

US Foreign Policy: To What Extent Does the Reality Match the Rhetoric

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According to a 2016 study by Dov H. Levin, the US intervened in 81 foreign elections between 1946 and 2000, with the majority of those (68%) being covert.¹ Not only has the US meddled in elections deciding the fate of 81 countries, but also very actively initiated wars or coups in other countries. Just between the World War II and now, the US has overthrown a left-wing government in Guatemala (1954), supported an unsuccessful invasion of Cuba (1961), invaded the Dominican Republic (1965) and Grenada (1983), fueled a war in Vietnam, supported the South Korean government against North Korea, as well as initiated the Iraq War (2003) and Afghanistan War (2001). Not to mention the US killed 199,000 civilian lives in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during WWII.² On the contrary, America claims to uphold the moral ideals of “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness” from the renowned 1776 Declaration of Independence,³ as well as US foreign policy goals “to protect the US...advance democracy, human rights, and other global interests...and support personnel at home and abroad” documented by the Bureau of Public Affairs.⁴ But were there underlying reasons the US felt the need to intervene in the affairs of other countries? To what extent does US foreign policy uphold their own proposed ideals? This is my thesis: The reality of US intervention doesn’t match the rhetoric that justifies it, since underlying exceptionalist ideals – related to both democracy and world power – manifested into US involvement in the Vietnam War and Iraq War were hidden by public rhetoric. The US often justifies involvement in foreign affairs with the idea of helping countries in need, but the Pentagon Papers regarding the Vietnam War, and the false weapons of mass destruction intelligence regarding the Iraq War tell a different story.

There are many individuals in support of America’s foreign policy. One might argue that if it weren’t for the US being the global policeman, no force could have exterminated totalitarian leaders Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin. In World War II, the US defeated the dictatorships in Europe, upholding citizens’ right to freedom. The Soviets, Britians, and Americans recognized their victory through VE day, where Winston Churchill, Great Britain’s prime minister, declared victory that “The German War is therefore at an end.”⁵ Although initially isolationists, the US

¹ Levin, Dov H. “Meddling in the Ballot Box: The Causes and Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions.” Edited by Jessica T Mathews, *Foreign Affairs*, Oxford University Press, 17 June 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2021-04-20/meddling-ballot-box-causes-and-effects-partisan-electoral>.

² “The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” *Atomic Archive*, https://www.atomicarchive.com/resources/documents/med/med_chp10.html.

³ “Declaration of Independence.” *National Archives and Records Administration*, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

⁴ “Diplomacy: The U.S. Department of State at Work.” *U.S. Department of State*, June 2008, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/ei/rls/dos/107330.htm>.

⁵ “End of the War in Europe.” *International Churchill Society*, 11 May 2021, <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1941-1945-war-leader/end-of-the-war-in-europe>.

entered WWII on the side of the Allies, in response to Japan's Pearl Harbor attack against the US. The US fought the Axis powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan, defeating their totalitarian leaders, Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito. Thus, the US fought against dictatorship regimes that oppressed citizens to ultimately ensure the security of the world. Even in the present day, the US continues to uphold their democratic ideals. For instance, Ukraine has received much support from the US against the tyrant Putin. President Biden signed the Ukraine Supplemental Appropriations Act to provide an additional \$13.6 billion in military, humanitarian, and economic assistance to help Ukraine defend itself from Russia's unprovoked invasion.⁶ Thus, there are many cases where the US seemingly defends the rights of citizens in other countries and upholds their noble values. However, every move had an underlying reason. Soviet ambassador Nikolai Novikov argued in 1946 that "American leaders calculated that the United States of America, if it could avoid direct participation in the war, would enter it only at the last minute, when it could easily affect the outcome of the war, completely ensuring its interest."⁷ If the US' main priority had been to protect global interests, why did Roosevelt wait two years to intervene? Because the US would assume the role of the most powerful postwar country if the main competitors crushed or weakened each other in the war. Thus, although the US adopted isolationist policies seemingly to avoid antagonizing either side, it is clear that entering the war at the time of the Pearl Harbor bombing gave the US huge personal benefits. Furthermore in regards to the Russia invasion of Ukraine, the US claims to simply be supporting a country victimized by the tyrannical Putin. However, America's exceptionalism is partly to blame. Putin said in his February 24 2022 speech that his main concern and reason for invading Ukraine is "the eastward expansion of NATO, which is moving its military infrastructure ever closer to the Russian border."⁸ The US and Soviet Union were mortal enemies during the Cold War and after the US won, they formed NATO to prevent SU further expansion. After SU was split up into multiple countries, Russia and US agreed for an end to eastern Europe expansion of NATO, which the US purposely violated for the sake of extending their western influence into Europe. Thus, the US, although fighting for a very noble cause of defending the rights of Ukrainian citizens, is also fighting for American exceptionalism and influence over European countries. Ultimately, although US rhetoric claims to uphold noble values in regards to foreign policy, there is always an underlying reason fighting for American exceptionalism.

Another instance of double faced US foreign policy, is when the US justified involvement in the Vietnam war with noble values yet simply fought to spread US exceptionalistic ideals. The Vietnam War (1955-1975) was a conflict between the communist government of North Vietnam against South Vietnam. North Vietnam, led by Ho Chi Minh, hoped to unify the entire country

⁶ "United with Ukraine." *U.S. Department of State*, 7 Apr. 2022, <https://www.state.gov/united-with-ukraine/#>

⁷ Novikov, Nikolai. "Telegram from Nikolai Novidov, Soviet Ambassador to the US, to the Soviet Leadership." *Wilson Center Digital Archive*, 27 Sept. 1946, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110808>.

⁸ "Transcript: Vladimir Putin's Televised Address on Ukraine." *Bloomberg News*, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24>.

under the widely supported communist regime. On the other hand, the South Vietnamese government, led by Diem – a corrupt leader and puppet of the US – fought to preserve a Vietnam more closely aligned with the West.⁹ The US entered the war in 1965, documented in the Tonkin Gulf Resolution of 1964 which was approved after the Gulf of Tonkin incident. President Johnson claimed that the North Vietnamese had “deliberately and repeatedly attacked United State naval vessels lawfully present in international waters, and have thereby created a serious threat to international peace.”¹⁰ Because of North Vietnam’s “unprovoked aggressions”, the US authorized troop deployment in Vietnam in the Tonkin Gulf Resolution “to promote the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia ... the United States is assisting the peoples of southeast Asia to protest their freedom and has no territorial, military or political ambitions in that area, but desires only that these people should be left in peace to work out their destinies in their own way.”¹¹ This informal war declaration shows America’s noble fight to protect the freedom of Vietnamese from the corrupt communism North Vietnamese. After all, the US had no selfish economic desires in Vietnam; however, the Pentagon Papers, leaked in 1971, reveal a very different story. The Pentagon Papers were the Department of Defense’s highly classified study of the U.S. political and military involvement in Vietnam. Daniel Ellsberg, who worked on the document and realized the Vietnam War could not be won, photocopied and leaked the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times*, in addition to the *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, etc. The papers were published and exposed the lies of the government. For instance, the papers show that the US’s involvement in Vietnam, which actually began covertly under President Truman (aided France during First IndoChina War), Eisenhower (contributed to the breakdown of the Geneva settlement), Kennedy (broadened “commitment” to Vietnam), and Johnson (covert military operations), wasn’t simply to protect the freedom of Asia.¹² If the US simply desires that “these people should be left in peace to work out their destinies in their own way”, why was South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem's rise to power backed by the United States. And why did The Pentagon Papers Chapter 4, “The Overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem, May-November 1963”, later explain that the US’s choices were to “(1) continue to plod along in a limited fashion with Diem--despite his and Nhu's growing unpopularity; (2) encourage or tacitly support the overthrow of Diem... The first option was rejected because of the belief that we could not win with Diem-Nhu... The second course was chosen mainly for the reasons the first was rejected-Vietnam was thought too important; we wanted to win.”¹³ Thus, the US ultimately ended up assisting in overthrowing their own democratic leader in the 1963 coup to execute Diem. In other words, Diem was too difficult to control and use as a Vietnam faced American

⁹ Hopkins, George W. “Historians and the Vietnam War: The Conflict Over Interpretations Continues.” *Studies in Popular Culture* 23, no. 2 (2000): 99–108. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23414548>.

¹⁰ Tonkin Gulf Resolution; 88th Congress, August 7, 1964; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; Records of the U. S. Senate; National Archives.

¹¹ Tonkin Gulf Resolution; National Archives

¹² “Pentagon Papers.” *National Archives and Records Administration*, <https://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers>.

¹³ “Pentagon Papers.” *National Archives and Records Administration*

leader, so the US dethroned him. The US helped Diem rise to power because the US hoped to propagate their exceptional democratic ideals through him. However, after realizing Diem wouldn't directly uphold the American system of government, the US approved his coup. This behind the scenes US involvement shows that the US was not trying to let the countries decide their destinies, but instead very deliberately controlling the Vietnamese government to spread their democratic ideals. Furthermore, the pentagon papers reveal the truth about the Tonkin Gulf Incident; the North Vietnam attacks were an act of self defense against the USS Maddox warship stationed near Vietnam. Thus, the US lied to the public and also admitted the actual objective of the Vietnam War in a memorandum by J.T. McNaughton, "Observations About South Vietnam After Khanh's 'Re-Coup', 1965" in the Pentagon Papers which states that "U.S. objective in South Vietnam is not to 'help friend' but to contain China." Since China "looms as a major power threatening to undercut our importance and effectiveness in the world and, more remotely but more menacingly, to organize all of Asia against us."¹⁴ As shown, the US explicitly states that the purpose of the Vietnam War was for America to maintain the greatest world power status, which China apparently threatened. The US sent 58,000 troops to their death, and gruesomely killed thousands more through chemical warfare, under the pretext of aiding a country in need. In reality, the US simply cared for their influence in Asia. China and the Soviet Union were two powerful communist countries, which is the crux of what America stood against. Additionally, communism was working in Vietnam yet America chose to intervene because of their exceptionalistic ideals. America believed themselves to be the model country, and had the responsibility to help other countries who had or could fall to the virus of communism – the domino effect or slippery slope. Although spreading democracy to improve the citizens living under the government system is a noble cause, the US was spreading democracy to prove the exceptionalism of America and the American political system; if that weren't the case, the US would have acknowledged the success of communism in Vietnam, and congratulated the newly independent Vietnam. Ultimately, the US government's claim to "support personnel at home and abroad" (Bureau of Public Affairs), was later debunked by the Pentagon Papers, and killed thousands of American soldiers and Vietnamese civilians. So who's the real enemy?

Another example of the American government publicly justifying their underlying exceptionalistic reasons with moral values is shown through the relatively recent Iraq War. The Iraq War (2003–11) was a conflict in Iraq that consisted of the US invading Iraq, followed by a U.S.-led occupation of Iraq which was opposed by an insurgency. After violence began to decline in 2007, the United States gradually reduced its military presence in Iraq, formally completing its withdrawal in December 2011.¹⁵ President Bush in his 2003 declaration of war states that the reason for war was "to disarm Iraq, to free it's people, to free the world from grave dangers...[and] to undermine Saddam Husienn's ability to wage war."¹⁶ U.S. forces invaded Iraq vowing to destroy Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and end the dictatorial rule of Saddam Hussein. However in 2004, the Bush administration retracted its prewar

¹⁴ "Pentagon Papers." *National Archives and Records Administration*

¹⁵ "The Iraq War." *Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/iraq-war>.

¹⁶ "Full Text: Bush's Speech." *The Guardian*, 18 Mar. 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/mar/18/usa.iraq>.

arguments about extensive stockpiles of chemical, biological, and even nuclear weaponry in Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The 2005 WMD Commission Report concluded that "the Intelligence Community was dead wrong in almost all of its pre-war judgments about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. That Iraq had reconstituted its nuclear weapons program; that Iraq had biological weapons and mobile facilities for producing biological warfare (BW) agents; and probably had chemical weapons stockpiles of up to 500 metric tons. These assessments were all wrong."¹⁷ However the US didn't leave Iraq after learning their main reason for invading Iraq was invalid. Instead, the US continued to occupy the country, no matter the opposition of Iraqi citizens. A 2007 January poll found that 64% of Iraqis believe that crime and violent attacks will decrease if the U.S. leaves Iraq within six months, 67% believe that their day-to-day security will increase if the U.S. withdraws and 73% believe that factions in parliament will cooperate more if the U.S. withdraws.¹⁸ The US military was not only fighting a nonexistent enemy, but was also decreasing the security and welfare of citizens abroad, which directly violates America's foreign policy goals. Furthermore, disarming a country with WMDs is arguably good for the security of the world, but not necessarily the job of the US. The US might have felt responsible for disarming a country with powerful weapons, because of Iraq's potential to surpass the US in terms of military power. Thus, the US seemingly prioritizes global welfare but in reality, cares much more about suppressing growing powers and maintaining American exceptionalism. Moreover, the fact that the US didn't withdraw its troops from Iraq after the 2005 report, and that the US remained in Iraq even after dictator Saddam Husenein was executed and a democratic leader put in place, shows that the US had an ulterior motive. So what was the underlying reason for the US invading Iraq? There were two credible reasons for invading Iraq: control over oil and preservation of the dollar as the world's reserve currency. According to data from the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) in 2005, "Iraq is estimated to hold 115 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, and possibly much more undiscovered oil in unexplored areas of the country. Iraq also is estimated to contain at least 110 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. The country is a focal point for regional and oil security issues."¹⁹ Thus, it is possible the US was motivated by the abundant oil and natural resources in Iraq. Seizing the oil mine in Iraq would boost the American economy and production, furthermore proving American exceptionalism and power. So although there is no "pentagon paper" for the Iraq War, the US government's involvement in Iraq seems worthy of further research. Ultimately, the US's invalid incentive for invading Iraq shows the possibility of an underlying motive commonly present in US foreign policy: maintaining American exceptionalism.

As shown through the pentagon papers in the Vietnam war and the invalid WMD intelligence in the Iraq war, the US government's selective media hide, lie, and twist the reality to

¹⁷ *Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction*. 31 Mar. 2005, https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/wmd_transmittal_letter.pdf.

¹⁸ "Bush Iraq Speech Poll, January 2007." *Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research*, 10 Apr. 2009, <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/ICPSR/studies/24582#>.

¹⁹ "U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) - Iraq." *Country Analysis Briefs*, June 2005, https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Iraq/archive/pdf/iraq_2005.pdf



the eyes of American citizens. The perceived “protecting of rights abroad and at home” often covers the true motive to maintain and spread American exceptionalist democracy, world power, and ideals. But are these examples – in Vietnam, Iraq, even WWII – exceptions to the rule or *the* rule? So I urge you to ponder the point: to what extent can we trust our government?

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