

The Snowball Effect - Why the U.S. gets Knocked out Cold in Vietnam and Afghanistan

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How does the U.S., the world's #1 military power, lose against the Communists in Vietnam and the Taliban in Afghanistan, forces weaker in number, technology, and experience?

Thesis

The U.S. failure in nation-building both in Vietnam and Afghanistan is a result of the Snowball Effect, or the notion that one crisis spirals out of control into multiple crises due to poor management of the situation, which when put together are enough to undermine or destroy the entire nation-building effort.

For Vietnam, the Tet Offensive was the initial crisis event, as it began the downfall of U.S. public opinion, and paved the way for the My Lai Massacre.

For Afghanistan, the crisis was the Iraq War of 2003, which gave the Taliban the chance to regroup, and launch the Taliban Insurgency of 2005-2021.

Findings – Vietnam

- The Tet Offensive (January 31, 1968) - Vietcong unleash full scale attack on all major South Vietnam cities. Public questions if the U.S. is winning the war.
- In response, the U.S. escalates its presence, and ramps up the draft, leading to more inexperienced, and undisciplined soldiers.
- My Lai Massacre (publicized in December 1969) – 500+ Vietnamese civilians killed by U.S. soldiers. Turned public opinion against the war when images of the massacre appeared in *TIME Magazine*.
- U.S. attempts to regain public support fail. Including...
 - Negotiation – Nixon sabotages negotiations in 1968.
 - Protest Suppression – Kent State Protest (1970)
 - Secret invasion of Cambodia and Laos
- U.S. forces withdraw from Vietnam. Saigon falls on April 30, 1975.

Findings – Afghanistan

- September 11, 2001 – Planes hijacked by Al-Qaeda strike the World Trade Center and Pentagon. U.S. launches invasion of Taliban controlled Afghanistan weeks later.
- Taliban falls within the year. Taliban and Al-Qaeda survivors flee to Pakistan in 2002.
- 2003 – Wrongly believing Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is hiding WMDs, the U.S. redirects its attention to Afghanistan, and launches another full-scale invasion. The Taliban uses this time to regroup.
- 2005 – Taliban launches insurgency, worsening yearly until 2012. Public support falters for three reasons...
 - Increase in U.S. soldiers being killed.
 - Increased financial burden on the U.S.
 - Revenge taken on Osama bin Laden.
- Presidents Obama and Biden establish deadlines to withdraw from Afghanistan. U.S. forces pull out in 2021. Kabul falls on August 15, 2021.

Conclusion

Nation-building, by itself, is not always doomed to end in failure. The U.S. has succeeded in its German (1945), Japanese (1945), and Korean (1953) nation-building efforts.

The U.S. was winning in both Afghanistan and Vietnam militarily, but the U.S. allowed one crisis in both wars to snowball into a public opinion disaster, which destroyed the nation-building effort.

If it is possible to prevent this collapse of support, the U.S. maybe able to prevent future nation-building disasters.

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