



## Superpowers Often Lose Small Wars to Weaker Nations

**Researcher: U.S. Has Only 26 Percent Chance of Success in Iraq**

By LEE DYE

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The world's most powerful nations have lost more than a third of their military battles against much weaker nations since World War II, despite the fact that their opponents were seriously outgunned and outmanned. That has caused many to wonder why powerful states lose limited wars.

Patricia Sullivan, a political scientist at the University of Georgia, began grappling with that issue several years ago while working on her doctorate at the University of California, Davis, and she thinks she has come up with at least part of the answer.

Even the most powerful states lose their appetite for war if the cost is much greater than had been expected and if guns alone won't guarantee success, she argues in a paper published in the current issue of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. Her research was sponsored partly by the National Science Foundation.

Some will quarrel with Sullivan's numbers, some of which are admittedly arbitrary, but she has a worthwhile goal to provide a working model that would allow policymakers to get a better estimate of how successful they are likely to be in a military operation. Few will find some of her conclusions reassuring.

When she ran the data on Iraq through her computer, for example, she came up with only a 26 percent chance of success, and that's if U.S. forces remain there for at least 10 years after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

"My definition of success is you have to be able to leave and have the situation hold for a year," she said in an interview. That doesn't mean every American has to leave, but at least 70 percent of the forces that were there at the height of the war would be out of there. That may be an arbitrary definition of success, but at least it's better than what a lot of folks in Washington have come up with.

Sullivan has found 122 wars and military interventions since World War II in which the United States, the Soviet Union, China, Britain or France fought a weaker adversary. According to her research, the big guys lost 39 percent of the time. The United States walked away from 10 out of 34 military interventions.

She defines a military intervention as an operation that includes 500 battle-ready troops, which is a lower standard than the 1,000 combat deaths used in many political science studies. "It's an arbitrary number, but I wanted to include battles that are at a lower level, but not just a few advisors," Sullivan said.

Her list of failures by the United States includes the obvious Vietnam and the earlier attempt to move into North Korea as well as lesser skirmishes that pale in the shadow of Iraq, Lebanon in 1982-1984, Libya in 1986, several Iraq interventions after the first Gulf War, and Somalia. The United States was not defeated militarily in any of those battles, but it gave up because the cost of continuing the effort was too high.

Why the country lost is the very heart of Sullivan's research. When guns count, the major states always win. But when the end goal is to get your target to toe the line and become whatever you want, then guns no longer matter. And that's where most failures occur.

The threat of defeat, she writes in her study, "is highest when states pursue political objectives that can only be attained with target compliance," like the acceptance of a government that will remain friendly to the victor.

For the weak states, the cost of fighting back can be great. Sullivan's study shows that those lesser states suffer 81 percent

of the battle deaths "when they choose to fight back against major power militaries."

If it's strictly a brute force confrontation, the major states will win 75 percent of the time, Sullivan says. But if a political settlement is also required, that number drops to 20 percent.

Surprisingly, the level of commitment "is only marginally statistically significant" in whether the major power wins or loses. In some cases, according to Sullivan's research, a higher commitment — as in a greater number of combat troops — actually "decreased the probability of success," possibly by making the smaller country more determined to win.

Sullivan draws a sharp contrast between the two Persian Gulf wars. The first war, Operation Desert Storm, "was a quick and decisive victory for the United States, and the allies suffered far fewer casualties than anyone had predicted," she writes.

"Instead of filling thousands of hospital beds in a protracted conflict, the United States liberated Kuwait after a six-week air campaign and a 100-hour ground war, losing only 146 soldiers in combat."

That success was so convincing that the then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, said the ghosts of Vietnam had been dispatched and the United States would immediately develop "the capability to prevail, quickly and cheaply, in any and all forms of conflict."

Then came Operation Iraqi Freedom. Hussein's regime collapsed, few American lives were lost, and the battle was declared over. Then the bottom fell out.

As Sullivan's study would predict, the effort to make Iraq into a democratic clone from the west has faltered, turning into a problem that "brute force" could not resolve.

So, where will it end? No one really knows, but after studying 122 wars, Sullivan has an opinion.

"I think that eventually, we will withdraw because more and more people think the price is too high," she said.

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