

Vandiver, Frank E.

How America Goes to War

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This is the last of 20 books written by Frank E. Vandiver, a military historian, former professor and president of Texas A & M, a visiting professor at the US Military Academy at West Point, and founder and director of the Mosher Institute, a think tank on national defence and arms control, who passed away in early 2005. With US troops deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the American and international community discussing the rationale behind America's involvement in post-9/11 conflicts, this could not be a more timely publication.

This volume clearly draws on a lifetime of writing and expertise gained by Vandiver during his long and accomplished career. The author looks at the relationship between the President and the Congress, from George Washington to George Bush. The book is structured chronologically by conflict with individual chapters discussing, among others, the war with Mexico, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, WWI and WWII, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the Cold War, and the Gulf War. Those analyses are intertwined with short discussions of topics such as the evolution of the army, the increasingly international US military presence, the Truman Doctrine, and the rising technological superiority of the US military. Vandiver finishes off with the most recent US military involvement, i.e. the "war on terror."

Throughout its history, America's rise to a global power has been linked with how and when it went to war. In the process, the importance of the President's role vis-à-vis Congress has significantly increased. Vandiver's main thesis is that America's future will depend on how it engages in military actions.

Vandiver is unapologetically critical of the last military pursuit. In his view, George W. Bush "came into office determined to scrap America's wimp image—lingering from his father's and Bill Clinton's hesitant foreign policies—and to finish what amounted to an unfinished family crusade. From the start, he wanted Saddam Hussein gone. The question was, how? Terror brought the answer. (p. 131) ... When the president talked to Congress within a few days of the attacks, he blamed them on Al Qaeda. There seemed no connection with Saddam Hussein. (p. 132)... Probably with a boost from the Israelis, U.S. intelligence looked toward Baghdad as the great protector of Islamic destructive gangs. Somehow Saddam Hussein transmogrified into the engineer of 9/11. (p. 133)... Obviously both the U.S. and British government had either lied about reports of WMDs or had cynically manipulated intelligence to start the war. (p. 137). ... This one [war] follows the emerging pattern of America's 'modern wars'—it dribbled into a nation-building guerilla foray with no discernible victory point." (p. 136).

Although the author considers, perhaps even accepts, the possibility that "the United States has already sold itself out to the endless maw of militarism" (p. 144), ultimately, his message is not pessimistic. The typically American traits of "optimism, care for the underdog, and a deep-struck love of liberty" combined with a "slowly spreading countrywide alarm about the future" provide hope for "the rise of a mature national conscience". It helped America defeat

British rule, fascism, and communism, it might help overcome the present crisis, says Vandiver.

What made Vandiver write this volume was a lack of a single tome that would tell the story of how America had become involved in military conflicts, an issue the author became interested in when “President George W. Bush launched the war against terrorism” (p.xi). Lack of such a single volume is a fact and thus this book’s *raison d’etre*.

The other main strength of Vandiver’s book is in putting the current US military involvement in historical perspective. The volume is an informative and rewarding introduction to questions of U.S. military involvement, national security and the related decision-making process written by an erudite and engaging historian.

The book’s weaknesses include brevity of treatment of each conflict (typically 4-8 pages) and shortage of referencing (sourcing includes on average 1-2 notes per chapter, just 28 notes overall). Lack of documentation is particularly evident in the sections dealing with the present conflict, where some readers might find it tempting to dismiss whole sections of the text, including the ones quoted above, as mere opinion or speculation, a conclusion the author invites by limiting discussion or providing insufficient evidence for his statements.

One of the related questions that receives little, if any, attention in the volume is government efforts directed at the general public, both within and outside the United States, efforts referred to as communication and/or propaganda campaigns, aimed at manufacturing consent and gathering support for going to war. This, however, is well outside the scope of this work, as drawn by the author.

Readers looking for well-documented, detailed treatments of America’s involvement in particular conflicts might be better off picking up other available works, including some by the same author (such as *Their Tattered Flags: The Epic of the Confederacy*) or *The Oxford Companion to American Military History* (Oxford University Press, 1999) and *American Military History* (Office of the Chief of Military History, U.S. Army, 1969). A person in search of a general introduction to America’s military pursuits will find this 144-page analysis interesting and thoughtful and well suited to put the current conflict in perspective.

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