COMPARING WARS

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Is Iraq another Vietnam? In other words, is the war in Iraq beginning in 2003 similar to the war in Vietnam from the 1960s to 1975? Various commentators have argued that the answer is yes; others say no.

What is striking about this debate is the lack of agreed criteria for assessing the similarity of two wars. A common approach is to draw up a list of alleged similarities between the wars — or, on the other hand, a list of differences.[2] Not only are there no standard criteria but even for an agreed criterion, such as duration or number of people killed, there are no agreed measures of what constitutes similarity. One of the problems is that these two wars are being compared in isolation, without reference to any other wars.

To make sense of a comparison, criteria are needed, in advance, for comparing any two wars, for example a tribal war in New Guinea and World War II. These may seem so different that a comparison is pointless. But to pass such a judgment is to use implicit criteria, such as the weapons used or the number of participants. That is precisely the problem: the criteria need to be chosen, elaborated and made explicit before choosing the wars to compare.

Comparing wars is a subset of a wider task of comparing two historical events, for which there is no standard, widely used set of criteria, perhaps because the variability of events is so vast. Compared to arbitrary historical events, wars are

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[1] We thank Robert Freeman, William Turley and an anonymous referee for useful comments.

[2] Council for a Livable World, "Iraq and Vietnam: More Similarities than You Thought," October 2005, http://www.wagingpeace.org/articles/2005/10/00_iraq-and-vietnam-similarities.pdf (accessed 9 March 2008) mentions two differences between the Vietnam and Iraq wars — the terrain and the opponent, communism and terrorism respectively — before giving a list of 24 "shared characteristics."

relatively well defined. A generic set of criteria for comparing wars will define the parameters through which the argument can be made and will reveal a gulf when comparing an acknowledged war with something that some might claim is not a war.

The relevant literature can be canvassed quite briefly. There are vast numbers of studies of individual wars, and quite a few studies comparing particular wars.[3] But in all this writing, there is no standard set of categories for comparing wars.

To open up debate on how to compare wars, we developed a list of 20 categories. We describe these in the next section. In the following section, we illustrate their use in scrutinizing commentary about Vietnam-Iraq comparisons. We conclude with some general comments about the political uses of war comparisons.

The task of comparing wars is of much wider significance than the Vietnam and Iraq wars. Clausewitz in *On War* attempted to uncover patterns in warfare, such as the role of the center of gravity, but he was also aware that wars are different, stating, "every war is rich in unique episodes."[4] Comparing wars is a complex enterprise in which it is easy to draw misleading parallels or differences. Setting out categories for comparisons is a step towards pinpointing the source of divergences in interpretation.

Criteria for Comparing Wars

The complexity of any single war is vast, as military historians well recognize. Therefore, to compare two such complex entities is a process of dramatic simplification. As mathematical modelers know, simplification is essential for gaining

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[3] For example, Douglas A. Borer, *Superpowers Defeated: Vietnam and Afghanistan Compared* (London: Frank Cass, 1999); Thomas Donnelly, "Lessons Unlearned: A Comparison of Three American Wars," *The National Interest* (Summer 2000): 76-82; Matthew Evangelista, "Is Putin the New de Gaulle? A Comparison of the Chechen and Algerian Wars," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21 (2005): 360-377; Riikka Kuusisto, "Framing the Wars in the Gulf and in Bosnia: The Rhetorical Definitions of the Western Power Leaders in Action," *Journal of Peace Research* 35 (1998): 603-620.

[4] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

insights. The question is not whether to simplify but rather which simplifications to make. In social analysis, the task is more complex because many concepts are not well defined and may be contested.[5] Therefore, dividing up "conceptual space" cannot be a neutral process. We proceed with full recognition of these difficulties.

Our approach is a simple one: we start with the standard set of questions used by journalists: who, where, what, when, how and why? For each of these questions, we consider plausible conceptual divisions. For example, the question "who?" draws attention to participants in wars, for which a standard distinction is between soldiers and civilians. This immediately raises the issue of individuals who straddle the boundary, for example guerrilla fighters who are civilians when not fighting. To make progress, a decision needs to be made about such boundary cases. One option is to set up a new category, but this runs the risk of a proliferation of categories, reducing the convenience of the classification scheme. So we adopt the categories of fighters and civilians (non-fighters), acknowledging its shortcomings. Stimulated by the "who?" question, we also add governments and other groups, thus using the familiar distinction between individuals and collectivities. Again, it would be possible to add further categories, for example distinguishing between governments, corporations and non-government organizations, but again this sacrifices simplicity. To keep the number of categories manageable, we thus ended up with just three categories of participants: countries/governments/groups, fighters, and civilians.

Proceeding this way, we developed a set of 20 categories, given in Table 1.

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[5] William E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse,* 3d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Table 1. Categories for comparing wars

Causes/rationales

    Driving forces (structural dynamics; ideology)

    Triggering events

    Public rationales (discourse)

Participants

    Countries/governments/groups

    Fighters (conscripts; professionals; standing army vs guerrillas; mercenaries)

    Civilians

Methods/nature

    Mode (conventional war; guerrilla war; genocide; etc.)

    Weapons

    Mobilization (social, political, economic)

    Ideas (propaganda; images)

    Legality

Scale/duration

    Area/terrain

    Intensity

    Duration

Outcomes

Deaths/injuries

Environmental impact

Economic impact

Political impact

Psychological impact

Social structural change

We briefly explain each of the categories, pointing out how they might be assessed.

Causes/rationales

The categories grouped under "causes/rationales" deal with the question "why?"

"Driving forces" is concerned with social structures and associated belief systems (ideologies), beyond the control of any individual. For example, in a hunter-gatherer society, a driving force might be maintaining a viable food supply. In contemporary societies, possible drivers are international rivalry, nationalism, state power, capitalism, and the military-industrial complex. The assessment of driving forces is heavily dependent on preferred theoretical perspectives. A realist might attribute a war to international anarchy whereas a Marxist might attribute it to capitalism.

"Triggering events" is about events that provoke or sustain a war, most famously the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in 1914, the trigger for World War I. Not all wars have such triggers; on the other hand, it could be said that triggers abound in wars: when one party attacks, that triggers a defense that is perceived as aggressive, and so forth.

"Public rationales" covers the official, explicit reasons for waging war. These are sometimes congruent with underlying motivations and linked to driving forces, but on other occasions the public rhetoric is a pretext. When Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, the pretext was aggression by Polish troops at the border, though actually these were German soldiers in disguise. Public rationales are usually high-minded, such as defending against aggression or defending freedom.

Participants

This group of categories deals with the question "who?" as already discussed.

"Countries/governments/groups" is a wide category covering involvement of collective entities in war. The countries, say Iran and Iraq in the 1980s, can be the same as the primary governments, but in the case of civil war the government may be opposed by insurgent groups. Many wars are complex, with multiple countries, contesting governments and governments-in-exile, and paramilitary and opposition forces. International forces may be involved, as in the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999.

"Fighters" indicates those doing the fighting, which can be further classified by types (conscripts, professionals, etc.), by levels of training and skill, by numbers, and by degree and type of involvement. Some participants are on the front lines, involved in direct contact with the enemy; others are engaged at a distance, such as crew in bombers. Then there are supporting personnel, including mechanics, cooks, accountants, and scientists. They are not normally counted as fighters but they could easily be considered participants. This could well justify an additional category.

"Civilians" includes individual participants who are not fighters. Some may be active supporters of the fighting through roles as writers, doctors, or workers in

military production facilities, or through direct assistance in hiding or feeding fighters. Others may be participants only as citizens of warring countries, or as victims of attacks.

Methods/nature

This group, of categories deals with the "how?" question, namely how war is carried out.

"Mode" deals with the type of war. Two main types, for contemporary wars, are conventional and guerrilla wars. Another axis of types is civil wars and wars between states. Genocide might be added, considered as a war against civilians.[6] Other types, such as nuclear war, are covered by the next category, "weapons." This category is not intended to cover descriptions that imply driving forces, such as "religious wars," because these are covered under that category.

"Weapons" covers types, numbers, and uses of weapons. This is standard territory, though it is much simpler to note types and numbers of weapons than to assess how they are used. Note that some new weapons, such as drones, challenge usual ways of thinking about fighters and weapons.

"Mobilization" refers to the ways and degrees to which social institutions — economic production, politics, education, health, transport, legal system, etc. — are oriented to the war in question. In total war, every facet of social life is directed toward war-making. At the other end of the spectrum are wars carried out by a relatively few troops with little apparent effect on the daily life of most citizens or the operation of political, economic, and social systems.

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[6] Martin Shaw, *War and Genocide: Organized Killing in Modern Society* (London: Polity, 2003).

"Ideas" refers to the role of concepts, images, and stereotypes in carrying out the war, as contrasted with weapons and mobilization that deal with material (and matériel) dimensions. Every war includes a struggle over ideas, and may involve direct attempts to persuade enemy fighters and civilians as well as methods to shape ideas of one's own fighters and civilians and the international community. In many cases, "ideas" used to prosecute war can be classified as propaganda. Note that there is a partial overlap with public rationales, which can be used to aid the war effort.

"Legality" refers to the legal status of the war, from any of a number of angles, including the laws of the countries involved, international law, and laws concerning types of weapons. To this might be added moral assessments, for example using just war theory.

Scale/duration

This group of factors addresses the questions of "where?" and, to some extent, "when?"

"Area; terrain" covers the geographical features of the war, including where fighting occurs and what territories are contested (if any).

"Intensity" refers to the rate at which fighting occurs. It can be measured by tonnage of bombs dropped per week, number of troops engaged in a month, value of matériel destroyed per year, or deaths per day. In an intense war, more happens in any given time period.

"Duration" is how long a war lasts. Often this is straightforward but sometimes the boundaries are not clear.

A war occurring in the year 1008 is likely to be very different from one in 2008, but we do not include a category referring to when a war occurs. The reason is that the historical period in which a war occurs is a partial surrogate for other factors, such as countries and weapons, which are historically specific: for example, powered aircraft were not used before the twentieth century. The point of comparing wars is to reveal what is similar and different about them, which usually means comparing events in different historical periods. To say that two wars occurred in different years does not say whether they are alike or different in other respects: those other respects are measured by the criteria we are suggesting.

Outcomes

This group of categories deals with the question "what?" "Outcomes" refers to the consequences of war, both during a war and afterwards.

"Deaths; injuries" can be broken down by military and civilian casualties and by types of death and injury, for all sides involved. In comparing deaths in wars, one option is to use total numbers, but this might give peculiar results: a war with a million deaths would be considered less similar to one with three million deaths than to one with a thousand deaths. An alternative is to use logarithms, giving a different scale comparison.

"Environmental impact" includes effects on soils, water supplies, atmosphere, plants, and animals.

"Economic impact" includes the costs of war, in a financial sense, and the economic effects on groups and individuals, such as higher profits for some companies, bankruptcy for others, job opportunities for some individuals, unemployment for others, and so forth.

"Political impact" covers impacts within the political system, for example election of a different government, changes in policies, and shifts in public opinion on political issues, in all countries affected.

"Psychological impact" refers to changes at the level of individual psychology, including post-traumatic stress in soldiers, feelings of grief, anger, or insecurity, changes in attitudes such as xenophobia, and levels of personal fear.

"Social structural change" concerns fundamental change in institutions such as the state or economic system. For example, a revolutionary war might transform a colony into an independent state or a capitalist economy into a state socialist one.

Another possible category would be how wars end, for example in stalemate or by one side's victory followed by liberation, exploitation, occupation, assimilation, or destruction.[7] We have used our categories involving outcomes to subsume war endings, judging that endings are more difficult to conceptualize than are outcomes.

Simply outlining what these 20 categories involve shows the complexity of the process. The explication of a single category is a potentially contentious process. Assigning numbers to any category necessarily involves value judgments. This is the inevitable consequence of simplification. While recognizing the limitations of any scheme for comparing wars, there are advantages. Most importantly, a general scheme allows debate over war comparisons to be assessed on a more neutral ground. This would result in less begging of the question by choosing comparisons in accord with one's conclusion. A general scheme encourages attention to issues that might otherwise be avoided or overlooked.

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[7] We thank William Turley (personal communication, 5 March 2007) for this point.

The practical value of a set of categories is best tested by applying them to actual wars. In doing this, ambiguities and other difficulties will be highlighted. The process will also reveal whether comparing wars might make some sense or is a misguided enterprise. The general project of comparing any two arbitrary wars is beyond the scope of any paper. Here, we use the categories for a simpler task: critical examination of commentaries on the Vietnam and Iraq wars. Numerous individuals have argued that the wars are either similar or different.

More generally, underpinning comparison of any two or more wars, there should be a purpose, for example to gain insight into comparative impacts on societies. Our purpose here is to comment on current debates about the Vietnam and Iraq wars.

Vietnam-Iraq Comparisons

Some assessments of similarities and differences between the Vietnam and Iraq wars are long and detailed.[8] Analyzing such assessments using the 20 categories would be a similarly long and complex process. At the other end of the spectrum, viewpoints presented via news stories — often based on interviews or talks — may not provide a person's full set of reasons.[9] Some stories report a variety of perspectives from different individuals, complicating the analysis.[10] To illustrate the use of the categories, we selected four pithy Vietnam-Iraq commentaries — two on each side of the debate — each of which is clearly written and strongly argued. Our

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[8] For example, Kale Baldock, *Is Iraq another Vietnam?* (Kansas City, MO: North Kensington Manor Press, 2005); Robert K. Brigham, *Is Iraq another Vietnam?* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006); Jeffrey Record and W. Andrew Terrill, *Iraq and Vietnam: Differences, Similarities, and Insights* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2004). See also John Dumbrell and David Ryan (eds.), *Vietnam in Iraq: Tactics, Lessons, Legacies and Ghosts* (London: Routledge, 2007).

[9] For example, David Jackson, "Bush Sees No Link between Vietnam, Iraq Wars," *USA Today,* 14 November 2006; Ed O'Keefe, "Bush Accepts Iraq-Vietnam Comparison," *ABC News,* 18 October 2006.

[10] For example, Elizabeth Becker, "Similarities between Vietnam and Iraq," *New York Times,* 2 November 2003; Susan Page, "Is Iraq Becoming another Vietnam?" *USA Today,* 13 April 2004.

aim is not to argue for or against Vietnam-Iraq similarities, but rather to illustrate the way commentators draw on categories in making their cases. We do not intend to challenge any of the points made by these authors, but rather to classify and juxtapose them.

In 2003, *YaleGlobal* published several short articles on Vietnam-Iraq, taking contrary positions. In the first such article, Orville Schell argues that the U.S. government risked being caught in a "quagmire" in Iraq, analogous to Vietnam in that both involved guerrilla resistance to an invading force.[11] Schell also mentions the important role of "nationalism, a sentiment that is almost always excited by foreign incursion." Schell's argument draws almost entirely on two of our categories: mode (in this case, guerrilla warfare) and driving forces (nationalism).

William S. Turley, in a subsequent *YaleGlobal* commentary, gives five main reasons why Iraq is *not* another Vietnam.[12] The first is that Vietnam and Iraq have different "histories, societies, and cultures." This fits within our category of driving forces. Second is that the strategic context is different: the war in Vietnam was revolutionary in a Cold War context in which Vietnamese forces obtained Soviet and Chinese arms, whereas there is no comparable outside anti-U.S. involvement in Iraq. This also fits within the category of driving forces, and partly within the category of countries/governments/groups.

Turley's third difference is that the stakes for the United States are much greater in Iraq. This fits into our category of political impact. Fourth is that conditions for guerrilla warfare existed in Vietnam but "extremists inside Iraq and Jihadis from outside … really are fleas by comparison with Vietnam's guerrillas." This falls into the

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[11] Orville Schell, "Is Iraq Becoming a New Vietnam? - Part One," *YaleGlobal,* 14 July 2003, http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/article.print?id=2087 (accessed 9 March 2008).

[12] William S. Turley, "Apples and Oranges Are Both Fruit, But … Think Twice before Calling Iraq 'Another Vietnam'," *YaleGlobal,* 24 October 2003, http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/article.print?id=2677 (accessed 9 March 2008).

category of mode, guerrilla warfare in this case. In discussing the conditions for guerrilla warfare, Turley points to the significance of a population supporting guerrillas, which also connects to our category of mobilization.

Turley's fifth difference is that the U.S. government had no exit strategy in Vietnam but does in Iraq. This fits most closely into political impact: Turley says one exit strategy is to transfer "responsibility from Americans to Iraqis" and another to "transfer authority to the United Nations."

Like Schell, Turley draws most heavily on just a few categories: driving forces, especially the Cold War context for Vietnam; mode, namely guerrilla warfare; and political impact. Turley uses these specific differences between Vietnam and Iraq in reaching his conclusion: "There are many good reasons to question the Bush Administration's conduct of the Iraq war. 'Vietnam' is not one of them."

In terms of our categories, Schell and Turley in part are arguing on different grounds, with Turley but not Schell focusing on political impact. Both of them deal with driving forces, but with attention to quite different aspects: Schell to nationalism and Turley to history and strategic context. Finally, they both deal with the mode of warfare, reaching diametrically opposed conclusions. The articles by these two authors illustrate that war comparisons can differ both by using different categories and by reaching different conclusions on the same category.

We next consider another article pointing to similarities between Vietnam and Iraq: Robert Freeman's "Is Iraq Another Vietnam? Actually, It May Become Worse," published by CommonDreams.org in 2004.[13] Freeman gives six principal similarities between the two wars. First: "Both Iraq and Vietnam were founded on lies." Freeman says, concerning Vietnam, "the original lie was that an impoverished nation of pre-

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[13] Robert Freeman, "Is Iraq Another Vietnam? Actually, It May Become Worse," CommonDreams.org, April 19, 2004, http://www.commondreams.org/views04/0419-11.htm (accessed 9 March 2008).

industrial age farmers posed a threat to the wealthiest empire the world had ever known." In relation to Iraq, he cites weapons of mass destruction, al Qaeda connections and other examples of "lying." This factor fits in our category of public rationales. In part, it also falls into the category of triggering events: Freeman mentions the "Gulf of Tonkin hoax" as "the manufactured excuse to jump in with all guns blazing." Alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq have been presented as a trigger for the invasion of Iraq.

Freeman's second similarity is that "Both wars quickly became guerilla wars." This is our mode category. Third: "Both wars used the palpable fiction of 'democracy' to pacify the American public into quiescence." This, like Freeman's first similarity, fits into the category of public rationales.

Fourth: "Both wars were against victim nations already deeply scarred by colonial domination." Freeman refers to the Vietnamese people wanting to be free of colonial domination, and, in relation to Iraq, the U.S. government wanting to control oil supplies, so this factor partly fits the category of driving forces, namely colonialism and neocolonialism. Fifth: "Both wars were fought in the vanguard of grand U.S. strategy." This also aligns with the category of driving forces.

Sixth, Freeman refers to similarities in "ideological context," including U.S. anti-communism in the 1940s and 1950s that made presidents fear "being portrayed as 'soft on communism'" in Vietnam, and "the necessity 'to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat' [that] now drives Bush policy more than anything else." This factor again fits into the category of driving forces.

Nearly all of Freeman's similarities fall within our first group of categories, causes/rationales, the only exception being the mode, namely guerrilla warfare. He gives little attention to participants, scale/duration, or outcomes. It seems reasonable

to infer that Freeman considers causes/rationales to be central to his case that the two wars are similar.

Finally, we turn to Frederick W. Kagan's article "Iraq is Not Vietnam."[14] Kagan lists a series of key differences between the conflicts. One is the "nature of the enemy" of U.S. forces: in South Vietnam there were "large numbers of indigenous [South Vietnamese] and external [North Vietnamese] soldiers organized into military units of up to division size" whereas in Iraq "the enemy is almost exclusively Iraqi." Kagan also refers to differences in U.S. forces, including that conscripts were used in Vietnam but not in Iraq: "The advantages of a volunteer over a conscript army in such wars are incalculable." These factors fit in the category of fighters.

Second, Kagan says Vietnam was a guerrilla war, whereas "the enemy in Iraq is incapable of conducting meaningful guerrilla warfare at this point." Since the end of 2004, according to Kagan, Iraqi insurgents have seldom organized military forces of any scale, and the attacks they have mounted "have no military significance." This is a difference in the mode of struggle: "The military capabilities of the Iraqi insurgents are simply not in the same league as those of the Vietnamese."

Third, according to Kagan, the political circumstances are very different in the two cases. In Vietnam, the communist insurgency had been underway for decades before large numbers of U.S. troops were committed, whereas in Iraq the "U.S. began by removing an unpopular dictator and moved very rapidly to choose a new government." Furthermore, the transfer of formal political authority to an Iraqi government in 2004 — a government supported by the majority of Iraqi people — had no parallel in Vietnam, where no Saigon government ever commanded much support. This difference fits in the category of driving forces.

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[14] Frederick W. Kagan, "Iraq Is Not Vietnam: A Pernicious Equivalence," *Policy Review* 134 (December 2005 – January 2006), http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/2920091.html (accessed 9 March 2008).

Fourth, Kagan says the ideologies involved in the Vietnam war — "communism and anti-colonialism" — were far more developed and appealing than those involved in Iraq, which include "radical militant Islamism and permanent jihad" and "defiant nationalism." This difference also fits in the category of driving forces.

Fifth, Kagan points to dramatic differences in the level of foreign support for U.S. enemies: "the degree of foreign fighter infiltration into Iraq is probably two orders of magnitude below the degree of North Vietnamese infiltration of the South." He also notes the heavy involvement of the Soviet government in Vietnam, including providing weapons and training. This difference fits into the category of countries/governments/groups.

Sixth, Kagan says that the skills of the Vietnamese troops, based in part on lengthy combat experience, were considerable, much greater than the "skills of the insurgent fighters in Iraq." Likewise, the U.S. troops in Iraq are far better trained than those in Vietnam. This difference fits in the category of fighters.

Seventh, Kagan points to differences in weaponry. In Vietnam, the North Vietnamese flew MiGs, deployed surface-to-air missiles, and had access to Soviet satellite and other intelligence. In comparison, "America's adversaries in Iraq … have no aircraft, no heavy vehicles, no sophisticated air defense networks." U.S. weaponry is also different in the two cases: "The technological improvement of the U.S. military between 1975 and 2005 has also revolutionized counterinsurgency warfare almost as much as it did conventional war." This is a difference in the category of weapons.

Finally, Kagan says the terrain is a major difference: unlike Vietnam, the terrain "makes Iraq as suitable an arena for counterinsurgency warfare as the U.S. could ever ask for." This is our category of area/terrain. In the conclusion to his

article, Kagan says, "America may fail in Iraq, but, if so, it will not be because of any similarity to Vietnam."

Kagan, in making the case that "Iraq is not Vietnam," thus draws on comparisons drawn from quite a few of our categories: driving forces; countries/governments/groups; fighters; mode; weapons; and area/terrain. It is illuminating to compare Kagan's argument with Freeman's. They both address driving forces and mode, but with contrary conclusions. Freeman also addresses triggering events and public rationales, not covered by Kagan, whereas Kagan addresses countries/governments/groups, fighters, weapons, and terrain, none of which are covered by Freeman. As in the earlier comparison of two *YaleGlobal* articles, these two analysts differ partly in the issues they address and partly in the conclusions they draw when they address the same issue.

Note that Freeman wrote his article some time before Kagan, and thus was less likely to use categories concerning outcomes. As more information emerges about a war — either reporting about a current one or archival sources about a past one — the evidential bases for comparison change. This should be taken into account when assessing commentaries.[15]

Among the four commentaries examined here, very seldom is there a clash of facts. The only category addressed by all four writers is the mode of warfare, and on this they differ through their assessments of what counts as guerrilla warfare. When the authors examine driving forces, they attend to different facts, seen through different lenses. For example, Freeman focuses on the colonial legacies in Vietnam and Iraq, whereas Kagan focuses on the beginning of the conflicts (so far as the U.S.

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[15] We thank Robert Freeman (personal communication, 25 March 2007) for this point.

government is concerned) and the relative legitimacy of the South Vietnamese and Iraqi governments.

This exercise reveals what should be obvious in advance, namely that any two wars are likely to have both similarities and differences. The key question then is not whether the wars are similar, but rather concerns what the similarities and differences are — and the significance and implications of these similarities and differences.

Arguably, part of the gulf between those who claim the Vietnam and Iraq wars are similar and those who say they aren't is ideological, linked to disagreements over driving forces and support for or opposition to the wars.[16]

Conclusion

Comparing wars is difficult and inevitably contentious, but it can be approached systematically by choosing categories for comparison, specifying how comparisons are carried out, making assessments, and judging the confidence of the assessments. In practical terms, there are many difficulties in implementing this process due to the large number of factors involved and the inadequacy of any classification scheme for neatly dividing conceptual space.

The most important step in making a balanced comparison is to establish the categories before choosing the wars to compare. This is a basic and essential methodological step, but one often ignored: frequently, commentators and analysts decide, on an impressionistic basis, that two wars are similar and then set about collecting evidence to bolster their viewpoint. Those preferring an opposite

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[16] Robert Freeman (personal communication, 25 March 2007), supporting this point, suggests that it would be useful to offer criteria for assessing ideological bias. This would be worthwhile but is well beyond the scope of this paper.

conclusion proceed likewise, except they look for and emphasize different evidence.[17]

The classification scheme presented here is a preliminary effort. To be of wider use, it requires elaboration, testing, and modification, and comparison with other schemes. But even in its present form, it can serve as a convenient aid in examining war comparisons. Each of the articles we sampled — short, punchy, systematically argued comparisons of Vietnam and Iraq — draws on only some categories. Within any category, each author selects facts and perspectives. This comparison of articles suggests that authors are in part talking past each other — by using different categories — as well as arguing using different assumptions and assessments of the evidence. This helps explain how articles with entirely different conclusions can be well argued and, depending on the reader's receptivity, compelling. For the articles are, in themselves, cogently argued; they differ in their selection, evaluation, and use of evidence.

A priori, a comparison between two arbitrarily chosen wars will reveal some similarities and some differences. When a commentator lists a series of similarities or a series of differences, with little or no attention to contrary views, it is a reasonable presumption that the comparison is being made for a purpose, typically to support or oppose a particular war or to advise on how it should be handled, as in the case of the articles we analyzed. Canvassing the list of categories is a useful antidote to a rush to judgment.

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[17] This conclusion resonates with the finding, decades ago, that lessons drawn from the Vietnam war are likely to reflect the coherent belief system of the person drawing the lessons: Ole R. Holsti and James N. Rosenau, "The Meaning of Vietnam: Belief Systems of American Leaders," *International Journal* 32 (1976-1977): 452-474.