial bombing in a bid to generate elusive leverage that never appeared. In both deals, the U.S. first tried to include its host nation ally in the talks before giving up and negotiating directly and exclusively with the enemy. In both, the United States committed to full and verifiable withdrawals of its combat troops in exchange for enemy actions that were neither verifiable nor enforceable. Finally, in both conflicts, U.S. priorities were the removal of its own forces—not on creating a workable political settlement that would actually end either war.

Of course, there are major differences between the Vietnam and Afghanistan wars as well, as a former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan recently outlined.[2] But how useful is the former conflict for understanding the latter one? Is it even possible to learn from one war and apply those lessons to another one? If so, what does the U.S. experience in Vietnam auger for the end of the war in Afghanistan?

It is wise to search for lessons in history, but those who do so should begin with at least two caveats. First, "history" offers no concrete lessons. History is just what historians write, and we rarely agree on the story, let alone its lessons, when we probe the past from our perches in the

[1]The full text of the "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America," is available on the U.S. State Department website, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf (accessed Mar. 6, 2020).

[2]Ambassador Ryan Crocker, "I Served in Afghanistan. No, It's Not Another Vietnam," *Washington Post*, Dec. 12, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/i-served-in-afghanistan-no-its-not-another-vietnam/2019/12/12/72b958f0-1d1d-11ea-b4c1-fd0d91b60d9e_story.html (accessed Mar. 19, 2020).

present.[3] There are such things as truth and lies, and facts certainly exist, but they never speak for themselves. Memory activists operationalize them for their own battles over meaning and memory, and victories, when they come, are almost never final.[4] As a result, the stories about the past that gain authority over time do so for a variety of reasons, and their relationship to the truth is not always one of them. Even when a consensus seems to emerge concerning a lesson learned or lost, it should be more properly seen as a pause in the memory wars—a temporary armistice that remains open to counter-attacks when new events or evidence re-ignite old debates.

The second caveat is that institutions, whether governments or armies, do not really "learn" from the past. Organizations and bureaucracies certainly change, but they do not have feelings or brains and cannot remember, forget, or understand things like individuals do.[5] While convenient as a narrative device—and it is one I will use below—mistaking institutions for individuals shifts focus away from the many structural constraints (political, budgetary, and even cultural) that shape how organizations collaborate, compete, change, or resist change.

These two caveats aside, it is clear that the Americans "learned" some lessons in Vietnam, which is to say that certain narratives about that war gained authority and eventually changed the way the United States approaches armed conflict today. Other lessons were either never learned or learned and lost, causing the United States to repeat bad habits that it should have abandoned long ago. But the real reasons for these apparent repetitions were not the country's—or the military's—failure to learn or remember. Rather, bureaucratic inertia inside American institutions (habitual practices) and the staying power of American exceptionalism (habits of mind) explain why the Afghanistan War looks, in Yogi Berra's famous phrase, like "déjà vu all over again."[6]

Lessons Learned

The Pentagon, Congress, and various presidential administrations all took away lessons from Vietnam, and for the military, one of the most important lessons concerned civilian casualties. The military men who ran the Vietnam War learned their trade in World War II and Korea—large-scale conventional campaigns in which seizing terrain and destroying materiel were critical to victory and civilians were either irrelevant or simply in the way. This mindset carried over into Vietnam. Although it was certainly not the U.S. government's policy or military strategy to "kill anything that moves," as one historian has suggested, as late as 1970, American artillery units were still firing unobserved "harassment and interdiction" missions both day and night, making it almost impossible to know what, or who, their artillery rounds were hitting.[7] Loose targeting criteria in the air led to bombing missions that killed more civilians than combatants, and the photographic evidence of the Vietnamese people's suffering further turned the American public against the war. These choices eventually helped kill at least two million Vietnamese civilians and undermined the White House's narrative that the United States was in South Vietnam to help a free people remain free.

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[3]Sir Michael Howard, "The Lessons of History," *The History Teacher* 15, no. 4 (Aug. 1982): 489–501, here 491–2.

[4]For a systematic dismantling of the ideas that facts "speak for themselves," see Carl L. Becker, "What Are Historical Facts?," *The Western Political Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (Sep. 1955): 327–40.

[5]On whether states can "remember" or "learn," see J. M. Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT, 2006), 4.

[6]For this and other famous phrases by the beloved coach, see "Yogi-isms" on the Yogi Berra Museum and Learning Center webpage, https://yogiberramuseum.org/about-yogi/yogisms/ (accessed Mar. 16, 2020).

[7]Nick Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York, 2013). On artillery, see John M. Hawkins, "The Costs of Artillery: Eliminating Harassment and Interdiction Fire during the Vietnam War," *Journal of Military History* 70, no. 1 (Jan. 2006): 91–122.

In the years that followed the war, the Defense Department internalized a key lesson about the strategic dangers of too many civilian casualties. The Pentagon spent billions to develop precision-guided munitions and integrated military lawyers into air operations centers to ensure that proposed air strikes conformed with the law of armed conflict. As a result, the standards for using military force today are far stricter than at any point in the Vietnam War. When General David H. Petraeus took command of the war in Afghanistan in 2010, one of his first tactical directives showed just how far the military had come from its earlier, less careful approach to protecting civilians in armed conflict: "Every Afghan civilian death diminishes our cause. If we use excessive force or operate contrary to our counterinsurgency principles, tactical victories may prove to be strategic setbacks."[8]

This is not to say that the Pentagon has settled the question of how to balance the benefits of applying force against the potential risk of misapplication—indeed, such issues are still being debated regarding Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria to this day. But when civilians are killed on today's battlefields, the Pentagon is far more responsive than it was in Vietnam. Officers send in investigation teams, interview survivors, work to determine what went wrong, and the U.S. government often makes payments to survivors. All of these actions are taken to manage civilian sentiments—both inside and outside the United States—and nothing on the same scale was done in Vietnam.

A second change from the Vietnam era—one connected to the first—concerns the relationship between the military and the press. In World War II and Korea, the Pentagon kept a tight reign over war correspondents: reporters had to submit their stories to military review boards prior to publication, and censors often struck out both sensitive material (like troop movements) and embarrassing content, even when it was unclassified. This changed in Vietnam, albeit in fits and starts. Sitting presidents continued to retaliate against journalists—President John F. Kennedy tried to get *The New York Times'* David Halberstam kicked out of South Vietnam and President Lyndon B. Johnson had the FBI and CIA investigate CBS's Morley Safer for "communistic ties"—but reporters no longer had to submit their stories to pre-publication review, and the military's ability to censor embarrassing or critical material declined as a result.[9] Instead, the Pentagon issued a set of voluntary ground rules that correspondents had to agree to for accreditation, which still allowed the military to shape some stories, but in fewer ways than in previous wars. Nor did journalists have to travel with military units in Vietnam, which allowed some of them to cover the aftermath of battles, and to see firsthand how U.S. military operations affected the Vietnamese people.

Partly because of the looser restrictions, war correspondents in Vietnam were able to report regularly on the war's difficulties, and some even questioned the government's basic rationale for fighting it. This eventually led to a myth, prominent in conservative circles, that the United States lost Vietnam because the media undermined the public's faith in it. The *military* did not lose the war, such critics contended; liberal, anti-American journalists and activists did so by demoralizing the soldiers in the field, weakening the government's hand in negotiations, and, in the end, snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. A number of historians and media scholars debunked these claims after the war by showing that most print and television coverage hewed closely to Washington's official line until the very end of the conflict, but facts could only do so much to weaken narratives that yielded such useful partisan fruit.[10]

Whether the journalists caused the anti-war movement or just strengthened it through their reporting made little difference to the post–Vietnam War Pentagon. What *did* matter was

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[8]CNN Staff Wire, "Petraeus Issues New Directive for Troops in Afghanistan," cnn.com, Aug. 4, 2010, http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/08/04/afghanistan.petraeus/index.html (accessed Jan. 31, 2018).

[9]These actions are described in Daniel Smyth, "Avoiding Bloodshed? U.S. Journalists and Censorship in Wartime," *War & Society* 32 no. 1 (2013): 64–94, here 81.

[10]For a good summary of the problems with blaming "the media" for losing Vietnam, see Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (Malden, MA, 2009), 133–53.

improving the military's public image, and to do so, the military first returned to the harsher censorship rules of an earlier era, before reversing course and finding a winning formula. In the October 1983 invasion of Grenada, the Pentagon first overreached by banning the press entirely from the island for the first three days of combat operations—a decision that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John W. Vessey later lamented as "a huge mistake."[11] Press restrictions on what journalists could cover and where they could go continued until just two days before the military began to withdraw its combat forces. In both the 1989 invasion of Panama and the 1991 Gulf War, the Pentagon experimented with press pools, which one reporter later claimed "essentially reduced [the media] to being a conduit for official information offered by commanders who could scarcely disguise their scorn."[12] Three news outlets later sued, claiming that the press pool system amounted to unconstitutional restrictions on the press.[13]

By the start of the second U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Pentagon's public affairs officials finally hit upon a solution: embedding reporters inside ground combat units with access to the most junior troops, so that the journalists' perspectives—and safety—were closely tied to the young men and women doing the actual fighting. There were no restrictions on embarrassing or critical content, but coverage of the war focused disproportionately on corporals and sergeants and individual heroics, rather than broader issues of strategy. The result has been effusive praise of American warriors and very little sustained coverage of the effects of the war on civilians.

A third lesson learned concerns how the different services cooperate with one another on the battlefield—what the Pentagon calls "joint" operations. In Vietnam, the senior leaders running the war had to navigate what one military historian later called "serious inter-service disputes over airpower" that eventually had "significant strategic, operational and tactical consequences for the pursuit of United States national policy in Southeast Asia."[14] Army and Marine officers also disagreed repeatedly over tactics and strategy on the ground. These problems persisted after Vietnam and well into the 1980s. In the 1983 invasion of Grenada, the Army and Navy still used different—and incompatible—communication systems, which meant that Navy jets in sight of U.S. Army troops could not respond to their requests for air support.[15] But eventually, the Pentagon and Congress grew weary of interservice inefficiency, and the 1986 Goldwater Nichols Act re-organized the Pentagon's bureaucracy, forcing the services to cooperate. As a result, basic procedures for logistics, communications, planning, and even professional military education became far more harmonized across the various services. In Afghanistan, headquarters units, intelligence centers, civil affairs teams, and even logistical and operational planning teams all began including personnel and perspectives from all four military services, significantly diminishing the interservice rivalries that plagued earlier wars.[16]

The Pentagon was not the only institution to make adjustments after Vietnam; Congress learned some lessons too. During the war, a number of prominent legislators took seriously their duty to question the military's performance as well as the president's strategy —none more than Senator J. William Fulbright, whose eponymous hearings in 1966 and 1971 directly challenged the White House's narratives of the Tonkin Gulf incident and the war in general.

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[11]Ronald H. Cole, *Operation Urgent Fury Grenada* (Washington, DC, 1997), 46 and (quote) 55.

[12]Major Colleen L. MacGuire, "Military-Media Relations and the Gulf War: A Compromise between Vietnam and Grenada?" (M.A. thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1992), 6.

[13]Ibid., 49–51.

[14]On airpower, see Ian Horwood, *Interservice Rivalry and Airpower in the Vietnam War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2006), 4, 175.

[15]Cole, *Operation Urgent Fury Grenada*, 5, 53.

[16]The changes to how the military has conducted joint operations since Vietnam are described well in General Martin E. Dempsey, "The Future of Joint Operations," *Foreign Affairs*, June 20, 2013, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2013-06-20/future-joint-operations (accessed Feb. 24, 2018).

Congress later passed the 1973 War Powers Resolution to limit the president's ability to deploy combat troops without informing the legislature and used its appropriations authority to steer or stop policies it disagreed with, including the White House's requests to increase funding to the failing South Vietnamese military after American combat troops departed. For those reasons, it is fair to say that during Vietnam, Congress challenged the president's war-fighting strategy and end-states, and those that spoke up eventually affected the length and nature of the war.

Congress still has the power to shape foreign policy and military strategy, but since Vietnam, it has used that power only rarely. Rather than issuing a declaration of war against a named enemy after September 11th, Congress passed the Authorization for the Use of Military Force instead, which gave President George W. Bush a blank check to use violence anywhere in the world, for an unlimited duration, in pursuit of anyone he determined to have "planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons."[17] The result has been seemingly endless wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as repeated, but more limited, combat operations in Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, and Syria—all authorized by Congress, but without any meaningful oversight of the wars' long-term goals or strategies.

Congress has also funded—but almost never questioned—the deployment of special operations teams throughout Africa and the Middle East, who have trained foreign forces and conducted lethal counterterrorism operations with those they train. When one such deployment led to the death of four U.S. soldiers in Niger in 2017, several congressmen expressed surprise that the United States even had troops in Niger in the first place. Pressed by reporters on the issue, Senator Lindsay Graham, one of the most senior members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, admitted that he and his Senate colleagues "don't know exactly where we're at in the world, militarily, and what we're doing."[18]

There are a number of possible reasons why Congress is today abdicating its duty to conduct oversight of military operations, but the long legacy of Vietnam is almost certainly one of them. For years after the war, conservative memory activists worked to shift blame for the war's failures from the White House to the Democratic Party–held House and Senate that had controlled wartime appropriations. Some of the most forceful (and fantastical) attacks came from former President Nixon himself: "When we signed the Paris Peace agreements in 1973, we had won the war," the former president insisted without irony or evidence in 1985. "Defeat came only when the Congress, ignoring the specific terms of the peace agreement, refused to provide military aid equal to what the Soviet Union provided Hanoi."[19] Nixon's first ambassador to Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker, made a similar claim: "We had achieved our objective, [and] made it possible for South Vietnam to defend itself." But "Congress decided not to put up any more money," making South Vietnam's defeat "inevitable."[20] The foremost revisionist historian of the Vietnam War, Lieutenant Colonel Lewis Sorely (ret'd), went a step further, painting Congress's actions as a betrayal of the troops: "It was forces in our own country that undermined and ultimately squandered the successes achieved," he wrote in 2006. "By their votes in the House and Senate, [Congress] threw away what our soldiers and commanders achieved on the ground."[21]

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[17]The text of the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force is available at https://avalon.law.yale.edu/sept11/sjres23_eb.asp (accessed Mar. 20, 2020).

[18]Daniella Diaz, "Key Senators Say They Didn't Know U.S. Had Troops in Niger," cnn.com, Oct. 23, 2017, https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/23/politics/niger-troops-lawmakers/index.html, (accessed Feb. 24, 2018).

[19]Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York, 1985), 18.

[20]David Fromkin and James Chase, "What Are the Lessons of Vietnam?," *Foreign Affairs* 63, no. 4 (Spring 1985): 722–46, here 729.

[21]Lewis Sorely, "No More Vietnams: Find the Will to Win in Iraq, as We Should Have in Indochina," *The American Enterprise* (Mar. 2006): 32–5.

Congressional Democrats' supposed *Dolchstoß* (stab in the back) quickly gained ground among conservative Americans looking to blame anyone other than a Republican president for Vietnam's tragic denouement. In the three decades after Vietnam, most Americans still consistently considered the Vietnam War a mistake, but *whose* mistake it was quickly became the subject of renewed debate. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the cultural costs of opposing a wartime president skyrocketed and conservatives played to this advantage, at times targeting Vietnam veterans in Congress who should have been immune to charges of faint-heartedness or an antimilitary bias. Former infantry officer and army captain Senator Max Cleland (D-GA), who lost both legs and an arm in Vietnam, also lost his bid for re-election in 2002, against an opponent who attacked him as soft on national security and repeatedly questioned his courage. Two years later, Senator John Kerry (D-MA), who received the silver and bronze stars for valor in Vietnam, lost the 2004 presidential election, partly because of a well-funded smear campaign by the "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth," whose members claimed, among other things, that Kerry had wounded himself intentionally to get one of his three purple hearts.[22] As ludicrous as these allegations were, they had their desired effect: to paint contemporary criticism of the war in Iraq as a betrayal of the troops that would inevitably lead to a Saigon-esque withdrawal. Given Congress's refusal to use its funding and oversight powers to shape the president's actions in either Iraq or Afghanistan, it appears the strategy worked.

Twenty-first-century presidents learned a lesson from Vietnam as well—or at least, from some of the narratives that had come to function as part of the popular mythology of the war. In the 1960s, President Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara often disagreed with senior military leaders over troop levels and the progress of the war, which led to later allegations that Johnson micromanaged the war, fought with insufficient force, or just did not have the stomach to do what was necessary to win.[23] Those accusations were not new—Harry Truman faced similar allegations during the Korean War—but after Vietnam, the charges seemed to stick. As a result, as President George W. Bush weighed his military options early in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, almost any policy choice that had a conceivable parallel to Vietnam was jettisoned, no matter how tenuous the connection. Should the president keep a line open to the Afghan Taliban for negotiations after the air campaign began? No, argued Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld: "Bombing pauses smacked of Vietnam. No way."[24] Would the president approve the military's target list? "I'm not picking targets," Bush replied—an exchange that prompted Chief of Staff Andy Card to claim that he and the president "had just seen the Vietnam legacy stare them in the face."[25] Should the military give the president estimates of enemy causalities, which might look like a repeat of Vietnam's disastrous "body count" metric? "Not once in this building have we ever reported a [body count] number," explained then–Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine General Peter Pace. "Probably because guys like me from Vietnam know what happens when you start counting."[26]

Presidents Bush and Barack Obama also invoked Vietnam directly, but only to highlight how different their own actions were from those of earlier presidents. In Vietnam, the "the

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[22]Nicholas D. Kristoff, "A War Hero or a Phony?," *New York Times*, Sep. 18, 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/18/opinion/a-war-hero-or-a-phony.html (accessed Mar. 20, 2020).

[23]For three examples of these allegations, see Secretary of State George Schultz, "The Meaning of Vietnam" delivered at the Department of State, Apr. 25, 1985, reprinted in the *Congressional Record*, 99 Cong. 1st sess., Apr. 29, 1985, 1789; Remarks by Rep. William J. Martini on the 20th Anniversary of the Vietnam War, *Congressional Record*, 104 Cong. 1st sess. May 2, 1996, 923; and Remarks by Rep. Louie Gomert, "Lessons of the Vietnam War," *Congressional Record*, 114 Cong. 2nd sess., February 12, 2016, 813.

[24]Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York, 2002), 187.

[25]Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack: The Definitive Account of the Decision to Invade Iraq* (New York, 2004), 331–2.

[26]Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 327.

government micromanaged the war," Bush explained to journalist Bob Woodward in 2002—a problem he did not intend to repeat.[27] Restricting air operations in Iraq or Afghanistan would also be avoided: "When I was in flight school, one of my instructors who had flown in Vietnam complained that the Air Force was so restricted that the enemy could figure out exactly when and where they would be flying. The reason, as he put it, was that 'the politicians did not want to piss people off.'"[28] Bush also vowed to update the American people regularly on operations so that they do not "get dissociated from the Commander-in-Chief [as they did] in Vietnam."[29] President Obama also worried enough about comparisons to Vietnam, so much so that he devoted an entire paragraph of his 2009 surge speech on Afghanistan to noting the key differences between the two wars, which made any comparison between them "a false reading of history."[30] Like Congressional Democrats, both presidents learned that they must avoid even the appearance of repeating Vietnam's errors, whether the parallels were appropriate or not.

Lessons Lost

From lessons learned, let us now turn to lessons learned but lost—bad practices that should not have been repeated, but which are recurring in the present nonetheless. At first glance, there are a number of eerie similarities between Vietnam and Afghanistan. In both wars, the American military appeared to increase troop levels incrementally and mostly relied on one-year tours of duty for everyone except the top diplomats and some general officers. In Afghanistan, as in Vietnam, the United States used economic aid and security assistance to try to improve the host nation's infrastructure and governance, but did so in ways that destabilized the economy and increased corruption. In both wars, the Pentagon created foreign military forces in an American mold and disregarded the host nations' concerns when they were raised. Finally, even though nearly all experts believed that Afghanistan would end in a political solution rather than a military victory, the vast majority of American resources used in the war have been military, just as they were a generation earlier in Vietnam.

Let us take each of these in turn. Figuring out how many military forces to send to a war, and how quickly, is always a difficult question, and in Vietnam, top commanders repeatedly asked for more troops and the president at times denied those requests or placed restrictions on their use. After the war, former presidents, veterans, defense experts, and political adversaries all railed against President Johnson's supposed incrementalism and restraint as the original sins that lost the war. Johnson's "fatal mistake [was] to commit American prestige without committing adequate American forces to back it up," former President Richard Nixon asserted in his 1985 memoir, *No More Vietnams*. "Our gradual escalation gave North Vietnam time to adapt … [and Ho Chi Minh] interpreted our gradual escalation as a sign not of restraint but of weakness."[31] Thirty years later, another Republican politician summarized the argument even more starkly in a thinly veiled criticism of President Obama's Afghanistan policy: "We really didn't allow our military in Vietnam to win the war in Vietnam. Our pilots, our military operations [sic], they could have won that war had they been allowed to do so."[32]

Here was a second stab-in-the-back narrative, one aimed at the White House instead of Congress, which boiled down to one hypothetical, untestable claim: had the president allowed the Pentagon to unleash the full effects of American military power earlier, the U.S. military

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[27]Woodward, *Bush at War*, 168.

[28]George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York, 2010), 195.

[29]Woodward, *Bush at War*, 168.

[30]Barack H. Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan," Dec. 1, 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan (accessed Mar. 19, 2020).

[31]Nixon, *No More Vietnams*, 76, 87–88.

[32]Remarks by Rep. Louie Gomert, "Lessons of the Vietnam War," *Congressional Record*, 114 Cong. 2nd sess., February 12, 2016, 813.

would have won the war. This was a storyline the post-Vietnam era Defense Department was happy to adopt, for it absolved the generals and the Pentagon of any responsibility for the war's failures. In the years thereafter, the perceived sin of military incrementalism became major talking points for President Ronald Reagan's Defense Secretary, Caspar Weinberger, and his Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell. The idea even made an appearance in President George H. W. Bush's 1992 *National Military Strategy of the United States*, which laid out the rationale for using force and the recipe needed for victory:

> Once a decision for military action has been made, half measures and confused objectives exact a severe price in the form of a protracted conflict which can cause needless waste of human lives and material resources, a divided nation at home, and defeat. Therefore one of the essential elements of our national military strategy is the ability to rapidly assemble the forces needed to win—the concept of applying decisive force to overwhelm our adversaries and thereby terminate conflicts swiftly with minimum loss of life.[33]

This idea that the cardinal sin of Vietnam was insufficient or incrementally applied violence is hard to defend, as we will soon see. But it was still widely believed by American generals and policy makers at the start of the Afghanistan War, and therefore, should have been a lesson learned with some effects on decisions concerning troop levels and other uses of military force.

And yet the lesson concerning overwhelming force did not affect troop deployments or timelines in Afghanistan. While the Taliban's ouster occurred quickly and spectacularly over two months in 2001, the U.S. military presence that stayed behind numbered just 5,200 in 2002, a commitment that quickly proved insufficient to secure the country or give the Afghan government a monopoly on the use of force. Troop numbers then grew in average increments of just 3,400 for the next six years, even as the insurgency re-ignited and gained the strategic initiative.[34] Long debates over whether to send more troops, how many, and how much money to devote to training and equipping the Afghan National Security Forces then became regular features of the war, just as they had been decades earlier in Vietnam.

A second lost lesson concerns short-duration combat tours and the lack of local knowledge that comes with them. "Know your enemy" is perhaps the oldest of all military dictums; it was penned by Sun Tzu 2,500 years ago and has survived so long precisely because it is always good advice.[35] And yet, the United States seems to have ignored Sun Tzu's counsel repeatedly in both Vietnam and Afghanistan. Far too few Americans in South Vietnam had a basic awareness or respect for Vietnamese culture or practices. Only a tiny minority learned Vietnamese or tried to understand the war from their allies' perspectives. Making things worse, the typical combat tour in Vietnam was just twelve months in length, meaning that once junior leaders began to grasp the complexities of the culture they were operating in, they were sent home. This policy forced each new unit arriving in the country to reinvent the wheel. "We don't have twelve years' experience" in Vietnam, a U.S. Army advisor to the South Vietnamese once quipped. "We have one year's experience twelve times over."[36]

The same problem plagued the War in Afghanistan from the beginning. Every new unit arriving in Afghanistan believed "the war began when I got here," explained former Army Chief of Staff General George Casey in 2014. "Every time this happened, something big fell

[33]Department of Defense, *National Military Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC, 1992), 10.

[34]Amy Belasco, *Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001–FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues* (Washington, DC, 2009), 9.

[35]Sun Tsu, *The Art of War* (Mineola, NY, 2002), 81.

[36]R. W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on the U.S.–G.V.N. Performance* (Santa Monica, CA, 1972), 67.

apart, and it happened on every major rotation of troops."[37] Ronald Neumann, who served as the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2005–2007 agreed with General Casey: "The loss in institutional knowledge and operational continuity is atrocious," he explained in 2014. "Essential senior leaders needed to stay long enough to establish trust with their counterparts, to understand political power dynamics, and to learn from mistakes, but with only a few exceptions, this did not happen." For Neumann, who served as an infantry officer in Vietnam, the problem was not ignorance of the past, but a government-wide failure to adapt: "I remain continually struck (if not appalled) by the basic lack of political knowledge of the many civilian and military officers in positions of authority. Individuals are well aware of the problems, but as an institution, the U.S. government seems unable to change."[38]

A third lost lesson concerns the destabilizing role money plays in military operations, and like the issues of short tours and local knowledge, the evidence was there all along. As early as 1953, when the United States was still providing military aid to the French fighting in Vietnam, American spending habits were already causing corruption to skyrocket, which, in turn, helped discredit the government in Saigon.[39] Five years after the war ended, a Department of Defense–funded study on the lessons of Vietnam specifically noted the linkages between the U.S. presence and rising corruption: Vietnam's "agrarian base economy is labor-intensive, relatively inflexible, and is acutely sensitive … to the demands of large-scale warfare," it cautioned. In future wars in agrarian societies, the "U.S. presence most likely will contort and eventually cripple such an economy and will force it to become almost totally dependent on massive and sustained U.S. aid."[40]

Despite these warnings, the same problems reoccurred in Afghanistan. While Afghanistan was no model of a functioning state before 2001, corruption rapidly increased after the U.S. intervention and became one of several issues contributing to a widening rift between the government and its people. "Injecting massive sums of money into an economy with limited absorptive capacity induced profound distortions," wrote Afghanistan veteran Lieutenant Colonel Colin Jackson, who would later become Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia in President Donald J. Trump's administration. "While Americans were quick to decry corruption within the Afghan government, they were less willing to accept that they had unintentionally fueled this behavior with their spending."[41] By 2016, the Afghan National Security Advisor, Dr. Rangin Spanta, was forced to acknowledge that "corruption is not just a problem for the system of governance in Afghanistan; it is the system of governance."[42] U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker agreed: "The ultimate point of failure for our efforts … wasn't an insurgency. It was the weight of endemic corruption."[43] A 2017 survey by the Asia Foundation found that 93 percent of Afghans believed corruption was a problem in their daily lives—the highest percentage since the Foundation began polling in 2007.[44]

[37]General George Casey interview with Ambassador Ronald E. Neumann, cited in *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, ed. Aaron O'Connell (Chicago, 2018), 48.

[38]Ibid., 49.

[39]Melvin Gurtov noted the U.S. propensity to spend billions with little oversight in the early years of American involvement in Vietnam in Melvin Gurtov, *The First Vietnam Crisis: Chinese Communist Strategy and United States Involvement, 1953–1954* (Westport, CT, 1985).

[40]BDM Corporation, *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam: Omnibus Executive Summary, Volume II: South Vietnam* (Maclean, VA, 1980), 11.

[41]Colin F. Jackson, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan: A Tragedy in Five Acts," in *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, ed. Aaron O'Connell (Chicago, 2018), 71–108, here 99–100. See also, Astri Suhrke, *When More Is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan* (New York, 2011), 15–16.

[42]Special Instructor for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC, 2016), 4.

[43]Ibid., 11.

[44]Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2017: A Survey of the Afghan People* (Washington, DC, 2017), 99.

A fourth lost lesson concerns cultural "mirroring"—the dangerous tendency to design assistance programs in one's own image and to ignore the needs and counsel of the foreign government being supported. Like the other lost lessons, this one was not new when it emerged in Vietnam; as early as World War II, General Joseph Stilwell remarked that American advisors in China "knew how to deal only in the American way and when this failed to bring results, they became confused and lost patience."[45]

Forcing Asian soldiers to train and fight the "American way" continued in Vietnam. To the American advisors leading the training effort, building a capable South Vietnamese army meant focusing on technological superiority, robust logistics, and conventional maneuver units supported by air power. Sadly, this force construct was not appropriate to the skill level of the South Vietnamese military or the enemy it was fighting. As Pacification Chief Ambassador Robert Komer later detailed, American advisors

> … imported into a small, undeveloped country all the enormous array of sophisticated technological means that the world's most advanced industrial nation thought might be useful, and used them to oppose an army that walked, that used mortars as its chief form of artillery, that used almost no armor until 1972, and that was near-totally lacking in air support. Yet at the least, many of our military techniques were not very cost-effective, and in some respects proved to be seriously counterproductive in terms of "winning hearts and minds."[46]

Komer may be overstating the case somewhat—he had his own reasons to claim his advice on pacification was not being followed—but the end result was still an extremely expensive advisory effort provided on U.S. timelines and a South Vietnamese military that was corrupt, lacked basic expertise across numerous military specialties, and by and large was unprepared for the enemy it faced.

The same problems reoccurred in Afghanistan. While piecemeal efforts to create and Afghan Army and Police began in 2002, it was not until 2009 that the United States instituted a nation-wide program, consolidated all training into a single command, and appointed a three-star general to run it: Lieutenant General William B. Caldwell IV. When Caldwell assumed command of the NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan, he likely understood some of the challenges ahead of him because his father, William B. Caldwell, III, had overseen the very same tasks in Vietnam's III Corps in 1967 and 1968. And yet, when the younger Caldwell was asked how he planned to whip the Afghan forces into fighting shape, his answer would have caused Komer to throw up his hands: "We are not going to allow them to progressively learn, we are going to leap them forward to the 21st century," Caldwell told a British journalist in 2011. "We've given every one of them a laptop. Most of these kids have never driven a car, they may not know how to flush a toilet."[47] That same year—almost a decade into the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan—a British general lamented the state of the Afghan forces and placed the blame squarely on the mindset of the trainers: "We were starting to build an army based on Western army standards, and we realized they don't need that capability."[48] The Afghans also found their concerns ignored in the process. The Americans "did not consult with Afghan counterparts," one Afghan General remarked bitterly in 2014. "The main problem

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[45]Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*, 43.

[46]Ibid., 48.

[47]Nick Hopkins, "Afghanistan: Advances Made but Country Stands at a Perilous Crossroads," *Guardian.com*, May 10, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/10/afghanistan-crossroads-taliban-military (accessed Feb. 24, 2018).

[48]David S. Cloud, "Pentagon to Drastically Cut Spending on Afghan Forces," *Los Angeles Times*, Sep. 12, 2011, http://articles.latimes.com/2011/sep/12/world/la-fg-us-afghan-police-20110913 (accessed Feb. 24, 2018).

with the police training was that both Europeans and Americans did what they thought were good for us."[49]

Finally, a fifth lost lesson of Vietnam was the risks of what Ambassador Komer called "an overly-militarized response" to conditions that required a more balanced mix of force, diplomacy, and other forms of national power.[50] This problem of militarization would also be repeated in Afghanistan at tremendous cost for American taxpayers and the Afghan people.

Historian and former White House advisor Arthur Schlesinger Jr. stated the problem succinctly near the end of the Vietnam War. Testifying in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1972, he warned that the principal lesson of the Vietnam War was that "all the problems in the world are not military problems, and that military force is not usually the most effective form of national power. So long as we continue to define world problems in military terms, so long will we strengthen the influence of our own military establishment and plunge the nation into further military intervention." Les Gelb, the Director of the Defense Department group that had produced the *Pentagon Papers*, made a similar point: "The lesson [of Vietnam] is that military power without political cohesiveness and support is an empty shell. Without legitimacy in a government—and the quest for it in South Vietnam seems never-ending—the Saigon regime perpetually will require American support."[51]

Favoring military force over other forms of power and ignoring the political dimension of conflict—were these mistakes that the U.S. Government learned from after Vietnam? Yes, but only for a time, after which the lesson seems to have been lost. The Defense Department certainly got the message; in fact, when the Army and Marines revised their joint counterinsurgency doctrine in 2006, the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* included numerous warnings about linking different forms of power and making sure the military stayed in its lane: "[M]ilitary force is not the only way to provide civil security or defeat the insurgents," the manual cautioned. "Indeed, excessive use of military force can frequently undermine policy objectives at the expense of achieving the overarching political goals that define success." For that reason, in counterinsurgency, "it is always preferred for civilians to perform civilian tasks."[52] Another section of the manual put the lesson more succinctly: "Some of the best weapons for counterinsurgents do not shoot."[53]

And yet, these lessons never made their ways off of the pages and into the wars, and in Afghanistan, the Pentagon eventually took charge of almost all of the counterinsurgency "weapons"—even those that belonged to other departments and agencies. When the United States began designing counter-narcotics and police training programs shortly after the Taliban's overthrow, the lead agency for both efforts was the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, which had been created in the 1970s for these exact purposes. And yet, in the ensuing years, both counter-narcotics operations and police training were taken over by the Pentagon, which subsequently outsourced much of the work to retired soldiers and security contractors.

The results for police training were predictable. "I knew how to shoot," Afghan Police recruit Gullam Farooq explained in 2010. "What I expected from the training was to learn more about actual policing, on how to conduct searches, how to investigate, how to behave with people, and what our actual authorities were. But they didn't teach us that stuff." Farooq was not alone.

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[49]General Juma Khan (pseudonym), cited in Pashtoon Atif, "The Impact of Culture on Policing in Afghanistan," in *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, ed. Aaron O'Connell (Chicago, 2018), 131–56, here 143.

[50]Komer, *Bureaucracy Goes to War*, vii.

[51]United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations, *Causes, Origins, and Lessons of the Vietnam War: Hearings*, 92 Cong. 2nd sess., May 9–11, 1972, 5, 79.

[52]Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago, 2007), 54, 67.

[53]Ibid., 49.

We "learned a lot of about fighting," recalled another Afghan policeman, but "we didn't really learn anything about actual police activities." Ordinary Afghan civilians were equally befuddled as to why the police were engaged in combat operations. "[E]very time I hear about police dead in an operation I wonder what the hell is the military doing," one Kabuli businessman remarked in 2014. "Fighting the insurgents is not what the police should do. It is the military's job." The "largest impact" of the Americans' police training, Afghan police captain Pashtoon Atif later noted, was "a general militarization of the police role in Afghanistan…. The focus on how to kill, rather than how to protect, gave the officers a military mindset—they came to believe that killing the enemy was more important than being responsive and respectful to the citizens whom they were supposed to serve."[54]

The problems of militarization went beyond the police and counter-narcotics. The State Department was also supposed to oversee rule of law and prison reform in Afghanistan, but that too eventually fell under military authority. In June 2009, General Stanley McChrystal took over command of the Afghanistan War and quickly concluded that "rule of law failures had become as large of a threat to success in Afghanistan as the Taliban itself."[55] The same year the Pentagon stood up a detainee operations task force—Joint Task Force 435—which placed all of detention operations in Afghanistan under the military's supervision. It later stood up a briefly lived Rule of Law Field Force–Afghanistan, which one scholar has called an "overt militarization of rule of law assistance" that created "a multitude of serious issues," not least because "the Department of Defense still does not know how much money was spent" on the program.[56]

Having the U.S. military in control of Afghan detentions dramatically increased friction with the Afghan government, partly because the military lacked the diplomatic experience to negotiate the prisoners' final status. The Pentagon eventually signed an agreement to transfer all detainees to Afghan control by November 2012, but when the Pentagon missed the transfer deadline, Afghan President Hamid Karzai lashed out and ordered Afghan military forces to seize control of the largest prison (which the Americans had built) . More negotiations diffused the crisis, but the Americans continued to run the prison for another year, which President Karzai repeatedly criticized as a violation of Afghan sovereignty.[57]

Even Afghanistan's Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)—the closest analogue to the pacification effort in Vietnam from a generation earlier—were supposed to be joint civilian and military teams that combined the expertise of several departments and agencies to ensure reconstruction work did not fall exclusively to the military. And yet, by 2008, 97 percent of the roughly 1,000 PRT staff members were active duty military personnel. Between 2002 and 2015, the Pentagon oversaw roughly two-thirds of all reconstruction and development dollars in Afghanistan; the State Department oversaw less than 5 percent.[58] Unsurprisingly, the programs the military ran veered quickly into the thing it knew best—security—and away from genuine development. As one U.S. Institute for Peace analyst later lamented, "We fooled ourselves into thinking that money could stabilize the situation, rather than create instability…. Trying to

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[54]Atif, "The Impact of Culture on Police Training in Afghanistan," 145–7.

[55]General Stanley A. McChrystal, *Commander's Initial Assessment* (Unclassified), Aug. 30, 2009, 2–5, 2–10; reprinted in *The Washington Post*, Sep. 21, 2009, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/21/AR2009092100110.html (accessed Feb. 24, 2018).

[56]Geoffrey Swenson, "Why U.S. Efforts to Promote the Rule of Law in Afghanistan Failed," *International Security* 42, no. 1 (Summer 2017): 114–51, here 133.

[57]Rod Nordland, "Karzai Orders Afghan Forces to Take Control of American-Built Prison," *New York Times*, Nov. 19, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/20/world/asia/karzai-orders-takeover-of-afghan-prison.html (accessed Feb. 24, 2018).

[58]Lieutenant Commander Jamie Lynn DeCoster, "Building and Undermining Legitimacy: Reconstruction and Development in Afghanistan," in *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, ed. Aaron O'Connell (Chicago, 2018), 157–88, here 186.

redirect a lot of development assistance to achieve security objectives instead of development objectives was a major cause of waste."[59]

Déjà Vu All Over Again?

What explains these remarkable similarities between Vietnam and Afghanistan? Why, in both wars, did the United States supposedly fight incrementally, rely on one-year tours, fail to curb corruption, build security forces in its own image, ignore partners' concerns, sideline the State Department, and, in the end, sign deals to end America's military involvement without actually ending the war?

There are at least two different answers to these questions. First, some things that look similar are actually quite different. Repeating Vietnam's supposed incremental troop buildups in Afghanistan and relying on one-year combat tours may seem like "forgotten lessons" at first, but the factors shaping both decisions actually have little in common.

Critics have lamented Vietnam's incrementalism for years, but in fact, the buildup of forces in Vietnam was anything but incremental. In 1965, the first year of the ground war, the United States put 184,000 troops in Vietnam—more than were ever simultaneously deployed to Afghanistan, even during President Obama's surge. That same year, the Air Force dropped 66 million pounds of bombs on North Vietnam. American troop levels more than doubled in 1966, and grew by another 100,000 the following year. By the end of 1967, there were 485,000 troops in the country—a force larger than today's entire active duty U.S. Army. If this was incremental violence, then one wonders which American war does not deserve the label.[60]

The factors shaping force levels in Vietnam were also radically different from those in Afghanistan. In 1965, the Pentagon based its troop requests on the threats posed by the irregular forces of the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam and the conventional forces of the North Vietnamese Army. As those threats grew, the Pentagon asked for—and received—more troops. The need to maintain significant Cold War combat capabilities in Europe, South Korea, and Japan, coupled with President Johnson's refusal to mobilize the reserves, led the Pentagon to rely on the draft to grow its numbers. While politically costly in the end, the draft gave the Pentagon enormous flexibility to adjust its personnel needs to changing conditions both inside and outside Vietnam.

In Afghanistan, both the troop numbers and the reasons for them were quite different. Following the hasty ejection of the Taliban in 2001, Washington purposefully sought a small footprint force to hunt al Qaeda in Afghanistan without tying the military down or stoking Afghans' fears of foreign occupation. That choice led to troop levels ranging from 10,000 to 20,000 through 2008. As the Taliban re-infiltrated Afghanistan after 2006, field commanders noted the need for more troops, but the manpower requirements of the war in Iraq made large increases impossible. In 2009, as forces withdrew from Iraq, President Obama finally tripled troop levels in Afghanistan, bringing their numbers to roughly 100,000.[61]

As Figure 1 shows, the pace and scale of the troop increases in both wars share little in common. This is because they stemmed from different military and political considerations regarding the missions, threats, and other commitments. While it is fair to call the U.S. response in

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[59]Ibid., 188.

[60]Vietnam ground troop levels are available from Department of Defense (OASD Comptroller), *Selected Manpower Statistics* (Washington, DC, May 1975), 63. For the statistics on ordnance dropped in 1965, see Col. Dennis M. Drew, USAF, *Rolling Thunder, 1965: Anatomy of a Failure* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, AL, 1986), 41.

[61]For troop numbers in Vietnam, see Department of Defense, "US Personnel in South Vietnam, 1960–1973," *Selected Manpower Statistics* (Washington, DC,1975), 63. For Afghanistan troop numbers, see Ian S. Livingston and Michael O'Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index* (Washington, DC, 2017), 4; Congressional Research Service, "Department of Defense Contractors and Troop levels in Iraq and Afghanistan 2007–2018, updated May 10, 2019," https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44116.pdf (accessed Mar. 16, 2020).

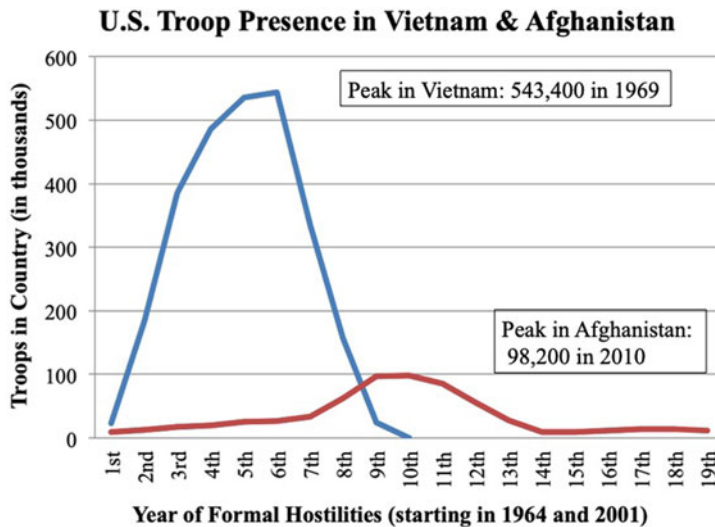**U.S. Troop Presence in Vietnam & Afghanistan**

Figure 1: Troop levels in Vietnam and Afghanistan by year.

Afghanistan incremental, no such similar charge is appropriate for Vietnam. The fact that conservative critics still rail about incremental approaches in that earlier war says more about the political utility of such arguments than it does about actual similarities or lessons lost.

One-year combat tours are another Pentagon decision that seems like a "forgotten lesson" until one looks closely. In Vietnam, short combat tours were the norm primarily because of the draft. A soldier's initial training could take between six months and year, depending on occupational specialty, and returning soldiers had post-deployment leave, training, and administrative and medical out-processing requirements that could sometimes take months. This made it necessary to limit most combat tours to one year, unless the Pentagon were to set different tour lengths for volunteers or draftees (which would have had severe repercussions on morale and unit cohesion). Even though draftees only comprised one-third of Vietnam veterans, the limitations on their use affected the entire force.

The conditions that created one-year tour lengths in Afghanistan also grew out of the Vietnam experience but were nonetheless fundamentally different. President Johnson's refusal to fully mobilize the reserves for Vietnam flabbergasted the Army's senior leaders, who thought the president was both limiting options on the battlefield and side-stepping an essential conversation with the American people on whether the United States had serious national security interests in Vietnam. To prevent a recurrence, Army Chief of Staff Creighton Abrams effected a wholesale reorganization of the army known as "total force integration" in the early 1970s. The majority of key combat enabling units—engineers, communications, supply, and civil affairs—were placed in the reserves. In the future, Abrams reasoned, should the president decide to commit large ground forces to battle, he would have to activate the reserves and to explain to the American people why their activation was necessary.[62]

Abrams's reorganization of the reserves had its merits, but it did not produce the desired effect in practice. When simultaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan put enormous strains

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[62]Colonel Harry G. Summers Jr., "The Army after Vietnam," in *Against All Enemies: Interpretations of American Military History from Colonial Times to the Present*, eds. Kenneth J. Hagan and William B. Roberts (Westport, CT, 1986), 361–74, here 363; Lewis Sorely, "Creighton Abrams and Active-Reserve Integration in Wartime," *Parameters* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 35–50. Conrad Crane disputes both Summers's and Sorely's arguments in Conrad C. Crane, "Post-Vietnam Drawdown: The Myth of the Abrams Doctrine," in *Drawdown: The American Way of Postwar*, ed. Jason W. Warren, (New York, 2016), 241–52.

on the active duty force, Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama did call up some reservists, but they did so selectively instead of requiring a large-scale mobilization. The capabilities that were now located only in the reserves were soon in such high demand that units became overtaxed, sometimes serving repeated back-to-back combat tours. Rather than mandating a new balance between active and reserve forces, Congress instead imposed new limits on how quickly units could be redeployed to a combat theater, known colloquially as the "deployment-to-dwell" ratio. These new requirements were the factor that most directly shaped tour lengths in Afghanistan.

But apart from issues of troop numbers and tour lengths, there *were* some mistakes from Vietnam that appear to have been repeated in Afghanistan: the problems of unmonitored spending, building security forces in an American image, and disregarding the inputs of the host nation partners. Can these be properly called "forgotten lessons" of Vietnam?

Not really, because the military not only remembered these lessons, it wrote them down and distributed them to the very forces fighting in Afghanistan. As the war in Iraq spiraled out of control in 2005, the Army and Marine Corps assembled a series of scholars—several with PhDs in history and international relations—to rewrite their counterinsurgency doctrine, and the new manual became required reading for almost all Army and Marine units deploying to a combat zone in the years thereafter. Perhaps because several of the manual's drafters had already spent years studying the American war in Vietnam, the revised *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* was full of Vietnam-era vignettes offering guidance of what *not* to do in Afghanistan or Iraq.[63]

Almost all of the "lost lessons" noted above made it into the Army's and Marines' new doctrine. The field manual noted that American spending habits in Vietnam had resulted in "poor administration and rampant corruption."[64] It cautioned against building and training "host nation security forces in the U.S. military's image."[65] It explained that Americans' "high technology equipment and computer-based systems" were "incompatible with Vietnamese material culture and economic capabilities."[66] It explained the dangers of letting the military play too large a role and the essential tasks of integrating civilian and military efforts. It repeatedly urged its troops to work with—and listen to—their host nation counterparts and reminded them that "the biggest hurdle for U.S. forces is accepting that the host nation can ensure security using practices that differ from U.S. practices. Commanders must recognize and continually address that this 'The American way is best' bias is unhelpful."[67]

But if Americans spotted their biases, they could not escape them—and the reasons why have less to do with remembering or forgetting and more to do with institutions and ideology. Simply put, the United States fought in similar ways in Vietnam and Afghanistan because it used similar bureaucracies and habits of mind in both wars; these shaped the limits of the possible, even for leaders who possessed the benefits of hindsight and careful study. Institutional inertia and ideological rigidity, not amnesia, explain why bad practices persisted even after events that should have spurred change.

The ways the United States spent money in both wars are a good first example of inertial power of bureaucracy. It is not that the United States *forgot* about the problems of uncontrolled, unmonitored, uncoordinated spending after Vietnam; it just did not *fix* those problems.

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[63]Three of the counterinsurgency manual's principal authors wrote either PhD dissertations, books, or scholarly articles on the Vietnam War's operations, lessons, or misconceptions. See David H. Petraeus, "The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam: A Study of Military Influence and the Use of Force in the Post-Vietnam Era" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1987); Conrad C. Crane, *Avoiding Vietnam: The U.S. Army's Response to Defeat in Southeast Asia* (Carlisle, PA, 2002); and John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, 2002).

[64]Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, 270–1.

[65]Ibid., 51.

[66]Ibid., 270–1.

[67]Ibid., 202–3.

A warning in a doctrinal manual should have been just the first step; what needed to follow were major reforms to a comptroller's office that has had systematic and continuous problems since Secretary McNamara's tenure at least. Without the necessary reforms, the problems have recurred every time the Pentagon has had to disburse funds quickly, without sufficient auditors, contracting officials, or guidelines to manage the predictable knock-on effects of inflation and corruption. Similar problems have plagued the Office of Management and Budget, which has led to constant turf wars regarding spending between State, Defense, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the White House—all of which hampered basic implementation of the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan.[68]

The over-reliance on military tools to solve political problems also reflects the constraints of American institutions more than amnesia concerning their failings. Since the start of the Cold War, the State Department has had just a fraction of the budget and manpower of the Defense Department; naturally, then, when new requirements emerged, the Pentagon could usually locate additional resources and adapt to new conditions quicker than its colleagues in Foggy Bottom. Inflexible State Department personnel policies also made it impossible to mandate assignments to combat zones, and the purposeful downsizing of USAID in the Reagan years made it difficult for either organization to provide the "civilian surge" of diplomats and aid workers that President Obama tried to send to Afghanistan in 2009. As a result, Provincial Reconstruction Teams became almost exclusively military; Pentagon contractors took over police training from State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs; and Afghanistan's rule of law and prison reforms eventually fell to the military because there was insufficient capacity elsewhere in the U.S. government to meet the need. Those repeated errors do not stem from forgetting. They were caused by the U.S. government's preference for lavishly funding the Pentagon but not the State Department or USAID, and by the State Department's own personnel policies, which it could have changed, but did not.

Another set of repeated problems—mirroring, disregarding partners' concerns, and a tendency to play too direct a role in advise-and-assist efforts—probably has less to do with institutions and more to do with the enduring power of ideology in general, and with the narratives of American exceptionalism in particular. As cultural historians of the Cold War have been arguing for some time, the Vietnam War caused massive changes to America's song of itself, challenging the then-hegemonic storyline of the United States as an invincible military power, a beacon of freedom, and a model that all other freedom-loving nations yearned to emulate. American "victory culture" may have already been under strain before Vietnam, particularly after the Korean War, but for a number of younger Americans, the nation's very public failure in Southeast Asia seemed to provide irrefutable evidence that American exceptionalism was built more on fantasy than on reality.[69]

Unfortunately, Americans' appreciation of the limits of military power was only temporary, even among military members and veterans, and the abolition of the draft is one of the reasons why. After the U.S. transitioned to an all-volunteer force in 1973, the political and ideological landscape of the military began shifting, as volunteers from socially conservative Southern states like Georgia and South Carolina began accounting for a larger share of officers and enlisted recruits than they had during the draft era.[70] As a result, by the start of the twenty-first century, the veteran community skewed more politically conservative than in previous eras,

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[68]The difficulties of Pentagon spending and turf wars with the Office of Management and Budget are explored well in Dov Zakheim, *A Vulcan's Tale: How the Bush Administration Mismanaged the Reconstruction of Afghanistan* (Washington, DC, 2011). See also Ronald E. Neumann, *The Other War: Winning and Losing in Afghanistan* (Dulles, VA, 2009), 126–45, 208.

[69]The term "victory culture" comes from Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (Amherst, MA, 1995).

[70]George M. Reynolds and Amanda Shendruck, "Demographics of the U.S. Military, Council on Foreign Relations," Apr. 24, 2018, https://www.cfr.org/article/demographics-us-military (accessed May 7, 2020).

with the biggest changes seen among the youngest veterans who had most recently left military service.[71] In 2013, political scientists Jonathan D. Klingler and J. Tyson Chatagnier used public opinion data from 2006 to show that unlike their draft-era counterparts, the "average volunteer veteran holds conservative, rather than liberal or even libertarian, values on nearly every policy variable … [and is] more conservative generally than the civilian public."[72]

The post-draft military volunteers were not only more conservative than the rest of civilian society; they were also more hawkish and interventionist. One of the issues Klingler's and Chatagnier's study probed was Americans' opinions on when the nation should use its military and for what purposes. Their research revealed a stark divide: both veterans and the active duty military were more likely than non-veterans or civilians to support using military force for a wide range of military missions, including attacking terrorists, securing oil, preventing genocide, and even spreading democracy. (The only military activity they were less likely than civilians to endorse was missions to support the United Nations.)[73] This shift to a more unilateral and interventionist military culture coupled well with Americans' pre-existing propensity to believe in a unique American mission to save, teach, and remake the world in its own image—some of the same ideological commitments that undergirded so many missteps in Vietnam a generation earlier.

Because of this reversion to Cold War victory culture, the military that invaded Afghanistan and Iraq was disproportionately populated with soldiers convinced of what historian Melani McAlister calls "benevolent supremacy"—a discourse that reframes U.S. power as not only benign, but as a path to salvation and liberation.[74] This feel-good narrative naturally resonated with American soldiers and their supporters, but not with Iraqi and Afghan civilians, setting up a clash of ideas that infected politics and security in both countries. When successful invasions gave way to protracted occupations, hasty efforts to design new institutions reverted to an American blueprint.

Unfortunately, U.S. blueprints for democracy contained a number of culturally contingent elements that skewed Americans' efforts to transform either country into a stable democracy. Operating under the faulty assumption that most Iraqis and Afghans already wanted what America was offering, the American military initially focused on killing, detaining, or threatening those who objected to the occupation, which frightened moderates and alienated new sectors of both societies. Officers advising foreign ministries and military units increasingly viewed themselves as embattled teachers dealing with recalcitrant students, which led them to do far more talking and ordering than listening and asking. Opponents to occupation capitalized on these slights, and in Afghanistan, lethal "insider attacks" by Afghan soldiers and policemen rose precipitously, forcing the United States to designate "guardian angels"—U.S. troops who guarded the American trainers from their Afghan trainees.[75] These developments badly undermined the U.S. occupation rationale and led those serving in both countries to increasingly ignore the concerns and cultural commitments of the peoples they were genuinely hoping to help.

None of this is to say that the military lost Iraq, or Afghanistan, or Vietnam, all by itself. The fundamental obstacle to peace in civil wars is the warring factions themselves. Outside powers

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[71]Frank Newport, "Military Veterans of All Ages Tend to Be More Republican: Political Difference Highest among Younger Veterans," Gallup Poll, May 25, 2009, https://news.gallup.com/poll/118684/military-veterans-ages-tend-republican.aspx (accessed Mar. 27, 2020).

[72]Jonathan D. Klingler and J. Tyson Chatagnier, "Are You Doing Your Part? Veterans' Political Attitudes and Heinlein's Conception of Citizenship," *Armed Forces and Society* 40, no. 4 (2013): 673–95.

[73]Ibid., 685.

[74]Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley, CA, 2001), 40, 80–3.

[75]Bill Roggio and Lisa Lundquist, "Green on Blue Attacks in Afghanistan: The Data," *The Long War Journal*, June 17, 2017, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/08/green-on-blue_attack.php (accessed May 9, 2020).

like the United States can help forge a path to peace, but they must do so through careful diplomacy that at times encourages and other times pressures factions and their sponsors to reconcile. That did not happen in Vietnam. As Vietnam War historian Gregory A. Daddis has shown, President Nixon's approach to Vietnam largely focused on getting troops out and POWs home; it was "a policy of withdrawal rather than a strategy for victory." As a result, nothing the generals did in the war's final years "materially altered a war that American political leaders no longer saw as vital to U.S. national security or global dominance."[76]

This same sentiment is now driving U.S. policy toward Afghanistan, and as a result, the prognosis for a stable government in Kabul after the United States departs is poor, at best. Just like Nixon in Vietnam, President Trump ignored, rather than reconciled, the underlying political disagreements between the Afghan government and the Taliban. In ways eerily similar to the U.S.'s last year in Vietnam, Trump first tried to bomb the Taliban into signing an agreement, then cut the Afghan government out of the talks and started withdrawing troops—all while ignoring the Afghans' dire warnings of the likely results. That is not history repeating itself; it is the natural outgrowth of an American political culture that repeatedly favors military solutions to political problems and undervalues how careful diplomacy can generate cooperation and compromise. For former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ronald Neumann, who served in Vietnam as an infantry officer and has thought about both conflicts for years, this tone-deaf approach goes far beyond issues of tactics or military strategy. "The problem with US foreign policy," he once joked grimly, "is that we make much of it without reference to foreigners."[77]

Americans' habit of largely ignoring the world except when trying to remake it has existed in the United States for a long time, as have the other core tenets of American exceptionalism. And, in the end, the staying power of these exceptionalist narratives is probably the best indicator of whether the United States will ever "learn" the so-called lessons of Vietnam or Afghanistan. Bureaucracies can be reformed, and individual politicians can be elected or defeated. But ideologies have extraordinary resilience, particularly ones that affirm feel-good fantasies or help memory activists point fingers for political purposes. It is no wonder then that such discourses pervaded American tactics and strategy in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, affecting how the nation fought those wars and, eventually, how it withdrew from them.

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[76]Gregory A. Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (New York, 2017), 9, 73.
[77]Neumann, "Washington Goes to War," 49.