

Learning Nothing from the Iraq War

By [Bill Astore](#)

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What has America learned from the colossal failure of the Iraq War? Not what it should have learned, notes historian (and retired U.S. Army colonel) Greg Daddis at [War on the Rocks](#). Daddis recently attended a 20-year retrospective symposium on the Iraq War, where he heard two distinctive narratives. As he put it:

Most, if not all, veterans of "Iraqi Freedom" told an inward-facing story focusing on tactical and operational "lessons" largely devoid of political context. Meanwhile, Iraqi scholars and civilians shared a vastly different tale of political and social upheaval that concentrated far more on the costs of war than on the supposed benefits of U.S. interventionism.

In short, the U.S. view of the Iraq War remains insular and narcissistic. The focus is on what U.S. troops may have gotten wrong, and how the military could perform better in the future. It's about tactical and operational lessons. In this approach, Iraq and the Iraqi people remain a backdrop to American action on the grand stage. Put differently, the Iraqis are treated much like clay for Americans to mould or discard should they refuse to behave themselves under our hands.

So the "lessons" for America focus on how to become better, more skilled, manipulators of the "clay" at hand. Issues of right and wrong aren't addressed. The morality or legality of war isn't questioned. And Iraqis themselves, their suffering, their plight, even their say in determining their own futures within their country, is pretty much dismissed as irrelevant. And the same is largely true when considering the Vietnam War or the Afghan War; we matter, they don't, even when we're fighting in their country and spreading enormous destruction in undeclared and illegal wars.

As Mike Murry, a Vietnam veteran who comments frequently at this site, has said: you can't do a wrong thing the right way. America's Vietnam War was wrong; the Iraq War was wrong. There was no "right" way to do these wars. Yet, far too often, U.S. military officers and

veterans, joined by far too many Americans who lack military experience, want to focus on how to wage a wrong war in a better, smarter, often more ruthless, way

Indeed, the narrative at times is reduced to “We lost because we weren’t ruthless enough, or we were about to win until the U.S. military was betrayed.” I wrote about this [back in 2007](#) after I heard Senator John McCain speak on PBS. Basically, his point was that if America lost the Iraq War (which we already had), it wouldn’t be the U.S. military’s fault. It would be the fault of anyone who questioned the war. McCain, in other words, was spouting yet another exculpatory stab-in-the-back myth.

What can we learn from the Iraq War, then? Let’s start with these basic lessons: Don’t fight a war based on governmental lies and unfounded fears. Don’t fight illegal and immoral wars. Don’t fight undeclared wars. Don’t meddle in the societies of other people where you are seen as invaders and about which you are ignorant. Don’t wage war, period, unless the domestic security of the U.S. is truly threatened.

Those seem like the right lessons to me, not lessons about how to recognize insurgencies or how to respond more quickly to asymmetries like IEDs and ambushes.

In sum, learn this lesson: Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, were and are countries with rich pasts and proud peoples who were not about to submit to American invaders and agendas, no matter how well-intentioned those invaders believed or advertised themselves to be.

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