



Comments on Panel 30

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The (Mis)Uses of History: The Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq
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PANEL 30: The (Mis)Uses of History: The Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq

Chair: **Robert Schulzinger**, University of Colorado, Boulder

“Will History Remember Iraq? Forgotten Memories from the Philippine-American War” by **Jon Krohn**, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

“Presidents Truman and Bush and the Perils of Regime Change” by **Arnie Offner**, Lafayette College

“Which Vietnam Analogy?: Contested Memories of Vietnam and Political Rhetoric about Iraq” by **Marianna Sullivan**, College of New Jersey

Commentator: **David Anderson**, California State University, Monterey Bay

To be ignorant of what happened before you were born is to be forever a child.
Cicero

As I was reading these excellent papers, I was reminded of Cicero’s aphorism. The title of our session is “The (Mis)Uses of History,” but it could also have been termed the ignorance of history or the total disregard for history. National leaders who have the power to make war or make peace but who have no real awareness of what has gone before are like children who are blind to the dangers that surround them and naïve about the consequences of their behavior. The war in Iraq burdens each of these presenters as it burdened me a couple of years ago when I presented a paper at the SHAFR annual meeting declaring that “one Vietnam War should be enough.” These papers have taken the discussion beyond mine. **Marianna Sullivan** has detailed how the partisan rhetoric on the conflict in Iraq is shaped by the competing narratives of the Vietnam conflict. Listening to **Arnold Offner** and **Jon Krohn**, I am led to believe that one Korean War should have been enough or one Philippine War should have been enough. How many wars is it going to take? Or, as Bob Dylan asked:

Yes, 'n' how many times must the cannon balls fly
Before they're forever banned?
<http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/blowin.html>

Each of these papers deals with the transcending policy question of how three U.S. presidents—McKinley, Truman, and Bush—used U.S. power in the name of American principles. Krohn and Sullivan describe how intensely partisan this question became, and all three historians talk about how leaders used or abused history in these policy debates.

It is worth noting that the Vietnam War makes an appearance in each of these analyses, as well. For Sullivan, the Southeast Asian war is central to her arguments, and, for Krohn and Offner, the reference to America's longest war (so far) is more fleeting but also telling.

Krohn's research is especially engaging because much of his source material is from the coverage of the Philippine War in rural Wisconsin newspapers. His subject may be the White House, but the perspective is from the heartland. Politicians often ask about how a policy will play in Peoria. In this case, how did it play in Wausau? In his bibliography, Krohn lists a number of studies on the meaning of empire in U.S. foreign policy, and these have informed his analysis. From his study he finds instructive parallels to the current war debate. President McKinley and his Republican supporters maintained that the use of U.S. military force was necessary to advance civilization and democracy in the Philippines, and his Democratic opponents argued that the American presence in the islands was cruel, wicked, and oppressive. Administration officials expected the Filipinos to welcome Americans as liberators, but instead they got a bloody insurrection with 4,000 U.S. deaths and tens of thousands of civilian casualties. Critics charged that the president was a fool, inept, and lying to the public. McKinley's defenders tried to put U.S. purposes in the Philippines in a positive historical context by drawing parallels to the Louisiana Purchase. Krohn does not phrase it this way, but the effort to make McKinley into Thomas Jefferson raises one of the seminal questions about American imperialism: At what point is an empire of liberty just another empire? Krohn notes that American colonial administration of the islands eventually led to progress toward democracy, but he also observes that the American conduct of the Vietnam War, the Ferdinand Marcos presidency in Manila, and today's U.S. occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan have renewed interest in the lessons of the forgotten Philippine War.

Offner notes that Bush administration spokespersons have themselves likened their boss to Harry Truman and the feisty Missouri's "forward strategy" of fighting for freedom in Korea. I dare say that Arnie knows quite a bit more about Truman's policies than does Dick Cheney. Offner perceptively observes that there are parallels between U.S. conduct in Korea and Iraq. In both cases Washington saw itself as responding to forms of aggression (the attack of DPRK across the 38th Parallel and the attack of 9/11) and put the danger to the United States in a global and ideological context. This initially defensive response led in both cases to decisions on regime change: roll-back or liberation in Korea and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Both presidents failed to anticipate the danger of these decisions. There, however, the parallel breaks down, in Offner's view. Truman became concerned about overreach, courageously fired Douglas MacArthur, and limited the cost and risk of the conflict. Bush by contrast "stayed the course," left Donald Rumsfeld in charge of the war much too long, and continues to "surge" and seek military resolution of Iraq's internal conflicts. Offner does not let Truman off the hook, however, because the Korean War had lasting consequences: lives were lost, huge defense budgets became standard, U.S. relations with the PRC and DPRK were embittered for years to come, and the Korean War served as a kind of dress rehearsal for containment of Asian

communism preparing for a larger production in Vietnam. These were disastrous developments that plagued U.S. policies for decades. Similarly, the new disasters in Iraq—deaths, dollar costs, internal chaos, regional instability, and international censure of the United States—will carry their own long-term price tag.

Sullivan examines the most recent parallel to Iraq—Vietnam—and finds the powerful influence of the previous conflict affecting both sides of the public discourse on the current war. She discerns partisan differences, for example that Republicans blame Democrats for turning the Vietnam War into a failure and for perpetuating the “Vietnam syndrome,” which is seen as a lack of will to succeed. Overall, however, she sees politicians from both parties avoiding a comprehensive critique of the Vietnam experience that would bring into question the character, values, and purposes of America and of individual Americans. The Vietnam debate and hence the Iraq debate is often more tactical, over how the U.S. acts, rather than on why it acts. Democrats, even John Kerry, have been reluctant to defend dissent over either war. Politicians follow the public more than they lead, and the public is ambivalent. Several studies have demonstrated that the majority of the American people came to view the Vietnam War as a mistake but that they also often had a negative view of war protestors. Sullivan notes that a common ground for politicians has become the “rescue narrative,” a contradictory rationale for war that keeps both parties funding it out of an ironic concern for the soldiers being sent to fight it. Toward the end of the Vietnam War, the Nixon and Ford administrations were admonishing the public to continue to support the war for the sake of America’s POWs, as if the reason for the war itself had become only the individual fate of those the country had sent to fight it. Today the public wants out of Iraq but funding the war continues. In the 1950s, public opinion polls showed that Americans wanted to defeat the Soviet Union and China, but those same polls showed that Americans were not willing to fight those countries to gain that goal.

Bold talk is not policy. Like life itself, history teaches hard lessons about hard choices. The Philippine War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War have much to teach us, but we seem unable to muster the leadership to learn those lessons. As Bob Dylan would say:

The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind,
The answer is blowin’ in the wind.’

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