

# Vietnam Syndrome and its Effects on the Gulf War Strategy

## Síndrome do Vietname e os seus Efeitos na Estratégia da Guerra do Golfo

Baturay Yurtbay, Yeditepe University

**Abstract**—The Vietnam War left a great number of dead and wounded behind itself. US foreign policy began to shift, and included discussions on the level of power which might be used for future wars or conflicts, at a time when the US was experiencing the anxiety of the failure in Vietnam - the so-called Vietnam Syndrome by the media and by various political science literature. The Gulf War, as a first serious foreign attempt of conflict after the Vietnam War, began with the discussions of to what extent the use of force is suitable and how the Vietnam War Syndrome could be overcome.

This study will briefly explain the effects and consequences of the Vietnam War and the Gulf War, as well as analysing US foreign policy discussions between the Vietnam War and the Gulf War. While analyzing US foreign policy and US intervention in the Gulf War, this research will mainly focus on Shultz doctrine, and Weinberger doctrine, and later evaluate the Vietnam War and the Gulf War in the framework of constructivism.

**Keywords**—Vietnam Syndrome, Gulf War, Vietnam War, Weinberger, Shultz.

**Resumo**—A Guerra do Vietname resultou num grande número de mortos e feridos. A política externa dos EUA iniciou assim um processo de mudança, que incluiu discussões sobre o nível de poder que pode ser utilizado em futuras guerras ou conflitos, num momento em que os EUA sofriam a ansiedade causada pelo fracasso no Vietname - apelidado Síndrome do Vietname pela comunicação social e por várias publicações científicas políticas. A Guerra do Golfo, enquanto primeira tentativa séria de conflito dos EUA após a Guerra do Vietname, deu início a discussões sobre até que ponto o uso da força é adequado e de que forma a Síndrome da Guerra do Vietname poderia ser superada. Este estudo explicará os efeitos e conseqüências da Guerra do Vietname e da Guerra do Golfo, além de analisar as discussões de política externa dos EUA que ocorreram entre a Guerra do Vietname e a Guerra do Golfo. Ao analisar a política externa dos EUA e a intervenção dos EUA na Guerra do Golfo, esta investigação irá concentrar-se sobretudo na doutrina de Shultz e na doutrina de Weinberger, e, de seguida, avaliará a Guerra do Vietname e a Guerra do Golfo no contexto do construtivismo.

**Palavras-Chave**—Síndrome do Vietname, Guerra do Golfo, Guerra do Vietname, Weinberger, Shultz.

**Submitted**—08-10-2017. **Accepted**—06-04-2018.



## 1 Introduction

THE Gulf War was the first US major military action to take place since the 1970s. It followed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which, as the invasion of a sovereign state, broke international law. However, the Gulf War was also significant for the US in terms of overcoming previous issues arising from the Vietnam War. Thus,

- *Baturay Yurtbay, Research Assistant in the Department of Sociology of Yeditepe University.  
E-mail: byurtbay@yahoo.com*

DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.21814/perspectivas.112>

the experience of Vietnam was highly influential on US military strategy during the Gulf War in terms of the use of force and the military strategy that followed, and also led to discussions related to US mistakes during the Vietnam War.

This essay will argue that the phenomenon of ‘Vietnam Syndrome’ had considerable influence on the conduct of the Gulf War. It will also argue how the US learnt from the strategic and tactical lessons of the Vietnam War, which led to a successful conclusion of the Gulf War. This essay will be divided into four parts. Firstly, Vietnam War and its effects will be evaluated. Secondly, the Gulf War will be on focus by explaining its causes and effects in the world structure including US, Iraq, Kuwait as well as China and Russia. Thirdly, the effects of Vietnam, the so-called Vietnam Syndrome, will be analysed as a strategic influence before and during the Gulf War. While the US foreign policy on the Gulf War is evaluated, doctrines of both Shultz (1984) and Weinberger (1984) are discussed to establish the Gulf War strategy. Finally, the Vietnam War will be evaluated in the framework of the constructivist theory.

## 2 Methodology

This research has as its basis a qualitative methodology. Literature on political science and sociology are the main fields taken into consideration for this research. Secondary-sources such as books, journals and scientific articles were analysed for the study of the Vietnam and the Gulf War. This research is mainly based on library-analysis and includes comprehensive interpretation and comparison of existing resources.

## 3 Vietnam War

The Vietnam War is frequently called “lost war”, “a nationally divisive war”, or “a shameful war” in the history and most of the literature (Janette 2002, 784), due to its decisive consequence. Firstly, in order to understand the Gulf War strategy, it is needed to take a careful consideration of the Vietnam War by looking at its aftermath as well. In this section, the effects and consequences of the Vietnam War will be analysed by briefly evaluating the main discussions around it.

First of all, it should be mentioned that, US intervention into Vietnam caused the emerge of two important issues: 1) the ending of colonialism in general caused by the beginning of the Cold War, 2) the increasing power of nationalism (Herring 1991, 105). Vietnam was not very politically and socially stable at the time and there were some revolutionary movements such as the Vietminh. Vietminh, known as a revolutionary movement in Vietnam, was created around the ideas of communism (Herring 1991, 105) and Ho Chi Min was the leader of this revolutionary group. At the time, communism was a great threat for the US. Therefore, Vietnam was seen as an important region in which Americans could fight communism (Herring 1991, 106). At the time, the threat of communist China and U.S.S.R should were taken into consideration the by US as well. US had a fear of the expansion of communism in the world.

At this stage, to understand the “spirit of the time”, domino theory might be benefited clearly. Domino theory is defined as “a theory that if one nation becomes Communist-controlled the neighbouring nations will also become Communist-controlled” (Merriam-Webster’s “domino theory”). By considering this theory, if Vietnam had become a failure for the US, the communist threat could have expanded through Indochina and South Asia easily (Herring 1991, 107). If communism began to spread over other regions, the US would face many disadvantages. The most important issue for the US was the potential difficulties in supplying raw materials. In this case, US raw materials could not be supplied and it became difficult to control strategic waterways (Herring 1991, 107).

The US had other threats under consideration. One of these threats was China due to the possible intervention in Vietnam. If China became involved in the Vietnam War, the war would have to be conducted in different regions against different enemies. This could complicate the US’ situation, since it was already far away from Vietnam geographically, which made difficult any military help to its forces. At this stage, the escalation of war could be enhanced and even nuclear confrontations could occur (Herring 1991, 110). American leaders also feared other kinds of intervention by China into Vietnam, which led to

many discussions around the use of force in the Vietnam War.

China was not in favour of a strong and unified Vietnam under Hanoi leadership, who was trying to unify Vietnam under his rule (Zhang 1996, 731). Therefore, China would prefer two Vietnams divided as North and South, rather than an unified one. There was also a fear of potential China-US war that could occur due to the Vietnam War. Even though there were some escalations during the war, Sino-American conflict did not occur, because China had a weak economy and lack of modernized military, making it impossible to compete with the US at the time. However, China had an important role in the US failure in Vietnam, by trying to deter US involvement in Vietnam (Zhang 1996, 762). The involvement of China would create crucial problems for the US, by escalating war and violence. During the Rolling Thunder operation, which took place in April of 1965, the US bombed railroads, highways and bridges of North Vietnam, in order to be able to deter North Vietnam forces (Zhang 1996, 754).

The geography and climate of Vietnam made the US involvement in Vietnam very difficult, as well as the jungles and swamps (Herring 1991, 112). There are many theories that try to explain the US failure in Vietnam. According to Summers (in Zhang 1996, 732), there was a lack of appreciation of the American leaders regarding military strategy and national policy, which caused the defeat of the US in the war.

Vietnam was frequently associated with unsuccessful judgement of political leaders at the time, and it created anti-war movements also influenced by the media, that were against US involvement of Vietnam War. However, the most important issue raised by the Vietnam War was the US' underestimation of the determination and strength of its enemies (Herring 1991, 113)

As a consequence, the US was damaged economically, politically, as well as socially. The Vietnam War became one of the most costly wars in the history, with an estimated 167 billion dollars of damages (Herring 1991, 116). Herring (1991, 104) mentions that: "It left America's foreign policy at least temporarily in disarray, discrediting the post-war policy containment and undermining the consensus that supported it. It

divided the American people as no other event since their own Civil War a century earlier. It battered their collective soul"

## 4 The Gulf War

The end of the cold war created a new international panorama with discussions around the world system and its unipolar (or multipolar in some sense) character. In this framework, the Gulf War took began in 1991 and it paved the way for new structural changes, affecting especially the Middle East and other regions of the world. It should be mentioned that the Gulf War was very decisive and overwhelming in terms of military strategy (Freedman and Karsh 1991, 5).

The Gulf War occurred after the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the Iraqi invasion to Kuwait. To understand the Gulf War clearly, Iran-Iraq war should also be considered carefully. Iran began to be armed during the 1970s in order to be able to create the hegemony of Iran. After Iran-Iraq war, the threat of Iran ended, however, the Iraq threat began to emerge.

In the summer of 1990, Kuwait was accused by Iraq of issues regarding the oil market and it was followed by the invasion of Kuwait by Iraqi forces (Regan 2013, 177). This invasion received great reactions from other countries, as well as from the UN Security Council.

After the invasion of Kuwait, President George H. W. Bush sent aircrafts to the region (Regan 2013, 178), but Iraqi forces were not willing to withdraw from Kuwait, even though a lot of mediation attempts were put in place, including the Soviet Union's proposal as a last mediation (Regan 2013, 179). In addition to mediation attempts during the war, many international condemnations occurred by Western countries, such as the UK, US and France (Freedman and Karsh 1991, 6).

Iraq did not agree with the peace proposals and mediation attempts and offered different claims to be able to legitimise itself in the Gulf War process. According to Iraq, Kuwait did not follow the OPEC agreements and increased its oil production in different regions. Another allegation was that Kuwait began to expand its borders against the benefit of Iraq. It should also be

mentioned that these allegations were rejected by Kuwait.

Operation Desert Storm was the most decisive part of the Gulf War. The Operation Desert Storm was successfully ended by the US and George Bush ceased fire in February 27 of 1991. Afterwards the UN Security Council began to implement this ceasefire under its Article 686, by which Iraq had to withdraw from Kuwait by ending its military actions there.

The Gulf War changed America's perception of itself and, at the same time, affected other states' perceptions of the US (Garofano and Steel 2001, 5). The US regained confidence in its military and political influence, and it strengthened its hegemonic power over other countries. During the Desert Storm, a divergence of opinions between Shultz and Powell began to emerge, resulting in vital issues for the future of the Gulf War, as well as of the US itself. Superior technology made the military operation more effective, but politics and the political conditions were also of considerable importance. The goal of the US was to make decisions that favoured the US, but without repeating the mistakes similar to those made in Vietnam.

## 5 Vietnam Syndrome and the Gulf War Strategy

After the failure of the Vietnam War, huge anxiety and stress began to emerge for the foreign policies of US. There was a question mark in terms of use of power in future conflicts caused by a fear of experiencing failure again. The discussions on the degree of the use of force became a central focus for the US, and the last stages of the discussions began to emerge before the beginning of the Gulf War, which also included the US intervention in Kuwait. The Iraqi strategy was threatening to the US since it could create a "second Vietnam" (Freedman and Karsh 1991, 5).

Therefore, there is a need to analyse the discussions that emerged in the US to understand the Gulf War and its causes. US foreign policy and potential solutions to be able to overcome the Vietnam syndrome should be analysed carefully. Herring (1981, 594) states that 'Vietnam syndrome' had a considerable influence over the

US foreign policy and its strategy during the Gulf War. Following the Vietnam War, the reasons for the failure began to be examined from a number of different perspectives. A number of questions began to emerge, including: (1) if the US had made serious mistakes during the war; (2) if the US could have won the war in the absence of serious military mistakes; and (3) if the US is now unable to intervene in other regions in an attempt to control them as a foreign power. Following the Vietnam War, US military leaders began to consider that a war in distant regions inevitably leads to high levels of military expenses, combined with uncertain results, resulting in a greater reluctance to use force. Campbell (1998, 358) states that "The principle cause of the military's current reluctance to use of force is their organisational disintegration and near-collapse in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the wake of Vietnam". In the Vietnam War, the US could not achieve its political and military goals.

Colonel Summer, neo-Clausewitzian analyst, cites Clausewitz's trinity to identify US mistakes during the Vietnam War (Campbell 1998, 364). According to Summers (Campbell 1998, 364), the failure to establish a national will, and a lack of well-identified political objectives were two important problems in the Vietnam War. Summer believes that these two failures, evaluated in the light of Clausewitz, led to the failure of the Vietnam War, and this led to the potential for identical issues to be experienced in future wars, thus giving rise to the Vietnam Syndrome.

The views of Shultz and Weinberger were important for the main discussion, which was shaped around the Gulf War. In October of 1984, the Secretary of State George Shultz discussed the use of American military force, stating that American forces needed to be more flexible in the use of force (1984, 1). He further emphasises the importance of the relationship between power and diplomacy, and the ways in which this relationship can be facilitated (1984, 1). However, he also believes that "There is not safety in isolationism" (1984, 2). One of Shultz's most important points is that diplomatic alternatives and military options should not be viewed as two opposing figures, but rather as two important powers that complete each other and proceed

together. Shultz (1984, 4) states that the US needs to control the balance between diplomacy and power in an efficient manner, as, following the 1980s, there will no longer be any total wars or total states of peace, but “a spectrum of often ambiguous challenges to US interests”. Shultz believes that clear military aims, the support of people and available resources are important for the achievement of US aims, and during the Vietnam War there was a lack of these elements (1984, 5). Shultz (1983) mentions that:

*“We know that we are not omnipotent and that we must set priorities. We cannot pay any price or bear any burden. We must discriminate; we must be prudent and careful; we must respond in ways appropriate to the challenge and engage our power only when very important strategic stakes are involved.”*

Shultz (1984) also believes that the international system was centred on Europe before, and this structure began to change day by day. It appears that many changes occurred, such as the diminishing power of the former colonial empire by the effects of decolonization, and the increasing struggle of moderates and radicals (Shultz 1984). Increasing effects of nuclear power should also be considered. Shultz (1984) found abnormal the America’s dependency of these problems due to the increasing danger in the world structure. He says that:

*“Certainly the United States is not the world’s policeman. But we are the world’s strongest free nation, and, therefore, the preservation of our values, our principles, and our hopes for a better world rests in great measure, inevitably, on our shoulders.”*

In the doctrine of Shultz (1984), it is crucially important to understand why so many Americans think to divide into two different categories power and diplomacy, if diplomacy can be used inside military alternatives rather than considering them as opponent figures.

According to Shultz (1984), moral issues may

emerge as consequences of some military interventions and he frequently connected morality issues to the Vietnam War. In his doctrine, there is an argument that defends that America can use its force to create a better world without being arrogant and immoral (Shultz 1984)

In November of 1984, the Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, expressed his opposition to Shultz, believing instead that the US should always be ready for a future war, maintaining an ability to avoid it. He notes the existence of many threats to the US, and that it is not easy to establish an appropriate level of response (Weinberger 1984). Unlike Shultz, he is not in favour of the use of flexible force, but he believes the US needs to be prepared for different insurgencies, terrorist activities and global conflicts (Weinberger 1984). He views the issues arising from the Vietnam War as a result of the use of military force as merely one aspect of diplomatic efforts (Weinberger 1984). He also discusses the difficulties of identifying enemies who might be generally ambiguous or exploit the indirect power of other countries. Weinberger (1984) notes that:

*Regardless of whether conflicts are limited, or threats are ill-defined, we must be capable of quickly determining that the threats and conflicts either do or do not affect the vital interests of the United States and our allies... and then responding appropriately.*

According to Weinberger (1984), there are many threats against the US, such as aggression and terrorism, and these threats make it difficult to determine a suitable level of use of force. Weinberger (1984) also sees the US as a major power in the world, with many responsibilities and interests when insurgencies, crises and global conflicts emerge in different regions. In Weinberger doctrine (1984), there is a strong belief in preparation before any kind of conflicts occur, and any kind of decisions regarding these conflicts should be made as soon as possible. According to Weinberger (1984), the US should do whatever it has to do in any conflict, insurgency or war in any region of the world. He has more certainty on the level of use of force, while asking

the question “Is this conflict in our nationalist interest?” (Weinberger 1984). He implies that if the answer is yes, then the US should take every effort to be able to win that war. Weinberger also emphasizes the importance of gaining support from the popular will before involvement in any war. To be able to have support of the people, threats that the US has to face should be clearly shared with the population (Weinberger 1984).

A number of ambiguities and issues can be identified in Weinberger’s position, such as unclear definitions of ‘vital interests’ and ‘last resorts’. He also mentions the importance of popular support without thinking of its tendency to manipulate. To gain the popular support, media tools could be used actively by misinforming people or directing them into a specific thought which is internalized by government officials or statesmen.

For Shultz (1984), the issues lie in the ‘grey areas’ between total peace and total war. It can be said that while Shultz is less clear about the solution, and frequently refers to diplomacy and military relationships, Weinberger (1984) puts forward more certain solutions without explaining some concepts clearly. While Shultz frequently refers to grey areas between total peace and total war, Weinberger tends to experience total war to be able to have certain victory by using a strict use of force.

Prior to the Operation Desert Storm, which took place during the Gulf War, General Colin Powell wanted to be certain of the US’ ability to identify vital interests, the achievability of objectives and rapid applicability of force (Herring 1981, 366). Herring (1981, 366) also notes that the Operation Desert Storm shows that Weinberger Doctrine, in terms of using proper force, worked successfully.

## 6 Understanding the Vietnam War in the Framework of Constructivism

Constructivism can be considered as a middle ground between the rationalist and post-structural theories. Epistemologically, it is difficult to find how do we know what we know. According to critical constructivists, such as Fierke, if we have different realities, it can be difficult to study them. So, it might be argued that positivist

methodology is inconsistent, because everything is relational and using positivist approach to our studies may be meaningless in the process of creating hypothesis.

In the framework of constructivism, war is constructed by human beings. War could be learned, as Mead has argued (Vasquez 1997, 668), mainly through practices which take place during daily life. As we see in the Vietnam War and the Gulf War, history played an important role in this process. By looking at history, we can experience many different things by practicing and we learn how we should behave in our future lives. Michael Howard studies show that war has been changing since the very early decades of the last century in Europe. It is sometimes associated with annihilation and sometimes with maneuver in the history (Vasquez 1997, 670). Constructivism shows us the possibility of changes in war. If it is possible for any kind of changes, ending wars may also be possible, according to constructivism. Vasquez (1997, 671) asks “If war was invented in a certain period in history, might it also be disinvented in some other period?” In this perspective, it could be argued that the US have taken lessons from Vietnam by “learning with past failures” and tried to overcome its mistakes in the next war.

Constructivism can reinterpret history, however it is not very successful for predictions of future structure of world politics. When the Vietnam War is argued, it is not possible to predict the consequences of the war, as most realist theory argues. “International society”, argument discussed by Bull and Kant, is also considered impossible to apply during the Vietnam War and the Gulf War process. Constructivism might be helpful to understand our mistakes but might not help to achieve certain results in terms of consequences of future wars.

## 7 Conclusion

The Vietnam War caused many deaths and paved the way to a significant economic crisis, political discussions and social polarization in American society. Subsequent conflicting situations and potential wars following the Vietnam War began to create a kind of stress on US’ foreign policies in terms of discoverable economics, military and

political problems, as well as potential polarization of the American society. This anxiety felt in the US' foreign policy showed itself before and during The Gulf War, considered to be the first serious involvement of the US into conflict after the Vietnam War. The consequences and failures following the Vietnam War paved the way to new discussions on level of forces that could be included in a limited war or total war. After the Vietnam War, Shultz and Weinberger brought forward different ideas on the optimum use of force in the Gulf War, and the conflict between their thoughts created a different solution to win the Gulf War without experiencing any kind of syndrome, as experienced in Vietnam before.

Even though there are some unclear points in both Shultz and Weinberger doctrine, it should be mentioned that while Shultz is closer to limited war with limited interests, Weinberger tends more to have a kind of total war in the Gulf War in order to be able to achieve certain results which will be concluded as victory.

In the framework of constructivism, it is possible to take lessons from history, but it still not possible to predict future wars or conflicts. "War and anarchy are socially constructed by the state" argument is still valid for both the Vietnam War and the Gulf War, however it is difficult to understand the relations between these two wars by only taking constructivism into account. There are some question marks in the framework of predicting future conflicts.

In conclusion, following the Vietnam War, there was a need for the US to make appropriate decisions to determine its future foreign policy. The experience of Vietnam has led to considerable concerns in determining the strategy of the Gulf War, however, at the same time, the lessons from Vietnam assisted the US to go through the correct channels in the Gulf War, by: 1) ensuring vital interests; 2) calculating the costs and benefits; and 3) deciding the level of use of force. Moreover, while the Vietnam War had a negative effect on the politics and military of the US, raising great issues regarding Human Rights in terms of international law and fear of repeating the mistakes of Vietnam, caused the US to develop an improved strategy during the Gulf War.

## References

- [1] Campbell, Kenneth J. 1998. "Once Burned, Twice Cautious: Explaining the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine." *Armed Forces and Society* 24: 357-74.
- [2] Freedman, Lawrence, and Efraim Karsh. 1991. "How Kuwait Was Won: Strategy in the Gulf War." *International Security* 16(2): 5-41.
- [3] Herring, George C. 1991. "America and Vietnam: The Unending War." *Foreign Affairs*, Winter. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/vietnam/1991-12-01/america-and-vietnam-unending-war>.
- [4] Garofano, John, and Ronald Steel. 2001. "The Gulf War's Legacy." *The Wilson Quarterly* 25(2): 3-5.
- [5] Janette, Michele. 2002. "What We Talk about When We Talk about War." *Contemporary Literature* 43(4): 784-793.
- [6] Herring, George C. 1981. "The 'Vietnam Syndrome' and American Foreign Policy." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 57(4): 594-374.
- [7] Regan, Ronald. 2013. "The Gulf War". In *Just War*: 177-183. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press.
- [8] Shultz. 1984. "Power and Diplomacy in the 1980s". Speech before the Trilateral Commission, Washington, D.C., April 3, 1984.
- [9] Vasquez, John A. 1997. "War Endings: What Science and Constructivism Can Tell Us." *Journal of International Studies* 26(3): 651-678.
- [10] Weinberger, C. W. 1984. "The Uses of Military Power." *PBS*, November 28. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/military/force/weinberger.html>.
- [11] Zhang, Xiaoming. 1996. "The Vietnam War, 1964-1969: A Chinese Perspective." *The Journal of Military History* 60(4), 731-762.



**Baturay Yurtbay** studied Political Science and International Relations and Sociology (as double major) at Yeditepe University. During his bachelor years, he also studied at The Hague University and Applied Sciences as exchange student and at Beijing Language and Culture University for learning Chinese. After his graduation in 2015, he received a scholarship and did an MA degree in the department of War Studies at King's College London, and then graduated with merit degree in 2016. His MA thesis "Solution or Stalemate: Evaluation of AKP, PKK and Kurdish Question in the context of Peace Process in Turkey between 2009 and 2013" was prepared under the supervision of Dr. Ahron Bregman and Prof. Dr. Philip Sabin and published by dissertation.com. His main research areas are political sociology, social movements, terrorism, state, and democracy. He is currently a research assistant in the department of Sociology of Yeditepe University, and doing his PhD in the department of Political Science and International Relations. He can speak Turkish, English, German and intermediate level Chinese.