History of US Military Commitments

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Resolved: The United States federal government should considerably decrease its military commitments.

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## Overview/Introduction

Foreign military commitments have not been present in the United States throughout all of our history. The modern superpower with a global military presence is a feature of the second half of our country’s history and a substantial contrast with its origins. In this chapter we will discuss how America started as an isolated, inward-looking nation concerned only with self-defense and show how and why it transitioned into a global power. There will be a number of military events in our nation’s past (for example the War of 1812, the War with Mexico, and the Civil War) that, although they were significant military engagements and important historical events, did not substantially impact our nation’s interest in projecting foreign military power. Since we need to stay focused on the resolutional topic, we will focus on US history that leads into foreign military engagements and leave aside these other important events for another day.

In this chapter, we will make you a better debater by going over the history by going over the following significant events of military foreign presence in American history:

* “Quasi-war” with France: 1798-1800 & The Barbary Pirates
* 19th century Overview
* Spanish-American war: 1898
* World War I 1914-1918
* The “Banana Wars” 1898-1934
* World War II 1939-1945
* NATO & The Cold War
* Korea
* Vietnam
* The Carter Doctrine
* Interventions in the 1980s
* Persian Gulf War
* The 1990s: Somalia & Yugoslavia
* 9/11 and the War in Afghanistan
* Iraq War 2003-2011
* Iraq 2012-2020
* Recent developments

## “Quasi War” with France 1798-1800 and the Barbary Pirates

After the French revolution swept away the monarchy that had supported the American colonial revolution, the Republic of France demanded that the United States pay the debt it owed to France for its decisive assistance in successfully fighting for independence against the British. The United States refused to pay the Republic of France, claiming its debt was to the French Crown, which no longer existed. This led to the first foreign military engagements in our nation’s history (if you don’t count fighting American Indians on the North American continent during the Washington Administration).

Congress authorized what became known as a “quasi-war” with France after the French attacked American cargo ships. Congress voted to authorize attacks on ships headed to French ports, but not for an all-out battle to defeat France (which the U.S. could not have won anyway). To fight this conflict, the previously disbanded US Navy and Marine Corps were re-established . Note that the idea of having a standing Army and standing Navy was something our nation had not yet accepted, because there was no perceived need for such permanent forces. State militias were expected to provide immediate defense against sudden attacks (like the American Indians), with federal forces to be called up later (after Congress had voted to hire and pay them). And America certainly wasn’t going to engage in foreign policies involving large standing armies and endless wars like the Europeans had done for centuries. By 1800, both sides wanted to put the quarrel behind them, so they signed the Treaty of Mortefontaine 1800. That treaty also ended the only formal foreign alliance the United States had (with France), and the only one we would have until the 20th century.

In 1801, President Thomas Jefferson sent the Marines to the shores of Tripoli, on the north coast of Africa (modern day Libya), where they fought the Barbary pirates who were preying on A close up of a map

Description automatically generatedAmerican and European merchant ships. Scholars debate whether Congress authorized this foreign military intervention in advance or learned about it long after the Navy had already been dispatched.

Both of these military adventures were limited engagements, in response to attacks on American shipping, with no long-term foreign military presence or commitment. But they demonstrated that the United States, while inwardly focused and unwilling to join alliances, was not afraid of military conflict in defense of its citizens, even if it meant a military engagement halfway around the world.

## 19th Century Overview

Between the involvement with the Barbary pirates and through to the Civil War, the US was focused on Westward expansion and economic and territorial growth. The major wars of the 19th century included the War of 1812 (repelling British invasion), the Indian Wars (territorial expansion within North America), the Mexican War (also territorial expansion), and the Civil War (triggered by irreconcilable issues regarding states’ rights and slavery). None of these substantially impacted our foreign policy of avoiding foreign military commitments.

In 1823, the Monroe Doctrine was signed. Penned by John Quincy Adams, who was at the time the Secretary of State, President James Monroe announced that no European powers should try to regain jurisdiction over any of their former colonies in the Western Hemisphere that had declared independence, and that the United States would not intervene in Europe’s wars.

This doesn’t mean the U.S. had no foreign military activity during this time. There were numerous minor interventions, skirmishes, and raids involving chasing of pirates, avenging insults, opening sea lanes, protecting US citizens in danger, retaliating for attacks on US citizens, peacekeeping, and chasing cattle rustlers. Some examples of places and dates of these minor engagements are listed below, along with the milestones of the Civil War and the Mexican War. These minor engagements did not result in permanent placement of US forces overseas, nor change America’s policy of avoiding foreign alliances.

1622-1924 – Indian Wars

1812-1815 – War of 1812

1822,23,24,25 – Cuba

1827 – Greece

1838-39 – Indonesia

1833,52,53 – Argentina

1840,55,58 – Fiji

1843 – Ivory Coast

1846-1848 – Mexican War

1843, 54,55,56,59,66 – China

1853,54,57,67, – Nicaragua

1855,58 – Uruguay

1860, 68 – Colombia

1861-1865 – Civil War

1863,64, 68 – Japan

1871 – Korea

1873-96 – Mexico

1882 – Egypt

## Spanish-American War - 1898

Seventy-five years had passed since the announcement of the Monroe Doctrine. Near the end of the 1800s, however, the relations between Spain and the US were troubled. Many Americans supported the movement for independence among Cubans, angry at continued Spanish rule of their island colony. The American battleship USS Maine was sent to Havana harbor to protect American interests during the crisis in early 1898. But a few weeks after arriving, the Maine exploded and sank, killing over 200 Americans. Though reports of the cause of the explosion were inconclusive, and to this day no one knows what caused the disaster[[1]](#footnote-1), many Americans and many journalists were quick to blame the Spanish government. “Remember the Maine!” became a popular cry that encouraged Congress a short time later to declare war on Spain.A picture containing standing

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American victory in the Spanish-American War resulted in a new experience in US history: control of foreign territories. The US became in some sense a “colonial” power, taking control of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and Cuba. The Philippines and Cuba were later granted independence, while Puerto Rico and Guam remain US territories today. Thus begins the transition from America as a nation isolated behind two great oceans with no interest in foreign entanglements into a nation with a global scope of military power, and substantial long-term foreign military interests and presence.

## World War I: 1914-1918

When the first “global” war broke out in Europe in 1914, the U.S. tried to continue its traditional policy of neutrality and resistance to being drawn into Europe’s troubles. President Woodrow Wilson won re-election in 1916 on the campaign slogan “He kept us out of war.” But as the war began affecting the lives of ordinary Americans, it became harder to resist. Germany had a submarine campaign in the Atlantic, which intended to sink ships attempting “to approach either the ports of Great Britain and Ireland or the western coasts of Europe or any of the ports controlled by the enemies of Germany within the Mediterranean.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

In 1915, the British ocean liner Lusitania , carrying British war supplies and nearly 2,000 civilians, was sunk by a German submarine in the Atlantic. President Woodrow Wilson’s response, instead of declaring war on Germany immediately, was to demand that Germany refrain from sinking passenger ships, and give adequate warning to all ships in danger of attack.[[3]](#footnote-3) The German announcement of “unrestricted submarine warfare” in 1917 resulted in more A close up of a newspaper

Description automatically generatedAmerican civilian casualties on the high seas, raising the stakes and provoking American anger. Probably the last straw was the discovery of the “Zimmerman Telegram,” a secret diplomatic message in which Germany offered an alliance with Mexico that could enable Mexico to recover its lost territory in the American southwest.

US intervention in World War I from 1917-1918 turned the tide of the war and ensured Germany’s defeat. While the US resisted early intervention in a conflict not their own (hundreds of US citizens had been killed before it got involved), it became a precedent for American involvement in European affairs. It also created a policy of using the military abroad to spread or defend an ideology: “Make the world safe for democracy,” said President Wilson. The United States was now clearly recognized as a global power, but there was no long-term presence in Europe at the end of the First World War.

After the war was over, Pres. Wilson proposed the League of Nations, to guarantee faster intervention and restoration of world peace by a global community of concerned nations whenever a war broke out. But the US Senate, responsible under the US constitution for ratifying treaties, wanted just the opposite: a return to the non-interventionist policies of Washington and Jefferson. Sen. William Borah (R-Idaho), a leading opponent of Wilson’s post-war policy outlined in the Treaty of Versailles, explicitly cited in his Senate speeches these two Founding Fathers and their policy of avoiding entanglement in Europe. The Senate agreed with Borah and refused to ratify Wilson’s scheme. The League of Nations carried on without US participation.

## A picture containing photo, different, large, group Description automatically generated“Banana Wars” 1898-1934

In 1904, Theodore Roosevelt announced his Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, saying Europe should not intervene in the Western Hemisphere, but the US could and would. The US engaged in numerous interventions and some long-term occupations of Latin American nations, many of which still today remember these occupations and wars long after we in the U.S. have forgotten them.

According to U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Smedley Butler, who was decorated with two Medals of Honor, the 33 years he spent fighting were not for anyone’s freedom, but for safeguarding the foreign interests and investments of big business, Wall Street, and bankers. Calling himself in 1935 a “gangster for capitalism,” he ascribed the conflicts he fought in Mexico to oil interests, Haiti and Cuba and Nicaragua for the banks, the Dominican Republic for sugar interests, Honduras[[4]](#footnote-4) for American fruit companies, and China for Standard Oil. Some of those interventions and occupations are listed below.

1843, 1856, 1903, 1989 – Panama

1912-1933 – Nicaragua occupation

1898-1902, 1906-09, 1917-22 – Cuba occupation

1915-1934 – Haiti Occupation

1903,1904,1914 – Dominican Republic, occupied 1916-1924, 1965

1903,’07,’11,’12,’19,’24,’25 – Honduras

1914, 1916-17 – Mexico

## World War II 1939-1945

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Description automatically generatedWar again broke out in Europe on a grand scale in 1939 with Hitler’s invasion of Poland. As with the first great war, the U.S. remained on the sidelines but provided aid and encouragement to Britain, which was left to carry on the war after France was defeated in 1940. Public resistance to active American military intervention lasted until Dec. 7, 1941. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which killed over 2,000 Americans and inflicted major damage on the US Navy, ended the debate over US intervention and entanglement in foreign alliances with regard to the conflict then raging around the world.

World War II ended in Europe with the defeat of Germany in the spring of 1945. The war against Japan was finished when the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, 1945. The war left Europe and Japan in smoldering ruins and the United States as a global superpower, with a monopoly on the most horrific weapon ever invented and troops spread out around the globe.

The aftermath in the American mindset was substantial. Pearl Harbor had proven to many that the United States could not sit safely in isolation behind two oceans. And the fact that American troops had been called in, not once, but twice in a generation to save the democracies of Europe suggested that we needed a new foreign policy that would prevent such crises from recurring. Instead of belatedly reacting to foreign wars and being drawn in reluctantly after much damage had been done, perhaps it was time to put our forces in place before they were needed, either to deter future wars from happening, or else to win them faster, if deterrence didn’t work.

## A screenshot of text Description automatically generatedNATO & The Cold War

George Washington’s farewell plea, urging Americans to “steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world” died its formal death after World War II. ”” The bitter ideological struggle of Communism versus democracy, often called the “Cold War,” ended the wartime cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union and had a dramatic impact on US foreign military presence and commitments. Though the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, its impact continues today.

A close up of a map

Description automatically generatedLots of experts in the 1940s, including Winston Churchill, who expressed the concern during his eloquent “Iron Curtain” speech in 1946, believed the Soviet Union was on the path of repeating the path of aggression and expansion taken by Germany in the 1930s. In 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) began, according to its first Secretary General, Lord Ismay, with a desire to “keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.” The treaty declares that all of its members should consider an attack on one to be an attack on them all. The goal was to prevent the forces of Communism, led by the Soviet Union, to do what the forces of Nazism and fascism led by Germany had done earlier: build up military might, pick off small countries one at a time, and build a totalitarian empire that would again mount an existential threat to the Western democracies.

Though the Cold War ended in ’91, NATO has continued adding new members. Comprising 30 countries today, NATO offers the promise of security to its smaller members, some of which were former allies under duress or even components of the Soviet Union and still fear Russian hegemony. But questions remain about whether NATO is still necessary (what’s the threat? Is Russia really going to invade Europe?) or even wise for its non-US members, given that it creates a “moral hazard” incentivizing them to reduce their own defense spending and simply rely on US military protection. Too, the United States faces increased risk of involvement in many more conflicts – conflicts we might have avoided had we not been committed by the treaty. Others argue that NATO provides international legitimacy for US military actions and guarantees the availability of troops and equipment from other nations, providing extra forces available for missions like the multinational effort in Afghanistan. .

## Korea

Japanese troops were driven out of Korea by Soviet (in the north) and American forces (in the south) at the end of World War II. This left the Korean Peninsula divided into a communist North and a non-communist South Korea. US troops were withdrawn from Korea in 1949 and many (particularly in North Korea and the Soviet Union) believed the US had lost interest in Korea.

After consulting with Soviet leader Josef Stalin, North Korean leader Kim Il Sung (grandfather of current N.K. leader Kim Jong Un) ordered Northern forces to carry out a surprise invasion of the South in 1950, to reunite all Koreans under a single (communist) government. The United Nations passed resolutions authorizing a military response, and U.S. forces under the command of Gen. Douglas MacArthur arrived and pushed the North Koreans back.

The counter attack was so successful, in fact, that it triggered Chinese intervention to save their threatened ally North Korea. Chinese troops by the thousands streamed across the Yalu River border with North Korea and changed the war from an allied rout of the North into a lengthy and exhausting stalemate close to the original line where the two Koreas had originally been divided before the war began.

An armistice was signed in 1953 that ended the shooting, but no peace treaty was ever concluded and the two sides remain technically at war to this day. The U.S. still has around 28,000 troops stationed in South Korea.

## Vietnam

Richard Nixon said: “No event in American history is more misunderstood than the Vietnam War. It was misreported then, and it is misremembered now. Rarely have so many people been so wrong about so much. Never have the consequences of their misunderstanding been so tragic.”

France had colonized Southeast Asia in the 1800s, altering its culture and superseding its local customs and institutions. Japan took over the region during World War II, and then went away and handed it back to the French upon losing the war. But the Vietnamese, having just gotten rid of the Japanese occupiers, they were in no mood to go back to being ruled by the French. Ho Chi Minh led the Vietnamese rebels who fought for independence and began guerilla attacks, and then full-scale battles, against French forces. The French were defeated in the northern part of Vietnam in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu. Their agreement to withdraw from the region included a temporary partitioning of Vietnam into a communist-controlled North (run by Ho Chi Minh) and a non-communist South Vietnam, allied with the United States. Elections were supposed to follow, to create a democratic unified government, but the U.S. canceled the elections in the South, fearing (probably correctly) that Ho Chi Minh would win.

The South was not a functioning democracy, but it was anti-communist, so the U.S. supported it. Communist rebels in the South, aided by the government of the North, began a movement to finish the unification of Vietnam by force, since the elections had been canceled. American forces arrived in the late 1950s as military advisors to the government of South Vietnam. More began arriving in the 1960s to provide additional combat forces to engage directly in the war, as it became apparent that South Vietnam could not win the war on its own. Congress voted in 1964 to authorize US military involvement in Vietnam when it approved the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, after the Johnson Administration reported that North Vietnamese vessels had fired on US ships in the waters off the coast of Vietnam.

By 1968 the U.S. had over ½ million combat troops in Vietnam, and many Americans wondered why, with such great dedication of resources, time, money and lives, we had not yet won the war. Public opinion began turning against the war, and Pres. Nixon began promising a plan to de-escalate the war and turn it back over to the South Vietnamese.

The public was thus surprised, and many were angered, to see Pres. Nixon coming on TV in 1970 to announce that American forces were invading Cambodia to cut supply lines being used by enemy forces infiltrating from the North. Congress never voted to authorize an invasion of Cambodia and the U.S. was not at war with Cambodia. And Congress voted to repeal the Gulf of Tonkin resolution in 1971 (at which time, Pres. Nixon said he had the power to engage US forces in Indochina with or without the Resolution, since he was Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces).

A vintage photo of an old building

Description automatically generatedAfter the Cambodian adventure, President Nixon began to withdraw troops from the conflict and to initiate peace talks with the Northern leaders. In 1973, North Vietnam signed a cease-fire treaty with the U.S.. This gave the US the ability to bring the rest of its troops home, but the conflict continued shortly after US withdrawal. Congress voted in 1973 to cut off all funding for further US military involvement in the region. In April 1975, South Vietnam was defeated and the North subsequently united the two as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The consequences for American attitudes toward intervention were great. Lots of questions swirled in public debate:

* How had small bands of poorly equipped forces been able to defeat the best-equipped military on earth?
* How did America get dragged into further and further escalation from such a small beginning?
* How can we rein in Presidents from entering or escalating wars without the checks and balances of Congress? Once a war starts, how can public opinion be effectively engaged in stopping it?
* How do we balance our credibility when we make promises to defend our allies with the futility of pouring men and resources into a situation that appears unwinnable?
* What should be America’s policy of when to intervene and when to leave other nations’ troubles alone? Are we intervening too much?
* Should we have clear goals and an “exit strategy” before entering any future conflict?
* What principles were we fighting for? Since South Vietnam was not a democracy, what values were guiding our foreign policy and determining what kinds of “friends” were worth the lives of American troops? And if the South Vietnamese people were not sufficiently motivated to fight for their own country, how many American lives was it worth?
* To what extent do we need to win the “hearts and minds” of the population in order for a long-term military strategy to be effective? Was the war in Vietnam lost because much of the population supported our enemies, or at least, did not support us?

All of these are issues you will probably be involved in debating to some degree in many of your debate rounds this year, and at the very least you should understand the principles so that you know the background for many of the issues that will arise.

Congress, reacting to the anger of the American people, passed the War Powers Resolution (also known as the War Powers Act) in 1973. The law demands that the President notify Congress within 48 hours of any military intervention and withdraw such forces if Congress has not affirmatively approved of their deployment within 60 days. Congress also abolished the military draft that year, although in 1980 they reinstated mandatory Selective Service registration for young men, in order to provide the information needed in case the draft should ever be reestablished.

## The Carter Doctrine - 1980

In his State of the Union address in January, 1980, President Jimmy Carter announced: "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force. " Thus began the American commitment to military defense of the Persian Gulf that continues to this day.

President Carter made it plain in that speech that the availability of oil was the driving force behind this military commitment. Oil was (is? Scholars debate whether it has the same impact today) so important to the economy that ensuring Middle East petroleum makes its way to world markets in safety was to Pres. Carter an overriding national security interest worthy of our defense dollars and soldiers’ lives. The Carter Doctrine is arguably the motivation behind US military support for Persian Gulf Arab states, and intervention in two major wars (the Persian Gulf War 1990-91 and the Iraq War 2003-2011) and various naval skirmishes with Iran in the Gulf. Arab petro-states like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait certainly do not uphold American values of democracy and human rights in their internal affairs, so our defense of these kingdoms and sheikdoms can only be attributed to our interest in their oil. This raises numerous questions that you get to debate:

* To what extent does oil need to be “protected” by anyone other than those who produce it? Don’t the producers themselves have the biggest incentive to pay for its protection? After all, petroleum is merely a worthless slimy sludge if its producer cannot sell it to anyone.
* To what extent can market forces solve for oil supplies? Is US military intervention for oil merely another government subsidy that distorts market outcomes that would otherwise follow if nations had to protect and manage oil security on their own?
* Since China is the biggest customer for Saudi oil, for example, to what extent does the US military subsidize the Chinese and other competitors’ economies at the expense of American taxpayers?
* Is oil still vital to the US economy any more? Do oil price spikes cause recessions or is our economy more technologically advanced to the point that oil is like any other commodity – important but not catastrophic? Even if it is vital, is its value sufficient to justify the cost in dollars and lives we devote to it through military intervention?
* To what extent does US support for unsavory Middle Eastern regimes tarnish our foreign policy and our principles? How do we resolve the dilemmas that happen when we support a ruler of a country that supplies our oil and his people oppose him and overthrow him? (Think Shah of Iran 1979)
* To what extent does US presence in the region create backlash and terrorism motivated by anger at the presence of “infidels” in the homeland of Islam?
* Are there other independent non-petroleum reasons for US engagement in the region, like containing/deterring the Islamic Republic of Iran? Protecting Israel?

## Interventions in the 1980s

Immediately after Vietnam there was little support for large interventions, and American foreign military engagements were minor in the ‘80s. Examples include:

* 1979-1992 – military aid and advisors in the civil war in El Salvador (21 US casualties)
* 1982-1984 – Lebanon peacekeeping mission. Became unsustainable after the Marine barracks was destroyed by a suicide bomber in Oct., 1983, killing 241 Americans. US forces were withdrawn a few months later.
* 1983 – Invasion of the small Caribbean island nation of Grenada, to overthrow the Cuban-supported government.
* 1980s – US military aid and troops in Honduras related to civil wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua nearby.
* 1987-1988 – “Tanker Wars” - protection of oil tankers in the Persian Gulf and minor naval skirmishes as the tankers came under fire as a result of combat spilling over from the Iran-Iraq war.
* 1989-90 – US invasion of Panama to overthrow Gen. Manuel Noriega. US military presence in Panama ended in 1999 in accordance with the Panama Canal Treaty.
* 1989 – US troops in Colombia, Bolivia and Peru as part of the “War on Drugs.”

## Persian Gulf War 1990-1991

Mentioned above under the Carter Doctrine, the United States led a multinational coalition to rollback the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. This intervention had several features that bear our notice:

* International and multilateral. The United States acted after achieving a consensus from a wide range of foreign countries, numerous UN resolutions calling for the action, along with troop and financial commitments from our allies.
* Congressional support. Congress explicitly voted to authorize Pres. George H.W. Bush to use force to roll back the invasion of Kuwait and enforce the relevant UN Security Council resolutions.
* A close up of a newspaper

  Description automatically generatedLimited mandate. When Iraqi forces were quickly driven out of Kuwait, the President ordered US operations to stop. Many wondered why he did not “finish the job” and continue all the way to Baghdad to remove Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein from power. In later discussions, he explained that he had been given only a limited mandate by the Congressional resolution and the UN resolutions authorizing force, and that he was mindful of the experience of Vietnam, where ever-expanding missions and changing objectives led to endless commitments and ultimate defeat (the term “mission creep” became associated with this concept). Highly criticized for this decision at the time, some suggest he was proven correct by the experience his son, Pres. George W. Bush, had with the all-out invasion of Iraq 12 years later.
* No “Cold War” implications. With the Soviet Union in the process of reforming and ultimately collapsing, the U.S. had the freedom to intervene without worrying about any escalation of Cold War tensions or even the risk of triggering a nuclear World War III if we went too far towards upsetting the Soviets. Iraq had been an ally of the Soviet Union, but with the communist giant neutralized, and the US effectively the only superpower in the game, Iraq found itself isolated and easily defeated. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union later in 1991, the absence of any “Cold War” implications to US policy created a new dynamic in our nation’s decisions to intervene abroad.

The U.S. today still maintains a military presence in Kuwait.

## The 1990s: Somalia and Yugoslavia

Before leaving office in the early ‘90s, Pres. George H.W. Bush sent US troops to intervene in the civil war and resulting humanitarian crisis in Somalia after the collapse of its government in 1991. The scope of the mission evolved over time (see the above reference to “mission creep”) and US forces were drawn into a battle with the forces of a local warlord. The embarrassing loss of that battle (which became the subject of the movie *Black Hawk Down*) led to American forces being withdrawn in 1994. The civil war in Somalia continues today, and the US continues to intervene with drone attacks and Special Forces activity from camps and bases in the region.

Later in the ‘90s, another civil war, this one in Europe, triggered US military intervention. Pres. Clinton ordered US forces to conduct aerial bombing to influence the outcome of the civil war in Yugoslavia and sent in US forces in 1996 as peacekeepers to enforce a settlement to the conflict. In 1999 he ordered a new aerial bombing campaign against Serbia to deter it from further action during its ongoing conflict in Kosovo. A resolution was introduced in Congress to authorize this bombing, but it was defeated. Clinton ignored the legislative defeat and continued the bombing, which achieved the desired effect of forcing the Serbs to a settlement of the Kosovo conflict. US forces stayed in the former Yugoslavia for several years to enforce the peace settlements before handing peacekeeping duties off to Europeans.

The political implications of this intervention included:

* What can be done if the President continues military activity after Congress votes not to approve it? In this case, no action was taken and Pres. Clinton suffered nothing other than political criticism in some media. A lawsuit was filed to enforce the War Powers Resolution, but a federal court dismissed it on technical grounds without resolving the issues it raised. (*Campbell v. Clinton*, 203 F.3d 19, in 2000). In Clinton’s defense, Congress made several contradictory statements at the time. Congress voted down a proposal to declare war. Congress voted down a proposal to authorize Clinton’s air strikes. But Congress also voted down a resolution demanding Clinton stop the bombing. And Congress voted to continue funding the operations. So, how could the President know what Congress intended? And how can Congress effectively exercise “war powers” when its political motivations lead it to vote not to approve and then vote not to oppose the same military operation at the same time?
* What US interests were at stake and what motivates the US to intervene? Is humanitarian concern sufficient to justify US intervention even if we have no geopolitical interest in the region? Most observers agreed that unrest within the former Yugoslavia posed no significant threat to the security of our allies in Europe nor the United States. But if humanitarian concern is enough to justify intervention, why not intervene in “all” humanitarian crises the world over? For example, why Yugoslavia and not Rwanda? What criteria guide American foreign policy for making the decision to intervene with military force?
* Since the conflict was in Europe and affected only Europeans and was not a major threat requiring massive outside force to come to their defense, why didn’t our European allies take full ownership of the intervention? Why was anything necessary from the U.S. side at all?

## A pile of smoke Description automatically generated9/11 and the War in Afghanistan

Four passenger jets were hijacked on the morning of September 11, 2001, and two of the planes were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. The third plane hit the Pentagon in Virginia, causing serious damage to the headquarters of the US Department of Defense. Another half-hour later, a fourth plane crashed in Pennsylvania after some passengers fought off the hijackers who were allegedly headed for the White House.

Like Pearl Harbor in 1941, these attacks brought great unity among Americans in support of a military response, and thus the (metaphorical?) “War on Terror” was born, along with entry into our longest military conflict, the still-ongoing war in Afghanistan.

The first US military response to the September 11 attacks was to invade Afghanistan the following month with the help of troops from Britain, Australia, joining up with alliance of northern Afghan opponents of Afghanistan’s Taliban government. The goal was to overthrow the government that had provided safe haven to 9/11 mastermind Osama Bin Laden and replace it with something better. NATO was brought in to the action in 2006 and continues to involve troops from our allies in the conflict, although various members of the alliance have reduced or withdrawn their forces over the years at various times. Today American troops remain in Afghanistan attempting to stabilize the fledgling government and hold off a resurgence of the Taliban. This is no easy task. Pres. Trump recently announced a deal with the Taliban to bring the conflict to an end and draw down US forces, but it remains to be seen how and whether this deal will actually be implemented.

## Iraq War 2003-2011

President Clinton warned the American public of the dangers of a growing program of “weapons of mass destruction,” [[5]](#footnote-5) being carried on by the defeated (in 1991), but not removed, dictator of Iraq, Saddam Hussein. Hussein made an easy target for American dislike, with his atrocious human rights conditions and his bitter enmity against the Untied States for having defeated him in ’91 and his resentment of the ongoing “no fly zones” and occasional American bombing of his forces. When President George W. Bush took office in 2001, he escalated further the warnings about Hussein’s WMD programs and pressured the UN to inspect possible weapons sites and sanction Iraq. When the UN did not move fast enough, Pres. Bush argued that the threat justified unilateral American military intervention. “This is about imminent threat,” said White House spokesman Scott McClellan on Feb. 10, 2003.

The United States invaded Iraq in early 2003, removing Hussein from power (he was later executed after a trial by the new Iraqi government). Defeating Hussein on the battlefield proved to be the easy part. His defeat unleashed sectarian violence (Shia Muslims against Sunni Muslims against Kurds) and violent resistance against the foreign occupation. The eight-year occupation that followed cost the lives of over 4000 Americans, and leaves a fragile democratic government in place in Baghdad. US forces left for what they thought was the conclusion of the war in December, 2011. No weapons of mass destruction were ever found.

Political questions raised by this intervention include:

* See the “hearts and minds” issue raised earlier in Vietnam. While many Iraqis were grateful to have Saddam Hussein gone, they were bitterly opposed to foreign troops patrolling their streets.
* The consequences of the war in terms of casualties (both American and Iraqi, the latter often being forgotten when human losses are discussed). Since perhaps over 100,000 Iraqis lost their lives in the eight-year conflict, did American intervention do more harm than good when measured by humanitarian problems solved versus human losses inflicted?
* America, rightly or wrongly, received a world reputation as being quick on the trigger and indifferent to world opinion, not willing to wait for the UN inspection process and other diplomatic efforts to work themselves out. A lot of people were able to say “I told you so,” when no WMDs were found, suggesting that the original justification for the war had been at best a tragic error, or at worst, an intentional deception). It may be OK to do things alone, but there are times when we need allies and friends in the world, and we have to consider how our actions will be perceived before we take them. Sometimes it’s worth the risk, and sometimes it’s not. You get to debate that.

## A group of people standing in front of a building Description automatically generatedIraq 2012-2020

The evil dictator Saddam Hussein was nominally a member of the Sunni branch of the Islamic faith, and actively promoted favoritism toward Sunnis in his dictatorial rule. Sunnis are a minority in Iraq and are outnumbered by practitioners of the Shia flavor of Islam (known as Shi’ites), which posed a problem for Iraqi society after the dictator was deposed in 2003. The two groups, though both claiming to be practicing the religion of Mohammed, are often considered bitter enemies.

After US forces left and some form of government resembling a representative democracy was established, it became clear to Sunnis that the good times were over. The hated Shi’ites, having a majority of the population, could impose their will through sheer numbers and votes, and they took revenge against Sunnis for Hussein’s decades of mistreatment. Radical Sunnis went on the offensive and formed the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).

Islamic State began taking over vast amounts of territory in Iraq and Syria, and committing horrific crimes and abuses upon the populations they conquered. The Iraqi military was in no condition to stop them, and the Syrian government was already mired in its own civil war. US military forces returned to Iraq, and a few were also dispatched to Syria, and the tide of the Islamic State was turned back after several years of fighting. Today the US maintains around 5,000 troops in Iraq as a legacy of the Islamic State conflict.

## Recent developments

In May of 2011, Osama Bin Laden was finally tracked down and killed under an intricate operation carried out by US Navy SEALs and CIA operatives. He was found in a house in Pakistan and killed along with several other associates. His long-term presence in Pakistan raises many questions about that nation’s involvement with the United States in the ongoing war against insurgents in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan has spilled over into Pakistan, and the US has carried out numerous drone attacks against Pakistani targets.

Near the end of 2010 and beginning of 2011, the movement of rebellion, reform and revolution known as the “Arab Spring,” took hold and began reshaping the Middle East. While full discussion of these events is beyond the scope of this material, we mention it briefly here because of the link to US foreign military involvement in Libya and Syria. The overthrow of dictatorial governments in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt led to a similar movement against Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. When the rebel assault against government forces began flagging, the UN authorized NATO to enter the war with air power. The bombing weakened the Libyan government, and the rebel movement was able to take control. Pres. Obama authorized US airstrikes in Libya without consulting Congress, arguing that the War Powers Act did not apply.

President Obama also dispatched a small number of US forces to Africa to engage in combat with the “Lord’s Resistance Army,” a rebel group involved in numerous human rights violations. Other US forces have been dispatched in recent years in several western African countries to fight against rebel movements and terrorists. In addition, US drones target and kill militants, terrorists and bystanders in Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Somalia.

The “Arab Spring” of 2011 triggered a civil war in Syria, as rebel movements rose up to fight evil dictator Bashar Al Assad. US forces in Syria not only fought Islamic State but also, beginning in 2017, fired on forces of the Syrian government. Pres. Trump declared in December, 2018, a withdrawal of all US forces from Syria. This decision was changed in February 2019 to a reduction, but not elimination, of the US military presence, and as of now there is no plan to end this commitment.

1. One plausible theory is accidental ignition of coal dust in the fuel storage area – keeping in mind that ships ran on coal at that time and coal dust is highly flammable and explosive. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://archive.org/stream/addressofpreside00unit#page/8/mode/2up [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F60C17F6385C13738DDDA80894DE405B858DF1D3>. For those eager to condemn Germany for the attack, notice should be taken of the fact that the German government took out ads in the newspaper before the Lusitania set sail, advising the public that the ship was carrying British war supplies and was therefore a legitimate military target, and vulnerable to submarine attack. Every passenger and crew member knew the risk they were taking before they boarded the vessel. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Honduras was the original target of the pejorative label “banana republic” during this time. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Weapons of Mass Destruction, or WMD, means: chemical, biological or nuclear weapons. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)