US war policy from Vietnam to Afghanistan

Pernicious parallels

The United States' protracted fight against insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan have raised the spectre of the Vietnam war. Mariano Aguirre reviews recent literature on US wartime policies from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan.

- *Washington Rules. America's Path to Permanent War*, by Andrew J. Bacevich. Metropolitan Books, 2010, 304 pp.
- *Lessons in Disaster. McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam*, by Gordon M. Goldstein. Times Books, 2008, 320 pp.
- *War Without Fronts. The USA in Vietnam*, by Bernard Greiner. Yale University Press, 2009, 518 pp. (Originally published in Germany as *Krieg ohne Fronten: Die USA in Vietnam* by Hamburger Edition).
- *Obama's Wars. The Inside Story*, by Bob Woodward. Simon & Schuster, 2010, 464 pp.

There are remarkable parallels between the US government's wartime policies over the past 40 years. Leaders in Washington faced very different conflict situations throughout that period, spanning US involvement in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. But ironically, they seem to be repeating their mistakes, based on similar ideological assumptions. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are dragging on, and massive military spending to fight what many argue are unwinnable guerrilla insurgencies are undermining the legitimacy of the United States as a superpower and exposing the limits of its military might and economic affluence.

Four recent books examine America's 'path to permanent war', as Andrew J. Bacevich subtitles his 2010 book *Washington Rules*, and show how it has been a decisive factor in losing wars, generating massive destruction and accelerating the decline of the United States as a global power. All the authors, with the exception of Bacevich, whose book is a historical interpretation, had access to declassified information, notes from decision makers and personal testimonies.

These books explore the role that the civilian and military elite have played in involving their country in disastrous wars, such as in Vietnam and Iraq, where the military machine wreaked havoc – without winning the wars, many would argue. Meanwhile, the war in Afghanistan seems to be heading for the same fate.

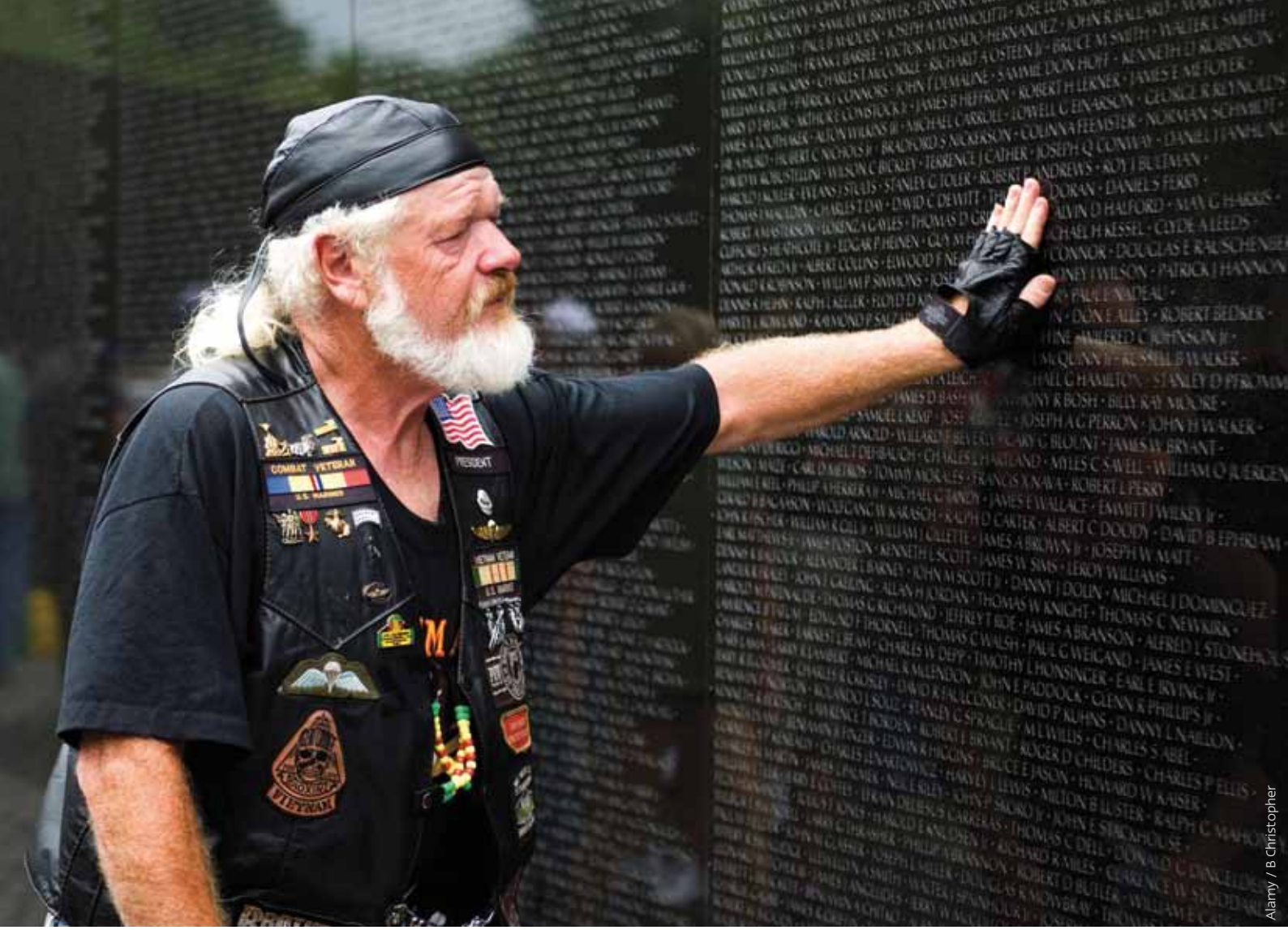
The influential inner circle of decision makers in these administrations played a decisive role during these conflicts, from the Ivy League technocrats, like McGeorge Bundy, and Cold War generals who advised the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, to the neo-conservatives that influenced George W. Bush and the current military elite that is pressuring US President Barack Obama to continue the war in Afghanistan.

But Bacevich, a former U.S. Army colonel, believes that in addition to an elite circle, there is also a group of interlocking institutions driving the United States' imperial impulse. This wider group consists of government agencies, think tanks, the media and corporations. There is a continuity between the actors and their interests. Corporations have a profit motive in selling weapons but have to persuade Congress to free funds for that purpose. Since the Reagan administration, private foundations were created to fund right-wing research and media. In fact, the mainstream media has been less critical ever since Vietnam, while the right-wing media are increasingly militant.

These are actors and instruments in the ideology of permanent war, which generates a political economy of war, or the 'Washington consensus', as Bacevich calls it. Indeed, he also criticizes American society for kowtowing to its government's war policies. 'The citizens of the United States,' he says, 'have essentially forfeited any capacity to ask first-order questions about the fundamentals of national security policy.'

It does not look like the Washington consensus is going to recede any time soon, according to Bacevich, even though the United States 'no longer posseses sufficient wherewithal to sustain a national security strategy that relies on global military presence and global power projection'. Americans, he says, 'can ill afford to indulge any longer in dreams of saving the world, much less remaking it in our own image'. >

By **Mariano Aguirre**, managing director of the Norwegian Peacebuilding Centre in Oslo, Norway, and fellow of the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.



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Vietnam veteran paying respect to fallen soldiers at the Vietnam War Memorial, Washington, DC

Ruinous policies

Bacevich sees a connection between the permanent war policy and the profound economic, political and civilian crisis that has affected the United States since 2008. The idea that an overstretched military power could contribute to the fall of an empire was put forward by historian Paul Kennedy in his 1987 book *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. The United States' reaction to 9/11 and the international community's acceptance of this nation as the sole superpower for the foreseeable future initially seemed to invalidate Paul Kennedy's argument. But as George W. Bush's presidency endured, this international acceptance lost steam, giving renewed impetus to the argument that US global influence is on the decline.

The inability of the coalition forces to settle the war in Iraq and the perception that the global war against terror is going nowhere are raising doubts about the efficacy of the US military machine. Add to that reports of gross violations of human rights against detainees in Guantanamo Bay and Iraq, and the legitimacy of US power is no longer something taken for granted. For many, the 2008 financial crisis was the straw that broke the camel's back. Overstretched resources from years of war and a collapsing financial market was ammunition for those who argued that the United States was a power in decline.

There is a domestic example of this decline. When Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, the US government's response to this natural disaster prompted cries of mismanagement and failed leadership. People around the world saw news images of what looked like an underdeveloped country. These images exposed an inadequate, ill-prepared and – most would argue – uncaring state infrastructure and bureaucracy.

Bacevich echoes Paul Kennedy's argument when he points out that the United States is pursuing 'ruinous military and fiscal policies'. George W. Bush doubled the military budget between 2001 and 2008 and left his country with a national debt of US$10.6 trillion. Meanwhile, the Obama administration is increasing military spending as well. The Congressional Budget Office calls the long-term budget outlook 'daunting', and is forecasting a steady trillion-dollar deficit for the next decade.

Significantly, President Obama has assumed a prominent public role during the US global power crisis. He was the first White House candidate and the first president to stress that his country was operating in a very different environment than it had been during the Cold War and post-Cold War eras. Obama has not shied away from raising what are painful truths for his country. The collapse of

financial institutions and the real estate market has resulted in high unemployment, a stagnating stock market, and evictions and foreclosures – while the predictions for economic growth in emerging markets such as India and China are only a few percentage points short of 10%.

President Obama has also stressed the need to develop a multilateral response to global challenges such as the environmental crisis and poverty. Implicitly, Obama has presented himself as the first post-imperial US president. But vast sectors of US society vehemently reject Obama's viewpoints, and to make matters worse, political and military inertia have a stranglehold on his rhetoric.

Cold War ideology

President Lyndon B. Johnson's escalation of US involvement in the Vietnam War arguably obscured the social and civil liberty advances he made. Similarly, Afghanistan could potentially throw a spanner in the works of Obama's domestic social programme. Bob Woodward makes this dramatic parallel in his 2010 book *Obama's Wars*.

President Obama stressed the need during his presidential campaign to withdraw from Iraq and put an end to the war in Afghanistan. But Woodward argues that the president was under pressure from the military establishment from his very first day in the White House to authorize a surge and postpone the withdrawal deadline in Afghanistan.

A reading of the books by Bacevich and Woodward, and a third book, political scientist Gordon M. Goldstein's *Lessons in Disaster*, published in 2009, reveals a cycle of more than half a century of war rationales – not only in Afghanistan and Vietnam, but also in much of US military policy since the 1940s. These pernicious parallels have arguably contributed to the economic, political and social decline of the United States.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy had strong reservations about increasing the number of US troops in South Vietnam. They were supporting a weak and corrupt government that in theory at least was putting up a fight against the communist North. After Kennedy's assassination, Johnson resisted involving his country in 'that bitch of a war' for a while.

But the presidential system had a pyramid structure. The inner circle of advisors had the ability to influence the president, which other officials did not. These advisors dismissed reports that did not agree with their vision, in the same way that the Bush and Cheney inner circle dismissed CIA reports that did not conclusively show that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.

President Johnson was eventually won over, thereby deflating the arguments of the few diplomats who warned against starting an air bombing campaign, deploying combat troops and ultimately taking the final steps towards *Americanizing* the war.

Lessons in Disaster is a brilliant account of the decision-making process that drove the United States into the quagmire of Vietnam. It describes how an elite group of military advisors, led by Bundy and McNamara and two generals, Maxwell Taylor and William Westmoreland, convinced the president to escalate the war in South-east Asia. Voices in favour of settling the conflict through negotiations were dismissed. And yet one such person, the diplomat George Ball, is referred to by Goldstein as 'the administration's prescient and articulate advocate of caution'.

The administration's policies were driven by ideas firmly entrenched in Cold War ideology. The domino theory, for example, aligned countries without taking into account their histories or present realities. Then there was the credibility factor, which held that the strongest power in the world was simply not capable of losing a war. And finally, there was the global war against communism, which failed to anticipate the vigorous nationalism behind many insurrections, from Cuba to Vietnam.

The My Lai effect

One parallel shared by the conflicts in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan is that failure is not an option for the United States. On the contrary, as Bernard Greiner shows in his 2010 book *War without Fronts*, the United States believes it is a country chosen by God to lead other countries on the road to freedom and democracy.

Destruction – whether human or infrastructural – has been repeatedly denounced, but Bern Greiner puts a new slant on it. Greiner examines the My Lai massacre, when an American platoon mass murdered civilians in a Vietnamese village in 1968. He argues that it was an inevitable consequence of two factors: the asymmetry between the North Vietnamese forces and the US military power, and the culture of *victory*, profoundly embedded in American culture.

The less likely it looked that Washington would win the Vietnam war, however, the more it adopted a *total war strategy* that did not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. If victory is unattainable, the logic went, then the United States would lose its credibility. The world would fall as a result – to communism during the Vietnam era, or to terrorism today. But Greiner also stresses that the Vietcong used this lack of distinction in its favour, exposing and sacrificing thousands of civilians for the sake of de-legitimizing the United States.

Goldstein and Greiner show how decision makers in the 1960s dismissed advice to not send troops to Vietnam. Woodward describes a similar situation today, which indicates that the lessons of Vietnam have not been learned. As Goldstein writes about Bundy, 'he marched ahead with the expectation that an undefined degree of coercive military pressure would extract an undefined form of political capitulation over an undefined period of conflict'.

The result of this attitude was the prolongation of the Vietnam war, which cost millions of people their lives. And it has also prolonged the US military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, where over a hundred thousand lives have been claimed. Opposition to the Vietnam War in the United States grew after news of the My Lai Massacre reached the public. Perhaps the leak of classified information about military abuses on Wikileaks on 22 October 2010, as well as subsequent leaks, will have a My Lai effect on public sentiment. ■

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