

Twisting Arms Isn't as Easy as Dropping Bombs

By Shankar Vedantam
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Whenever the United States goes to war, pro-war and antiwar advocates immediately reach for different history books. Hawks always equate the situation to a Hitler-Chamberlain standoff to show why hesitation can be fatal. Doves invariably pull the Vietnam War off the shelf to argue that plunging ahead can be foolhardy.

Two wars that the United States has launched against Iraq perfectly illustrate the problem with cherry-picking your history. Hawks and doves made their usual arguments before the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Antiwar advocates who predicted that forcing Saddam Hussein to retreat from Kuwait would result in thousands of U.S. casualties were proved wrong by Operation Desert Storm. And the neoconservatives who warned that ignoring Hussein's weapons of mass destruction was like appeasing Hitler now have egg yolk dribbling down their faces.

The history book getting the most attention right now is about the 1954-1962 French colonial war in Algeria. Hundreds of thousands of people died in that conflict before Algerian guerrillas handed the French army a humiliating defeat. President Bush said he is reading Alistair Horne's account of the conflict, "A Savage War for Peace," to glean insights about the U.S. predicament in Iraq. Horne, a British historian, recently told PBS's Charlie Rose that he sees similarities and differences between the U.S. war in Iraq and the French war in Algeria -- and hopes his book will help Bush find a way to succeed in Iraq.

Political scientist Patricia Sullivan recently decided to take a different tack than the political pundits. Rather than look for a single war to provide insight, Sullivan decided to look at all post-World War II conflicts between the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and weaker nations.

Her findings will probably surprise you -- and would make for sober reading at the White House: Although the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia and China were militarily superior to their opponents in every one of the 122 conflicts that Sullivan studied, these powerful countries failed to win an astonishing 39 percent of their wars against weaker opponents.

Other research backs up Sullivan: New York University professor of politics Bruce Bueno De Mesquita has shown that, in conflicts between unequal powers over the past 200 years, the weaker country has outdone its stronger foe 41 percent of the time.

What is critically important to understand, said Sullivan, who works at the University of Georgia, is that the strong countries were not militarily defeated in the post-World War II conflicts. Despite their vastly stronger military capabilities, these countries unilaterally withdrew or got stuck in a stalemate, as the United States did in Korea, in two out of every five conflicts.

The United States' withdrawal from Somalia in 1993 -- precipitated by events chronicled in the book and movie "Black Hawk Down" -- was perhaps the most dramatic post-World War II example, "despite the fact that its military was, at most, only marginally degraded," Sullivan wrote in a paper she plans to publish in the Journal of Conflict Resolution.

For all the talk of "shock and awe" before the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Sullivan's research shows that military power alone is not a useful predictor of victory.

Sullivan found that powerful nations tend to win wars when all they seek is an opponent's submission, but tend to lose when victory requires an opponent's cooperation.

"On one end of the spectrum are things you can achieve with brute force," she said. "On the opposite end is getting an adversary to change a domestic or foreign policy -- you want the adversary to change his behavior."

Pushing Hussein's army behind a line in the 1991 Gulf War and overthrowing the dictator in the current war were aims that did not require the acquiescence of Iraqis; they could be achieved by brute force alone. But creating "a democratic Iraq that upholds the rule of law, respects the rights of its people, provides them security and is an ally in the war on terror" -- goals that Bush laid out in his State of the Union speech last week -- all require the cooperation of Iraqis.

Sullivan found that the five Security Council permanent members won three-quarters of conflicts in which their aims did not require their opponents' cooperation, but only half of the conflicts in which they did need cooperation.

For the United States, the disparity was even greater -- winning 81 percent of conflicts when cooperation was not required, but only 44 percent of the military interventions, such as in Laos in 1964 and Lebanon in 1982, that Sullivan described as having "coercive" goals.

"In other words," Sullivan concluded, "the United States has withdrawn its troops without attaining its primary political objective in 56 percent of the military interventions it initiated with a coercive war aim."

Sullivan's findings do not lend themselves to the automatic conclusions of the history cherry-pickers. Her research does not address which wars are worth fighting, and it shows that, although the odds are against it, the United States can lose wars that only require brute force and can win wars that require an opponent's cooperation. But this is what makes Sullivan's findings so relevant to the current debate over Iraq: She is in the science business, not in sales.

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