

US fights not for freedom

American Adventurism Abroad - Overconfidence and War Thomas Palaima

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American Adventurism Abroad: 30 Invasions, Interventions and Regime Changes since World War II

Author - Michael J. Sullivan III Publisher - Praeger Pages - 197 Price - £48.99 ISBN 13: 9780275972769

Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions

Author - Dominic Johnson Harvard University Press Pages - 288

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On April 4, 1967, at a meeting of Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, Martin Luther King, winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1964, explained why he was against the Vietnam War and how it affected the civil rights movement in the US. His speech was a veritable sermon addressed to "my fellow Americans who, with me, bear the greatest responsibility in ending a conflict that has exacted a heavy price on (two) continents". It is remembered now for one phrase among the reasons King gave for breaking his silence about the war: "I knew I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today - my own government."

If you are interested in the controversial issues in Michael Sullivan's *American Adventurism Abroad* and Dominic Johnson's *Overconfidence and War*, King's classic speech is worth rereading. It lays out the thinking of a prominent political leader - albeit a very special sort of political leader - on many of the same issues. King's thoughts challenge Sullivan's and Johnson's and our own. His eloquent reasoning is informed by hard experience and by an intelligent understanding of history. He reminds us that leaders can advocate alternatives to war and violence and challenge those who hold and wield wealth and power. But doing so can make them dead very fast.

Like Sullivan, King reviews American involvement in foreign affairs since the Second World War, not just in Southeast Asia, but in South America and Africa. It is sobering that Vietnam is only 11th on Sullivan's chronological list of 30 test cases of American foreign interventions between 1947 and 2001.

In April 1967, the US was just getting the hang of purveying violence worldwide. Still, the intensive bombing of North Vietnam, Operation Rolling Thunder, was two years along. Much of its eventual total payload of 643,000 tons of bombs had been delivered, 300 American planes had been shot down, and the General Accounting Office calculated that the US was spending \$6.60 to inflict every dollar's worth of damage.

King called for "a true revolution of values", already discerning the pattern that Sullivan's 19 subsequent test cases now confirm. It is Sullivan's thesis that American use of overt or covert force around the world has not spread democracy or other idealised values. Rather, from the Truman Doctrine onwards, American foreign policy has aimed at making the world safe for capitalists who, in King's words, "take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries" involved.

Democracy is messy and unstable. It can nationalise industries, tax profits, permit unions, and regulate wages, working conditions and environmental standards. The US has preferred military regimes in places such as Greece, the Congo, Guatemala and Chile, and monarchies in Iran and Kuwait.

In ten of Sullivan's cases, the US used combat troops. In nine, it provoked coups leading to military takeovers. In nine, it assisted in assassinations of foreign leaders. In nine, it tolerated overkill to the point of genocide. The US has chosen whether or not to get involved according to its own geopolitical, often economic, interests. Want proof? Roméo Dallaire, force commander of the United Nations peace-keeping operation in Rwanda in 1993-94, has written a sickening account (*Shake Hands with the Devil*) of how quickly the US and other developed nations lose interest in human rights when the humans in question live in a country that has no exploitable natural resources or regional strategic value.

King also addressed Johnson's big question: "Why do political leaders and their nations choose to go to war?" Johnson's thesis is that our political leaders rise to power by natural selection. They are selected for a key adaptive psychological trait from our evolutionary past: overconfidence.

According to Johnson's "positive illusions theory", overconfidence in social groups and in leaders leads to four intervening phenomena that affect decisions about war: one, overestimation of one's own side; two, underestimation of the enemy; three, neglect of intelligence; and four, the sum of the opposing side's estimates of winning being greater than one. The probability of choosing to go to war or of continuing to fight a war is conditioned primarily by the types of government involved and the degree to which serious debate takes place. Constitutional checks and balances and open debate are the main restraints on "positive illusions".

Johnson, like King, explains the complex social and psychological dynamics that affect the decision-making of leaders and groups during crises surrounding war. Johnson uses four test cases: the First World War, the Munich Crisis in September 1938, the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 and the Vietnam War. Johnson also analyses Iraq, 2003, in an obvious postscript chapter. The four primary test cases strike a balance. In two, the outcome was war and the continuation of war despite the clear folly of the strategies being used. In the other two, war was averted, at least temporarily.

Johnson's test cases allow for maximum variability and complexity in intervening phenomena and controlling factors. As far as the limited scale of his book permits, he examines for each case a range of alternative factors (such as "groupthink", ignorance of critical information, and domestic political motives and constraints) and alternative explanatory theories (such as rational choice theory and neorealism). Even when these are taken into account, there is still room for "positive illusions" as a factor in decision-making about war.

As with most historical test-case studies, there is a positive residue from reading Johnson and Sullivan, quite apart from the arguments they advance.

Sullivan's book delivers one of the great cynical straight lines in the wicked comedy of human history. His narrative moves chronologically by presidential periods. By the time he reaches "the Nixon-Ford realist consolidations 1969-76", he has already covered 14 interventions leading mainly to dictatorships or military rule. These interventions cost 4 million human lives in civil

and racial warfare, "disappearances" of individuals under right-wing regimes, and American-supported military actions. But Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy, according to Sullivan, marked a "redefinition of America's role in the world and a shift from its historic idealist advancing of America's values".

Indeed. The 15,000lb bomb known as the Daisy Cutter, which produced casualties over a 400m radius, was first dropped in 1970 in the new age of realpolitik. It fell on what President Lyndon Johnson, in the era of idealistic foreign policy, called "that raggedy-ass little fourth-rate country".

If your tastes are more in line with Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove*, you may read here and there in *Overconfidence and War* things like this. State Department official (1961-66) and presidential security adviser (1966-69) Walt Rostow, a hawkish advocate of bombing, suppressed a report by the Policy Planning Council. Its strong arguments that bombing would not work never reached the President. Rostow had advanced so far up the evolutionary ladder of positive-illusionary thinking that in 1968 he could declare, with no apparent irony, that "history will salute us".

If you really want to salute progress in human evolution and feel better about the effects of positive illusions, read the speeches of Martin Luther King.

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