
How does the Vietnam War compare to the Iraq War? Enhance students’ global understanding by comparing the motivations, strategies, and outcomes of wars in Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

The Vietnam War (1964-1973) and the Iraq War (2003-2011) were major American military interventions in distant and culturally unfamiliar regions, first in Southeast Asia and then in the Middle East. Comparing the causes of these wars, as well as following their trajectories, both in military and political terms, provides an important window into the assumptions underlying American foreign policy. Both wars amply illustrate the challenges of the application of modern military force in asymmetrical warfare, the complexity of propping up unpopular governments, as well as the pitfalls of resorting to regime change. Finally, neither war ultimately seemed ‘winnable,’ and lasting peace was difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

The Vietnam and Iraq Wars show how positive American intentions went awry and military solutions faltered and failed. The future standing of the United States in the world depends on an informed and thoughtful appreciation of the assumptions behind the decision-making in these wars, and a clear-eyed look at what a democracy can and should achieve when resorting to war. Our students will likely be the future decision-makers and, as citizens and voters, they deserve an unflinching and insightful look at these wars and their larger meaning for US history. These examples can also help students see how cultural understanding and fuller appreciation of the culture and traditions of others can enhance the success of American foreign policy and diplomacy.

• What motivated American military interventions in Vietnam and Iraq?
• How did ignorance of the history, culture and language of Vietnam and Iraq affect these wars?
• What was the soldier’s experience like in these wars?
• What important distinctions and similarities can we identify between the Vietnam War and the Iraq War?
• How and why did military operations ultimately fail, in spite of apparent advantages in strength and resources?
• What can a democracy achieve when resorting to war? What aims are justified? What costs can be tolerated?
• What lessons can our students, as future voters and decision makers, draw from this history?

Causes and Justifications

Fear of the spread of Communism drove the U.S. to fight in South Vietnam in 1964. Memories of the 1938 appeasement of Hitler at the Munich Conference, provided the historical justification for stopping Communism before it spread, as modeled in the ‘Domino Theory’ where one country after another in Southeast Asia would inevitably fall to Communism. Resources in Vietnam included tungsten, tin, rice and tea, none of which seemed vital to US security. The immediate justification for war with North Vietnam was an August 4 incident in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964 in which US destroyers fired blindly into the night, due to freakish weather affecting their sonar. It turned out that no enemy boats were there, as US pilot James Stockdale, who was flying over the destroyers, told his superiors.

The troubled US role in the Middle East deepened with the Gulf War in 1991 aimed at expelling Iraq from Kuwait which Saddam Hussein had seized. The War on Terror after 9/11
resulted in a war against Afghanistan in 2001 (still ongoing) and was the larger context for attacking Iraq. Iraq’s vast resources of oil made it seem vital to US interests. The Iraq War was based on fabricated and exaggerated intelligence that suggested that Saddam Hussein had chemical and nuclear ‘weapons of mass destruction.’ This was billed as a preventive or preemptive war, and was associated with 9/11, though Iraq was a secular state and had no verifiable complicity in that attack. Once it was revealed that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the justification for war was retroactively turned into a war for democracy based on the historical model of Woodrow Wilson in World War I.

History of Vietnam and Iraq

Vietnam had a long history of resistance to foreign invasion (China, France), and this helped the Communist leader Ho Chi Minh to rally the North Vietnamese population against the U.S. forces in South Vietnam. The 1954 division of Vietnam was imposed by foreigners and resented by nationalists. Rigged elections helped Ngo Dinh Diem to come to power in South Vietnam in 1955. In 1963, Diem’s overthrow in a U.S.-sanctioned coup led to further coups, and only military leadership under Generals Thieu and Ky brought stability by 1965 through a thinly-disguised dictatorship with sham elections.

The roots of Islam were deep in the region that became known as Iraq. It was part of the Muslim Caliphate from the 8th century until its incorporation in the Ottoman Empire in the 13th. The British controlled Iraq after World War I until it achieved nominal independence in 1933. In the 1950s, the conflict between the majority Shi’a and the minority Sunni sects led to political strife and a series of political coups. The complexity of religious and ethnic differences in Iraq were barely kept in check under Saddam’s ruthless dictatorship led by the Sunni Ba’ath Party. The US-backed overthrow of Saddam’s regime led to near civil war, inciting sectarian strife, and gave prominence to the many existing independent militias such as Shi’ite Muqtada al-Sadr’s Madhi army and the Badr Brigades, both of which targeted Sunnis.

Military Strategies

In both wars massive air power was a significant feature. In Vietnam, large-scale ‘carpet bombing,’ dropping of canisters of napalm and spraying of highly toxic Agent Orange were important aspects of aerial warfare. In Iraq, aerial bombardment was used on a wide scale, including the use of cluster bombs, along with unmanned drones for targeted assassinations. But air power was never enough, and infantry was required, up to 536,000 soldiers in Vietnam in 1968, and up to 166,000 in Iraq in 2007. A major difference is that the U.S. military in Vietnam was made up of up 25% draftees, while in Iraq all were voluntary enlistees. Soldiers on both sides faced ambushes, booby traps, and the infamous ‘improvised explosive devices’ (IEDs) in Iraq.

Both wars offer examples of conventional as well as ‘asymmetrical’ warfare, where a well-equipped modern army is pitted against a largely unconventional insurgent force. Tactics used in Vietnam included “Search and Destroy,” emphasizing enemy body count over holding territory. The Vietnamese insurgency created a vast tunnel system in South Vietnam to shelter from bombs and escape U.S. forces. US strategy in Iraq became clouded after the defeat of Saddam Hussein. Tactics included “Cordon and Search” with violent nighttime house raids and, a “Clear, Hold, and Build” a tactic that was invented by politicians to make continuing the war more palatable. During the ‘surge’ in 2007, under Gen. David Petraeus, counterinsurgency techniques, such as reaching out to Sunni militias, and bringing soldiers into close contact with the population were used.
Outcomes for U.S.

Vietnam had momentous consequences at home, ending the careers of two Presidents (Johnson and Nixon), inciting mistrust in government (Pentagon Papers, Watergate) and creating a sense of national malaise called the ‘Vietnam Syndrome.’ The Iraq War soon was revealed to be difficult to win, and the U.S. occupation of Iraq and its transition to elective government were deeply flawed. The rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the emergence of ISIS in the broader region appear to be the unintended consequences of the Iraq War. Unlike Vietnam, Americans may not yet consider the Iraq War a national humiliation. Nevertheless, the critique of the war and the sense of the futility of the U.S. invasion may have contributed to the rise of Donald Trump, who claimed (without evidence) to have strongly opposed the war from the beginning.

Outcomes for Vietnam, Iraq

Within two years of U.S. withdrawal, in 1975, the North Vietnamese prevailed over the South and reunited the country. Refugees from the conflict, especially those who had supported the U.S. in a variety of ways, left the country and settled elsewhere, many in the United States. Vietnam’s economy was slow to recover. Normalization of relations with U.S. in 1995 helped to support a strong growth in Vietnam’s GDP, which had a remarkable takeoff period in the 21st century. Surprisingly, the Vietnamese appear to feel no animosity toward Americans. After the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011, ISIS invaded and captured parts of Iraqi territory in 2014. The Iraqi army, trained and equipped by the U.S., struggled to drive ISIS out and was finally able to do so by retaking the city of Mosul in July, 2017. The war is not over, however, and Iraq is likely to continue to struggle in a difficult region with reduced influence, especially as long as the Syrian conflict continues.

Skills:

• Comparing various aspects of US involvement in the Vietnam and Iraq Wars offers students a chance to develop the skill of comparison, as well as that of continuity and change over time.
• Comparing the historical contexts of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars helps students assess the effects of the Cold War and of 9/11 on American foreign policy.
• Students’ global understanding is enhanced by exploring the impact of these wars on the regions of Southeast Asia and the Middle East.
• Analysis of primary source documents related to the Vietnam and Iraq Wars help students refine their ability to clearly assess point of view, purpose and intended audience of each document.
• Evaluation of images and political cartoons about the Vietnam and Iraq Wars show students how different points of view about the wars emerged and changed over time.
• Exploration of the ways cultural misunderstandings, differences in traditions, religions, and languages contributed to the challenges in the Vietnam and Iraq Wars helps students develop their cross-cultural skills.
• Analysis of how racial stereotyping and religious intolerance played a role in the Vietnam and Iraq Wars and can help students explore how these wars tested American values.

Each participant will get primary sources and readings, suggested audio-visual resources, links to lesson on the web, and a current bibliography on the history of each war. By email participants can get a link to a Google drive with more extensive materials for enrichment and instruction.
Finally, why compare the Vietnam and Iraq Wars?

As citizens of the twenty-first century, our students need a firm global understanding of culture, history and politics. This begins with a clear-eyed assessment of the U.S. role in the world. As teachers, we need to provide the tools for them to more effectively explore the U.S. impact on the global environment. In the post-Cold War world, we need a deep knowledge of other countries’ traditions, beliefs and practices and an understanding of our own strengths and weaknesses. This comparison of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars offers material with inherent interest for many students. The comparison enriches the textbook, which cannot offer a comparative perspective. It develops historical thinking skills, awakens students to the responsibilities of global citizenship, and gives them a sense of the consequences of war.

Question:
• How does the history of these wars illuminate the future of the United States foreign policy?
• Can policy makers benefit from use of historical examples and learn from the mistakes of the past?
• What is the proper role of the United States in the world?
• When is military intervention called for and what conditions are required for it to be successful?
• Is there an ‘Iraq Syndrome’ and, if so, what is it?