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The Vietnam and Iraq Wars: The Antithesis of Realism

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Abstract

Policy makers are rational actors who use distinct ideologies in forming their preferences and deciding on which courses of policy to pursue. Yet often times, the decisions of these actors are based off skewed ideologies which deviate from those positions which have proven their utility and success in the past. In this thesis, the claim is made that despite the proven success of realist political thought in confronting twentieth century international challenges, policy makers who advocated the use of military force in both the Vietnam and Iraq Wars based their decisions off of liberalist and neo-conservative tenets. The result of both conflicts has been military quagmires which have resulted in each conflict being characterized as a foreign policy blunder. In proving this argument, the paper explores the justification for war given by political actors and systemically contrasts them with the tenets of realist thought, showing the flagrant violations in each instance. Furthermore, once it has been established that realist thought was in fact ignored, evidence supporting the embrace of liberalist ideologies to justify each conflict is offered. Finally, an examination into the lasting historical consequences of each conflict and the theoretical implications that each war has had on the shaping of United States history concludes the piece, suggesting that readers consider the magnitude of a seemingly trivial topic such as foreign policy ideology.

Author's Note: For the context of this paper, the mentioned "Iraq Conflict/War" is in reference to the current situation (2003-present), not Gulf War I.

Despite the fact that some of the greatest foreign policy successes of the twentieth century have been attributed to a pursuit of realist foreign policy, two of the most notorious foreign policy blunders of the same era, the Vietnam and Second Gulf Wars, occurred when the United States deviated from realist ideologies and embraced neo-conservative realism. Although, involvement in both the Vietnam War and Operation Iraqi Freedom seemed to be based on the realist tenets of preventing adversaries from tipping the global balance of power and maintaining military superiority relative to the capabilities of our enemies, a closer examination reveals the extent to which neither conflict embodied realist policy principles; indeed, both can be said to fall squarely in the liberal tradition. Historically, these conflicts have been among the most divisive foreign policy endeavors in United States history and both Vietnam and Iraq exposed the United States armed forces for what they are—a military body, not a diplomatic extension of the State Department or a nation building force.

Ironically, the profoundly negative impacts of the wars stand in direct opposition to the objectives of their main proponents, Presidents John F. Kennedy and George W. Bush, respectively. In his 1961 inaugural address, President Kennedy, devoted an entire paragraph to exclaiming "Let every nation know...that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to ensure the survival and success of liberty"¹. Three years later, the United States presence in Vietnam had increased sixteen-hundred percent². Forty two years later, on March 6, 2003, in a similar display of the inexorability of the United States as the global bastion for the preservation of liberty, President Bush, in a national news conference, stated "If the world fails to confront the threat posed by the Iraqi regime...free nations would assume immense and unacceptable risks...We are determined to confront threats wherever they arise"³. Fourteen days later, the United States was at war with Saddam Hussein. Yet for the purposes of this paper, it is not the ultimate result (the United States involving itself in war) which is important, but instead the purpose of each of these forms of rhetoric. Both presidents, through liberty laden language, supported by the promise to commit American troops if necessary, sought to use the mere *threat* of military involvement to bring about the submission of our foes. Had both

leaders stopped there, with their freedom charged addresses, their actions would have been a playbook example of the implementation of realism to achieve foreign policy goals. As Patrick Callahan, a professor of political science at DePaul University notes, "A powerful state...can intimidate others into conceding"⁴. Nevertheless, with regards to both Vietnam and Iraq, the *threat* of the military intervention was not enough to defer either Ho Chi Minh or Saddam Hussein—American ground, naval, and air forces had to be sent to both regions to validate what both foreign leaders perceived merely as idle threats.

But what is realism and why, if the politically charged rhetoric of both presidents epitomized it, did their subsequent military endeavors violate its tenets? While realism can be defined according to six major principles, for the purposes of brevity and to avoid redundancy, this paper will focus on three: military superiority correlates to power and should be sought since it allows for the threat of force to deter enemies who threaten physical and economic security; the balance of power amongst nations must be maintained as to maintain global stability; and morality has no place in foreign policy and thus the United States should discard it as a foreign policy objective⁵. Regarded as the oldest mode of political thought, and tracing its origins to the Peloponnesian Wars, it need be noted that realism has existed as the dominant approach to U.S. foreign policy since the early days of the fledgling republic, although few administrations have explicitly used realist logic to justify their actions⁶. The earliest emergence of American realism can be seen in the administration of George Washington specifically though his approach towards the English and French⁷. Briefly analyzing this point will establish a better foundation for which realist political thought can be understood.

The approach that President Washington took towards England and France following the Revolutionary War serves as a classic example of realist political thought. Despite the fact that England was the adversary against which the United States had fought during the War for Independence and that France was the ally which helped precipitate victory, Washington recognized that favorable relations with England were necessary in order to prevent America from being drawn into a European conflict on the side of the French against the more powerful English military⁸. Washington's actions are in line with the aforementioned realist tenet—the exclusion of morality in foreign relations. If a moralistic approach had been taken by Washington, the United States would have pledged its support to its ally, France, on the grounds that the tyrannical English had long oppressed the American colonies. But doing so would have jeopardized the security of the United States and would have violated the second tenet of realism, the maintenance of international stability, which would have in turn violated the first tenet—maintaining the economic system of the United States which was heavily dependent on England. Thus, it becomes evident that the initial decision Washington made, allying ourselves with the British, prevented this domino effect from ever occurring, and relied heavily on realist thought. If a more modern example is needed, look at the attitude of the United States towards the USSR during the Second World War. Although the Soviets were communist, the antithesis of American capitalism, and Stalin's regime committed flagrant violations of human rights, the United States aligned itself with the USSR in the name of winning WWII in order to defeat the *greater* threat, Nazi Germany. Once again, morality was ignored. Thus, if the actions of Presidents Washington and Roosevelt were classic examples of realism in what way were those of President Kennedy and President Bush the polar opposite? To better understand this, it is helpful to conduct a litmus test of sorts to see how the Vietnam and Iraq conflicts relate to the established definition of realism listed above.

Maintaining military superiority in relation to adversaries is without question the fundamental objective of realist political thought since it "is the essence of national power" and national power is the ultimate objective of any state actor⁹. By maintaining military superiority in relation to its foes, a nation can ensure its political and economic viability, assert its authority in the face of a chaotic international stage, and prevent enemies from tipping the established balance of power—all of which is sought in the name of maintaining world order and the status quo. Therefore, in order to conform to realist political thought, the United States military involvement in Vietnam and/or Iraq would have had to have occurred in response to a growing military threat from either nation. But a closer examination of both conflicts reveals that this threat never materialized.

For the purposes of chronology, Vietnam will be examined first. The argument that the North Vietnamese military never posed a threat towards the United States is all but irrefutable when one considers a main underlying fact about the Vietnam War: it was not the Vietnamese Army with whom we were fighting against but instead the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, also known as Viet Cong (VC), a guerilla force whose roots went back to the Viet Minh of the First Indochina War who were now threatening the U.S. supported Ngo Dinh Diem government in South Vietnam. Vietnam was a counter-insurgency war in the truest sense of the term. Even in the Iraq War (discussed later), it was not until Saddam Hussein's regular army fell that guerilla forces became the primary adversary of the United States and its primary impediment to victory in the militaristic sense. In Vietnam however, the exact opposite was the case; the war *began* as a war against a guerilla force and only later developed into a war against a state organized military body—Ho Chi Minh's People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). Thus, the first criterion of realist political thought has already been violated. Realism advocates pursuing military superiority relative to foes for the purpose of preserving the safety and security political and economic systems. It is difficult to argue that the Viet Cong ever posed the slightest degree of military threat to the United States until the United States sent forces to Vietnam itself. This point is most readily supported by the fact that the first casualty as a result of the Vietnam War, that of SP4 James T. Davis, occurred on December 22, 1961 at Cau Xang, an old French outpost from the First Indochina War¹⁰. As tragic as the death of SP4 Davis was, it cannot be ignored that his death occurred nearly six years after Ho Chi Minh first incited insurgent activities in South Vietnam. Thus, in a five year period in which the United States was not *directly* involved in the Vietnam conflict, the VC posed no threat to America. Military force, according to realism, was therefore unwarranted. Furthermore, analyzing the military capabilities of the VC relative to those of the United States furthers the argument that no threat was posed and that the criteria for military force as outlined by realist political thought was never met. In addition to the fact that the VC was a non-regular military force, its members are described as "receiv[ing] little training, perhaps no more than a few lectures in the jungle" and were armed with "primitive" weapons such as "machete[s], spear[s], or bamboo spike[s]"¹¹. Also, estimates of the approximate size of the VC in 1965 assign anywhere from fifty-five to eighty thousand members to its ranks¹². In the same year however, the United States had two hundred thousand troops deployed in Vietnam (a fraction of the 2.6 million which served in South Vietnam throughout the entire duration of the war) supported by air cover and armed with the latest in automatic firepower. Clearly, Vietnamese military might never remotely rivaled that of the United States.

Yet realism also allows for the use of military force if one of its objectives is to ensure that economic superiority is not

jeopardized. It can be deduced however, that at no point did Vietnam ever threaten the economic viability of the United States, especially when National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 340 is taken into account. Written in 1966, five years after the first U.S. advisors were sent to Vietnam, NSAM 340 entitled "U.S. Government Shipments by Foreign Flag Vessels in North Vietnam Trade" explicitly stated "that United States Government-financed cargoes shall not be shipped from the United States on a foreign flag vessel if such vessel has called at a North Vietnam port"¹³. Had Vietnam posed the threat to the economic viability of the United States which realism requires as the grounds for military action, it certainly would not have taken five years for such an embargo to have been created.

Shifting ahead four decades, the Iraq War provides substantial fodder by which an analysis of its adherence to realist principles, or its lack thereof, can be explored, although it's necessary first to point out the underlying differences between the two conflicts. Compared to Vietnam, Iraq was unique in several ways. First, some would argue that it was a continuation (albeit separated by eleven years) of the First Gulf War. Thus, the adversary with whom we were fighting was not foreign to us nor were its tactics those which we had not already encountered. Furthermore, Vietnam and Iraq differ in that when the United States involved itself in Vietnam, warfare had already been ongoing; the United States merely became yet another player in the conflict. However, the commencement of U.S. operations in Iraq however was the start of war. Furthermore, the underlying objective of each conflict differed as well. Vietnam was fought with an ideological objective—to prevent the expansion of communism into South Vietnam, to all intents and purposes, an extension of containment policies which had dominated U.S. foreign policy since the early Cold War. Iraq however, was initially based on a specific military objective—preventing Saddam Hussein from obtaining and using weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Nevertheless, when it became clear that the WMD threat never existed, the objective in Iraq began to resemble that of Vietnam—establishing a government sympathetic to Western ideologies to serve as a counterforce to interests threatening to the United States—which, as I shall demonstrate, created a schism between realist thought and the justification for war.

Let me first assess whether the Iraq War adhered to realism as per the first definition—that the use of force was justified given a mounting threat of the Iraqi military to the superiority of the United States military and to the threat it posed to the safety and security of America. A report generated for the Naval War College in 2002 highlighted the military capabilities of the Iraqi Army. The report stated that out of sixteen divisions, eleven were "relatively low-grade" and "lack[ed] modern training and...heavily depend on conscripts"¹⁴. Furthermore, the firepower of Iraq's military was described as "combat-worn and obsolescent", points furthered by a more in depth study of the Iraqi Air Force and Navy. Only fifty to sixty percent of Iraqi aircraft were considered combat effective, a relatively deplorable number which is made worse by the report which stated "air-to-air and air-to-ground training is limited and unrealistic"¹⁵. The strength Iraqi Navy was similarly limited, retaining only nine ships after the First Gulf War, all of which were relatively inoperable. Compare these statistics to those of the United States which maintained twenty-two combat ready army divisions, over fifteen hundred combat ready aircraft, and two hundred and fifty nine combat ships¹⁶. Moreover, United States combat ready troops outnumbered Iraqis nearly four-to-one. Yet the mere disproportion of the two forces is not enough to negate realism as it relates to the Iraq War. In order to be considered a truly flagrant violation of realist thought, it is necessary to prove that even with its severely limited capabilities, Iraq posed no serious military threat to the United States. Such proof is provided in the same report which remarks that Iraqi forces could sustain a defensive war but even that was optimistic at best "because of U.S. superiority in air power, attack helicopters, thermal sights, and range of engagement"¹⁷. Thus, if Iraq would have difficulty engaging the U.S. in a *defensive* conflict, which military experts agree is far easier than mounting an *offensive* conflict, it is highly improbable that the Iraqi military ever posed a substantial threat to the safety and security of the United States. And this argument is only furthered by the fact that leading up to the Iraq War, United States and United Kingdom (U.K.) maintained "no fly zone" patrols over northern and southern Iraq. Therefore, in a sense the United States was *already* using realist foreign policy by suppressing any mounting threat from the Iraqi military before it even materialized. However, by escalating the conflict to total war when the Iraqi military clearly posed no threat to the safety of the United States nor jeopardized its supremacy, the U.S. violated the first tenet of realism.

However, up to this point the primary justification used to go to war against Iraq, the presence of WMD, has been ignored due to the fact that such weapons were never found. But if WMD had been found in Iraq would the use of military force have been justified under the auspices of realism? According to two of the most prominent realists of twenty-first century, John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, no. Realist policy from an American perspective would advocate the use of force against an enemy who possessed WMD if they threatened the United States with those weapons. But Mearsheimer and Walt present significant evidence to suggest that although Saddam Hussein's rule was marred by periods of violence and seemingly irrational and sadistic behavior, this behavior was exhibited towards opponents whom he knew could not retaliate in an effort to exert superficial dominance in the region¹⁸. For example, proponents of the war in Iraq often referenced Saddam's actions during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War as justification to show that Iraq in possession of WMD would prove to be an unstable and unpredictable enemy which would pose a substantial threat to the United States. Evidence of Saddam Hussein's gassing of the Kurds and Iranians was offered to prove that he showed no reverence for human life and that his acquisition of more lethal WMD automatically correlated to danger for the United States at home and abroad. Yet what such critics failed to take into account was that Saddam Hussein's efforts were assisted, if not *facilitated*, by the United States, who after the 1979 Iranian Revolution considered Iran to be the principle threat to peace in the Middle East and thus supported Iraq in the conflict between the two nations. The United States "provid[ed] [Iraq] with satellite imagery of Iranian troop positions" and "facilitated Iraq's efforts to develop biological weapons by allowing Baghdad to import disease-producing biological materials"¹⁹. With this evidence, Mearsheimer and Walt argue that the United States showed no reluctance in assisting Saddam not only because it sought to counter the Iranian regime but also because "Saddam was unlikely to use those weapons against the United States and its allies unless Washington threatened him directly". Ironically enough, *this* position taken by the Reagan administration took is classic realism at work; even though Saddam Hussein's actions were brutal and repressive, the United States still forged an alliance with Iraq to defeat the greater threat, Iran, reminiscent of the position that the United States took towards Russia in WWII mentioned above. But what, if any, bearing does that have on the decision to go to war with Iraq in 2003? By going to war, the Bush administration violated realism on two counts. First, it went to war with an enemy whose threat to the United States was far less severe than military action warranted and second, it used Saddam Hussein's prior actions, regardless of their impetus, as false justification that a threat towards U.S. interests existed. In essence, it used a prior instance of realism to violate realism in the present.

However, thus far the only issue which has been addressed to prove that the United States involvement in both the

Vietnam and Iraq Wars were the antithesis of realist thought was the fact that a credible military threat to the safety and security of the United States never materialized and therefore, the use of military force was unwarranted. Nevertheless, a second principle of realism exists—whether or not U.S. action in Vietnam and Iraq was pursued in order to maintain the balance of power that existed. Once again, neither conflict can be justified on these grounds either. Look first at Vietnam. It can be reasonably inferred that the United States goal of preserving democracy in Vietnam (regardless of the undemocratic nature of the Diem regime) was an extension of George Kennan's policy of containment, which sought to quell the expansion of Soviet communist influence farther than it had already gone. Thus, by committing troops to South Vietnam to prevent the VC and Ho Chi Minh from furthering communism in Southeast Asia, it can be argued that the United States was merely continuing an already established foreign policy. Yet this is irrelevant. Whether or not containment was an already established policy has nothing to do with whether or not it, or the subsequent committal of U.S. troops, adhered to realism. What can be conceded is that supporting Diem despite his brazen violations of human rights was an example of realist policy; the United States supported a virtual autocrat in the name of combating the greater threat that communism posed. But was there any evidence to suggest that the VC or Ho Chi Minh posed any threat to the balance of power which would have justified committing U.S. troops? Such an argument was made by Columbia University Professor Zbigniew Brzezinski who stated that "if South Vietnam goes all of Southeast Asia and perhaps all of Asia will follow"²⁰. He went on to argue that a communist victory in South Vietnam would further upset the balance of power by "strengthen[ing] China vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, which would then become more aggressive in its dealings with the West"²¹. However, once again evidence to disprove these two theories was offered, this time by Hans Morgenthau, the supreme realist of the twentieth century whose teachings are the basis of many of the positions taken by Mearsheimer and Walt. Addressing the first point, Morgenthau argued that despite the fact that North Vietnam and Laos had already embraced communism, their doing so by no means precipitated a similar embrace in any other Southeast Asian country, thus discrediting what many referred to as the "domino theory" of the time. Most clearly Morgenthau reasoned "The triumph or defeat of communism in a particular country is not simply a by-product of what happens or does not happen in another country"²². Nothing better illustrates this point than the ultimate result of the Vietnam War; despite the fact that communism *did* permeate the seventeenth parallel, Vietnam was so devastated by the war and the subsequent sanctions that followed, that it was rendered virtually inoperable as a influential state in the region and more importantly, no evidence suggests that communist victory in Vietnam did anything to strengthen the Soviet Union. Secondly, in reference to a communist victory strengthening China relative to the USSR, Morgenthau simply argues that in order for this to have occurred China would have had to have had a direct role in the VC activities in South Vietnam for which no evidence exists. Therefore, since no substantial threat to the balance of power existed, the use of military force in Vietnam was once again unjustified. Realism was once again violated.

Shifting focus to Iraq, it becomes evident that it too posed no substantial threat to the balance of power either in the Middle East or the greater international community. In addition to the fact that its military was reserved to fighting mainly defensive warfare and the fact that it was kept in constant check by U.S. and U.K. flight patrols in the North and South, evidence suggests that Iraq's military capabilities relative to neighboring Middle Eastern states was limited at best. In regards to Iran, Iraq's principle enemy in the Middle East, experts considered Iraq to have never fully recovered from the eight year war with Iran in the 1980's and thus, unlikely to engage in warfare with Tehran again. Furthermore, strategists hypothesized that although Iran and Iraq had similarly limited military capabilities relative to one another, Iraq would have more to lose in a conflict with Iran due to the fact that its Shi'ite minority, already vehemently anti-Saddam, could seize the opportunity to stage a coup supported by Shi'ite Iran. In this sense, Iran maintained an internal "check" on any aggression that Iraq might have shown. Moreover, the same report produced for the Naval War College referenced above also stated that the probability of Iraq engaging in warfare against other Gulf states was minimal due to the fear of repercussions that would be incurred from U.S. forces already in the region²³. Thus, the United States was already maintaining the balance of power in the Middle East with its sheer military presence in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The shift from presence to combat was therefore unnecessary and in conflict of the principles of realism.

The final element of realist thought as it relates to foreign policy is that the United States has no moral obligations to other nations because morality has no place in the realm of foreign policy. Realism states that nations are motivated by one goal and one goal only, national supremacy to ensure national security, which must be achieved by any means necessary regardless of any moral conflicts that may arise. Thus, if it is in a nation's interest to act against an adversary it will do so without considering the moral implications and conversely will not be incited to act in the name of what is morally "right" if its own interests are not met. Yet how do either of these points relate to Vietnam or Iraq? Thus far I have argued that it was not in the United States' interest to engage in war with either Vietnam or Iraq. Neither state posed a substantial threat to the physical or economic safety of the United States, challenged its military supremacy, or threatened to upset the regional and global balance of power. So what justification was used? It has already been hinted that in reference to Vietnam, the United States sought to prevent the communist sphere of influence from extending any farther than it already had in Southeast Asia. Communism, according to the prevailing thought of the American political elite of the era, was a threat to democratic institutions both at home and abroad. Ignoring the validity of this belief, it is the implications of this sentiment that are for more important for the purposes of this essay in that politicians used this "threat" to justify the need for the United States to commit troops to Vietnam in order to preserve democracy, the moral "good". Nothing better embodies this belief than Vice President Johnson's statement following the death of the first Vietnam War casualty, SP4 James T. Davis, who he referred to as "The First American to fall in defense of our freedom in Vietnam". His words are an extension of Kennedy's "Pay any Price" speech which similarly committed the United States to acting as the global protector of democracy. However, it need be noted that few realists would argue that defending democracy is *not* in the interest of the United States; the success of democracy directly correlates to the success of the United States as a driving body in the international community since it is considered by most to be the greatest embodiment of the of a democratic political system. Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that it has already been proven that in the case of Vietnam, its status as a democratic or communist nation had little to no bearing on the United States or the survival of the democracy as a whole. Therefore, while supporting democracy in Vietnam via diplomatic means adhered to realism, it was counter-realist to support Vietnamese democracy via military means, especially considering the end result was defeat and humiliation for the United States.

A similar situation seems to have manifested itself in Iraq. Initially, support for the war was garnered on the basis that Iraq was seeking to acquire or already in possession of WMD which threatened the peace and stability of both the United States and international community. While significant evidence has already been offered to rebut this claim, it is not being offered for the truth of the matter asserted but instead as a prelude to the subsequent action which arose, war with Iraq.

Once troops had already been committed to deposing Saddam, it was revealed that Iraq was not in possession of WMD nor did sufficient evidence exist that it was in the process of acquiring them. Therefore, the Bush administration was faced with a daunting dilemma: admitting one of the greatest intelligence failures in the history of the United States (political suicide in a post-9/11 world) or justifying the war in another way; it chose the latter course. The War in Iraq then shifted from the military objective of preventing the use and/or proliferation of WMD to the idealistic objective of liberating the Iraqi people from the hands of an oppressive tyrant, Saddam Hussein. The White House began an incessant campaign of providing the media with evidence of Saddam's oppressive and autocratic ways including the mass-genocide of his own people, the operation of "rape rooms" to punish political dissenters, and the unimaginable violation of human rights committed by the Republican Guard, Iraq's secret police which were portrayed in a light similar to the SS of Nazi Germany. With this, the fact that WMD were never found became a moot point; twenty-five million people who were before subject to the whim of a tyrant were now being given the chance to forge a viable and democratic society. Nevertheless, however appealing this may be, it does nothing to negate the fact that morality, absent from the scope of foreign policy according to realists, was used to justify a conflict.

Thus, neither the Vietnam nor the Iraq war were the product of realist thinking. Then what ideology did they embody? While the argument can be made that several different schools of thought contributed to the validation of both conflicts, the most obvious one is idealism, also known as liberalism. As a foreign policy approach, liberalism is not to be confused with domestic liberal beliefs and ideals. Rather, liberalism as it relates to international affairs is primarily concerned with the expansion of democratic institutions to the greatest extent possible. First emerging as a major foreign policy platform during the presidency of Woodrow Wilson, liberals argue that "promoting liberty is a moral obligation as well as a means to advance interests" of the United States and that the American political systems works better in an environment of democracies as opposed to autocracies. Furthermore, liberals argue that America's greatest foreign policy triumphs have been achieved when the preservation and/or expansion of liberty were the paramount goals, such as was the case in World War II, the First Gulf War, and the defeat of the USSR during the Cold War (although the latter was not achieved via conventional military means). Switching to the two conflicts at hand, there is no question the freedom-infused rhetoric used to support the Vietnam War exemplified liberalism. The United States was meeting its moral obligation to prevent communism from expanding any farther than it already and by committing U.S. troops to the region, the United States showed its solidarity with the South Vietnamese who wished to counter the mal-effects of communism. Iraq, as it has also been discussed, became a predominantly liberal foreign policy endeavor once it had become evident that WMD were not going to be found. Interestingly enough, the embrace of liberalism by George Bush is a complete reversal of the foreign policy position he advocated when he was first elected. Pledging not to continue the "nation building" policies of his predecessor, Bush spent the early months of his first term pursuing realist endeavors such a strengthening intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) defense system in response to what it perceived as a growing threat from ICBM from rogue states such as North Korea. However, the post-September 11th foreign policy of the Bush administration has been heavily liberal, as exemplified by his "freedom is on the march" slogan which infuses many of his foreign policy speeches. While it is true that the debate over whether liberalism is a more appropriate foreign policy in the post-September 11th world is for the reader to decide, what cannot be contested is that it has replaced realism as the predominant foreign policy of the Bush administration, evidenced most directly by the War in Iraq.

It seems clear that, if one accepts the definition of realist principles offered at the outset of this essay, neither of the wars discussed fits its paradigm. To recap, realism as being made up of three separate components: the necessity of pursuing and maintaining military dominance over adversaries to protect the security of the United States; using force to maintain the established balance of power; and the fact that pursuing moralistic goals in foreign policy is wrong. A point-by-point comparison of each conflict to these three components of realist thought show adherence to none of them. Neither the VC nor Iraqi military posed a military threat to the United States or challenged its superiority; neither the expansion of communism into South Vietnam nor the actions of Saddam Hussein ever threatened to restructure the balance of power in either region; and U.S. politicians used the moral obligation of the United States to protect and propagate freedom as justification for both conflicts. Both conflicts are strong examples of liberalism in the foreign policy realm. But so what? No evidence has been presented to definitively prove that realism is superior to liberalism or vice versa. Does it matter which one happens to prevail in regards to U.S. foreign policy endeavors? Yes. Whether realism or liberalism is the driving force behind foreign policy decisions dictates what foreign policy the United States pursues. Virtually no realist, with the exception of Henry Kissinger, supported either the Vietnam or Iraq Wars. Thus, we can infer that if an ardent realist, other than Henry Kissinger, had been guiding foreign policy during these two eras, United States involvement would have never occurred. Would this have had made a difference? Absolutely. History and the implications of these historical decisions would have been far different than they are today. If the Vietnam War had never been fought, it can be argued the anti-war movement of the 1960s-1970s would have never materialized (for there would have been no war which to be in opposition to), and the Liberal (domestically speaking) party may have developed far differently from what it is today. Similarly, if the Iraq War had never begun, one could reason that George W. Bush's heightened popularity following September 11th would have continued, the anti-Bush sentiment dividing Republicans and Democrats would have never developed, the polarization of Congress would have never occurred, and the gridlock in forging domestic policy occurring on Capitol Hill today would have been avoided. While all of these events are undoubtedly hypothetical, they are not unlikely possibilities. Therefore, while it seems that foreign policy makers often shift between ideologies (be it realism, liberalism, anti-imperialism, hegemonism) depending on the situation, it does not make any such shifts any less important. As Thomas Friedman so aptly stated, "the world is flat". It cannot be expected that in the cohesive world in which we live today, the decisions of a foreign policy giant like the United States will not have monumental implications not only domestically, but internationally, as well. My point has not been to condemn or condone either school of thought, but only to illustrate the consequences for the country—and indeed the world—of the choices made by those politicians who led the US into Vietnam and Iraq.

Endnotes

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5. IBID, pp. 29-30
6. IBID, p. 30
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