The False Promise of American Exceptionalism and the Failure of US Foreign Policy

MEGAN GAULD draws from US foreign interventions in Iraq and Vietnam to call the cultural assumption of American exceptionalism into question.

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President Ronald Reagan Saluting at The United States Military Academy at West Point During Brigade Review of The Corps of Cadets, October, 1987

In 1999, when asked why most other countries disagree with American policy in Iraq, United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said, 'it is because we are American, we are the indispensable nation, we stand tall—we see further into the future'(Maynes 1999, 517). This statement eloquently demonstrates the myth of American exceptionalism. The agency of the United States in the affairs of other states is assumed both to exist and to be desirable. The hubris inherent in this position is demonstrated by the historical record of American military intervention in Vietnam and Iraq (Brown 2003, 11). This article will first discuss the tenets of the exceptionalist claim, then tackle its assumption of moral superiority. It will then examine the implications of losing this assumption and the practicality of military force without it. These examinations are done through the lenses of US military interventions in Vietnam and Iraq.

The American exceptionalist myth is normative, and it comes with practical implications. The normative claim is that America is morally and politically superior to other countries because of its values, political system,

and history of democracy (Ceaser 2012, 5). The practical claim is that this normative superiority gives the United States a global mandate to police the world as it sees fit (Rhodes 2021, 71). Both assumptions underlie American foreign policy; crucially, both are, to a significant extent, false. The failure in Vietnam showed this during the Cold War, while the failure in Iraq shows that it holds true in the post-Cold War era.

The claim of moral superiority is erroneous—democracy neither started nor ended with the United States (Manela 2007, 219). American values, namely those in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence regarding liberty, justice, and equality, are in no way uniquely American. Furthermore, they are arguably upheld more authentically elsewhere (Huntington 1966, 406). America's history is not largely different, and is certainly no more honourable, than the histories of various post-colonial nations in Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean (Manela, 2007). In such a diverse international system, it can hardly be claimed that there is such a thing as the moral superiority of one country over another. Thus, for our purposes, American superiority can better be understood in its practical capacity. The United States is one of the wealthiest nations in the world, and its military is the strongest ("GDP By Country" 2017). It is this strength that underlies the United States' status as a superpower—not the supremacy of American values, democratic institutions, or history.

The falsity of the normative claim has important implications. Prior uses of military force imposing American values and institutions without considering whether this is a viable task has had calamitous consequences for other countries, and its civilians (Brown 2003, 6-7). There is a long list of countries whose experience of American intervention has done extensive damage without meaningful change (Lowenthal 1991, 243). Despite the superiority of conventional American forces, a multitude of complications emerge when troops are tasked with a counter-insurgency mission involving both combat and state-building functions. Such challenges become evident when observing the American experience in both Vietnam and Iraq.

The war in Vietnam was an unmitigated disaster for everyone involved: for Vietnamese civilians in particular, but also for the American army and government. Vietnamese deaths have been estimated at 882,000 in one study and one-to-three-million in another (Hirschman et al. 1995, 9; Lewy 1992, 450). The United States was directly involved in the war from the late 1950s to the early 1970's, and it violently shattered Americans' impression of their military's invincibility (Menand, 2018). It gave a generation of Americans the impression that their country was an imperialist and militaristic power (Ibid). So rattled were American military leaders, politicians, and the public that their collective new aversion to overseas military engagements was labelled 'Vietnam syndrome' (Ibid).

Similarly, in Iraq, the challenges of the military's goals and the military's suitability to achieve them were ignored. Two years after US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, the ISIS insurgency escalated into a war which lasted until 2017 (Hamasaeed, 2020). At times, ISIS held substantial portions of Iraq's territory, including about 90 percent of Al Anbar Governorate by 2015 (Ibid). Though the conclusion of the war in 2017 left the Iraqi government in control, the country has endured state corruption, a deteriorating economy, and the loss of thousands of civilians in American air strikes (Ibid). Approximately 461,000 civilians were killed between 2003 and 2011 (Hagopian et al. 2013, 10).

The staggering costs of war and occupation in both Vietnam and Iraq gave little opportunity for progress towards democracy or liberalism in these places (Okimoto 2019, 179). The prolonged combat and attempted state-building of the counterinsurgency found limited success. The combat portion failed in Vietnam and took thousands of American soldiers with it (Menand 2018). It succeeded in Iraq in the sense that ISIS was eventually defeated and the American-backed government was restored (Hamasaeed 2020). However, the weakness of that government and the institutions that were built throughout the counterinsurgency as part of the state-building campaign testify to the challenges

faced. Similarly in Vietnam, the weakness of the American-backed government in South Vietnam and the military's inability to consolidate it precluded the establishment of sustainable democracy or of any liberal values at all (Lewy 1992, 318).

The state-building portions of these counterinsurgencies both failed for a reason. The goal of this part of counterinsurgency is winning 'hearts and minds' (a phrase coined in the Vietnam War) and using that trust to build institutions that foster democracy (i.e., state-building) (Gompert et al. 2008, 8). State-building is therefore an inherent, if often-forgotten, part of counterinsurgency (Ibid). Combat is intrinsically counterproductive, even antagonistic, to winning the hearts and minds that are necessary for counterinsurgency to become robust state-building. According to Goran Peic (2021, 1031), foreign military force often begets hostility among the locals, and this hostility often becomes armed insurgency. The problem with military intervention is that it is both foreign and militaristic. As it is, foreign involvement in the internal affairs of a state has historically resulted in distrust among locals (Ibid). An insurmountable advantage held by the Viet Cong was that they had grassroots backing whereas the South Vietnamese government was seen as illegitimate because it was propped up by the United States (Menand 2018). A similar phenomenon occurred in Iraq, where the American presence itself provoked the hostility of many Iraqis (Hagopian et al. 2013, 3). The very nature of military intervention as being both militaristic and foreign is difficult to reconcile with many of the goals of counterinsurgency.

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A risk-averse, combat-oriented, prejudicial culture afflicts the US military, making it unsuited for counterinsurgency on both the systemic and individual levels. For example, modern American warfare and its precipitous use of targeted drone strikes means thousands of civilians get caught in the crossfire (Walsh 2015, 507). This is not just a tragic part of modern warfare but is rather a specific tenet of the American war strategy. The US military offloads the staggering risk of asymmetric warfare, the use of unfamiliar strategies by local militias fighting conventional forces to offset their military inferiority, onto civilians (Smith 2008, 147). Indiscriminate civilian death in American interventions is not a flaw in the way the US military wages war but a feature of it. This fact influences locals' view of the occupying force, damaging the counterinsurgency campaign and state-building efforts.

These issues permeate the American military from the structural to the individual level. One former service member, Ian Fishback, worked in Iraq as a team leader in the Special Forces during the counterinsurgency campaign (Lam 2017). He encountered an overall lack of will to complete the operations that make a counterinsurgency successful, such as meeting with local Sheiks and other religious and political leaders (Ibid). More combat-heavy missions, on the other hand, were popular among commanders and their forces despite their insignificance to the overall mission (Ibid). Fishback said that many of his compatriots exhibited a mentality that would place them more aptly in an action movie than in a counterinsurgency campaign (Ibid). An attitude placing productive conversations with civilians second to more 'exciting' combat missions is another barrier to the success of military counterinsurgency operations.

United States military culture poses more of a large-scale problem than a general preference for action-heavy missions on an individual level does. Another notable systematic defect in the American military that raises questions about its suitability for intervention in other countries is racism. The Vietnam War was fought at a time of overwhelming

racial strife in the United States, which was reflected in systemic racism in the army throughout the war (Lucks 2014, 2). Assuming that the organisation has over time departed from such prejudices is a mistake. The Associated Press collected testimony from enlistees and officers in all branches that testify to a deeply rooted culture of racism (Stafford 2021). Beyond the organisational inefficiency such prejudice undoubtedly engenders, it is worth asking about the place of a military with such embedded racism in the rebuilding of nations that are predominantly black and brown. State-building is surely doomed to fail if the organisation undertaking it denies the humanity of the people for whom the state is being rebuilt.

The size of the United States' defence budget, which is five percent over the global average of military expenditure versus total government expenditure, means that military intervention is almost always a viable solution (De Luce and Grammar 2018). The moral support found in the claims of American exceptionalism reinforce the decision to resort to military force. However, contrary to those claims, American values and institutions are neither inherently superior nor universally implementable. The deployment of the military to impose them, therefore, is often in vain. These fallacies in American thinking about foreign policy exaggerate the United States' agency in the domestic affairs of other states. Realistically, America's ability to impose American norms and values is limited. Conventional militaries are intrinsically unsuitable for the work of counterinsurgency. Denying this truth has led to the militarisation of American foreign policy in a manner that presents force as the solution to a multitude of problems. This approach to foreign policy has caused devastating and enduring damage across the world and at home.

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