

Asking the Wrong Question Can Lead to War.  
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The United States has gone to war twice by asking the wrong questions. Fortunately for us, even though we did not "win" either of those wars (in the conventional sense, such as the way we won World Wars I and II), we did not lose them either. No enemy came to our shores and conquered us. But in both of those wars, we made a terrible mess of two countries and suffered a terrible cost of young lives of our own, costs that we are still paying. Those two wars were the Vietnam War and the second Iraq War.

The reason for thinking about questions is the 40th anniversary of our withdrawal from the painful Vietnam War, with the searing image of the last helicopter taking off leaving behind many Vietnamese who helped us to the vengeance of the North Vietnamese shortly to arrive. It was shameful.

This was also the last war in which young Americans were drafted to fight? a system that was designed to be fair but had been badly corrupted by then. Too many of the well connected managed to get out of it, leaving the miseries of that war to the underclass, who returned from the war bitter, hooked on drugs, and alienated from an America hostile to them. A very bad war indeed, and even our political objective: to save Vietnam from being taken over by Communism, failed.

Why did we spend so much blood and money on such a war with so little benefit? What question had we failed to ask? We were fighting a cold war with the Soviet Union (rightly; they were monsters) but had wrongly cut off all communications with Communist China. We assumed, wrongly, that Communism was just one thing; that it was a monolith. Once we corrected that mistake, our Cold War was fought with much more finesse, and brought to a much better end.

We assumed that North Vietnam was a client of Communist China, never understanding that it was a client of the USSR, and that there was actually bad blood between China and Russia that we could have exploited. We never understood from the start that we could have listened to our China experts who knew this. Instead, demagogue Joseph McCarthy and his friends in Congress persecuted the China Experts and all of them had their careers ruined.

We could have talked to Ho Chi Minh, who was a Vietnamese patriot first, and a Communist second, but never did. Our Congress was so blinded on monolithic anti-communism that only the wrong question was asked and the wrong war fought. It cost everyone big not having asked the right question.

In Iraq, the same problem happened. We never asked the right questions about Saddam Hussein. The question should have been: Why would he boast about having a two million-man army and weapons of mass destruction? Did he really want the US to take him on? Was he really that stupid? Or was he really directing that boast to someone else?

Those who know the Middle East have to understand the role of lying. In a region of constant insecurity, nobody ever has the luxury of telling the truth. I would even question demographic information from the region. If one asks how many children a man has, he will tell you how many sons (and may even lie about that). When a family's religion can be a matter of life or death, one cannot expect truth either, hence the skewed Sunni-Shi'a demographics for so long. Saddam was aiming his boast at Iran, and assumed that the US would understand this. We did not, and launched a war that was a huge mistake.

It might not have been such a disaster if we had not compounded it by a second mistake: did Iraq just need a new and better dictator or did it need democracy? Good question, bad answer.

President Obama has asked the right question this time. "If the Ayatollas are suicidal enough to go nuclear, why is their money in Swiss banks?" Good question!

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682 words

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