

## **Two Tales of Texans: LBJ, George W. Bush, and the Lone Star Wars**

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Two presidents from Texas, two long and bitter wars, what I have called the Lone Star wars after the nickname for the state of Texas. My essential thesis is that there are important similarities in the mistakes made in the Vietnam and Iraq Wars, mistakes caused by significant defects in the predominant way of thinking of American foreign policy makers. Perhaps it is no accident that both these wars were undertaken during presidencies of men from Texas, since these characteristic flawed ideological views are more widely and deeply embedded in Texan political culture than in the rest of the country.

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This article sweeps broad and wide over several decades of history, two different presidencies, two different wars, two different party systems both in Texas and at the national level, and the international order in two different iterations, so it can only skim the surface of the profound issues raised by the Vietnam and Iraq Wars for the U.S. and the global system. It will paint in very broad strokes the myths and stereotypes of Texas, what in the language of the postmodernists might be called some of the “grand narratives” of Texas politics and history, rather than analyze deeply the more complicated realities of one of the largest and most diverse states in the union. However, substantial data on the continuing regional conflict that polarizes U.S. politics will be presented and analyzed.

This article cannot capture the complex careers of Lyndon Johnson or George W. Bush or the intricate inner workings of the Johnson and Bush presidencies. However, there are important generalizations that can be made about the Vietnam and Iraq wars, the Johnson and Bush presidencies, and the predominant world view of Texans which I will argue crystallize key aspects of American foreign policy. Texas is typical of the rest of the U.S. in that it holds aggressive, militaristic views toward the rest of the world. Yet Texas is not typical of the U.S. in that these views predominate so completely over other more diplomatic and cooperative perspectives toward the world.

This paper will not cover the first Iraq War fought by the first President Bush, even though he was also a war president from Texas. First of all, although the elder Bush built his political career in Texas he was raised, educated, and had his character largely shaped in New England. More importantly, the first Iraq War was qualitatively different from the second. Because it was over quickly it was not so

costly in blood, treasure, or to the U.S. position in the world. In fact, it was widely supported not only by American allies but by most of the nations of the world, including most Muslim nations, and endorsed by the UN. The decision making was not reckless; in fact, the decision not to continue on into Baghdad after the liberation of Kuwait, so fiercely criticized by conservatives in the 1990s, seems so much wiser today.

### **Tall Tales of Texas**

Before Alaska joined the union in 1959, Texas was the largest American state. Texas has always had a reputation of being a larger, brasher version of America, of highlighting what is uniquely American, from the 19th century cowboy to the 20th century oil baron. Texas has a very unusual history for an American state. It was once part of Mexico, it was once an independent nation, and it was once part of the rebellious Southern states. The “lone star” on the Texas flag symbolizes the Texas spirit of independence, a sense of Texas exceptionalism that parallels the creed of American exceptionalism.

In this section I will introduce three icons of Texas culture and briefly discuss how they symbolize key components of the Texas heritage that have not only shaped Texas politics and Texan political leaders but also reflect elements of a characteristic American view of the world: 1. the cowboy, 2. the oil baron, and 3. the Baptist believer.

The cowboy is a symbol of American independence and individualism recognized around the world. From movie panoramas

of the Wild West, to the macho cowboy on a horse enjoying a smoke in the great outdoors in cigarette commercials, to cowboy hats as an instant symbol of wealth and independence, Hollywood and Madison Avenue have projected across the globe the image of the lone courageous man or an ad hoc band of men with guns bringing justice to a lawless frontier. This is largely a myth about the settlement of the West, which actually spread more from river or railroad towns outward rather than through random isolated ranchers or homesteaders. Cowboys were never a significant part of the western population, and play no important role in today's urbanized, industrialized America.

However, the mythology of the cowboy does have a grain of truth. The cowboy plays such a large role in American legend because he symbolizes how Americans want to see themselves, as free rugged individuals unbound by legal systems or social customs. Unfortunately, the cowboy image also captures the unilateralist, lawless elements of U.S. foreign policy—the desire of many U.S. foreign policy elites, and particularly Texan presidents, to be able to act free of restraints of law and convention, just like a cowboy out on the range, beyond the reach of society.

The oil baron is another Texas icon—rich, ruthless, and reckless. Texas has the richest oil deposits in the U.S. It is the Saudi Arabia of U.S. states, although its wells are starting to run dry. While Texas is not as completely dependent on oil as Saudi Arabia, roughly one quarter of the state's revenue comes directly from the oil business and much of the state's economy is lubricated by oil. Both Presidents Bush started their careers in the oil business.

Of course, few Texans own oil wells. Not that many are even

employed in the industry, which is highly capital intensive. But the oil industry has had its impact on the character of the Texas elite. The oil business is high risk, high reward. Most oil drilling ends in complete failure, in empty holes in the ground. Oil men are always seeking new reserves to exploit. They are high stakes gamblers, who have to be unafraid to take big risks. Perhaps these are not the traits most advisable for the man who decides whether to take the most powerful nation on earth to war.

A final cultural stereotype associated with the U.S. South generally, but particularly with Texas, is the Baptist true believer. The 19<sup>th</sup> century traveling tent show preacher who denounced public school teachers who “blasphemed” that monkeys are our ancestors also taught that white Americans had a Manifest Destiny to rule all of North America and all the lesser non-white races therein. The new, slick 21<sup>st</sup> century megachurch media maven, with thousands of members and hundreds of thousands in book sales and/or television viewers not only espouses “creation science” and the subordination of women to men, but also that the United States is the nation chosen by God to set the world on a righteous path.

No longer do many fundamentalist preachers teach that white skin ordains one race to rule another, but most still do teach that cowboy country is God’s Chosen nation, the new Promised Land, even the new Israel. Many churches implicitly or even explicitly teach a kind of 21<sup>st</sup> century Protestant election, that capitalism is God’s economics. Individuals and nations who follow its rules have God’s blessings to prosper and rule the world, while the poor, benighted fools who do not must be forcibly shown the way.

That these new doctrines of election and salvation select

essentially the same people and nations for top dogs and subordination as the old racist doctrines is rarely commented upon. Many of these fundamentalist preachers and their followers also believe that God will lead the U.S. to victory in Armageddon, a cataclysmic global nuclear war in which God finally defeats evil.

Of course, most Texans' daily lives are more shaped by 21<sup>st</sup> century consumerism than by biblical precepts. Texans, like most Americans, spend more time at the mall than at church. And most churches in Texas do not teach that God is seeking nuclear war. But the grain of truth is the widespread belief throughout the U.S., but even more explicitly and firmly held in Texas, that God is on our side, that U.S. foreign policy is literally a crusade, and that the U.S. has a literally divine mission to "save" the world. A more secularized version of this myth is even more widespread throughout America, where liberalism, democracy, and capitalism replace Christianity as a kind of civil religion, an ideology that justifies America's special role in world history.

Many experts on the origins of the U.S. view of itself and the world have noted the recurring theme of the U.S. as the "promised land" in American Christianity. However others have argued that the doctrine that has driven U.S. foreign policy since U.S. entry into World War I under President Wilson, that the U.S. has a special, divinely sanctioned role to play in reordering global politics, actually casts the U.S. as the "Christ nation," literally savior of the world. (Gamble) In other words, U.S. foreign policy suffers from a kind of "Messiah complex." Take for example George W. Bush's second Inaugural Address, widely accepted as the most important speech of his presidency

We go forward with complete confidence in the eventual triumph of freedom...Not because we consider ourselves a chosen nation; God moves and chooses as He wills. We have confidence because freedom is the permanent hope of mankind, the hunger in dark places, the longing of the soul. When our Founders declared a new order of the ages; when soldiers died in wave upon wave for a union based on liberty; when citizens marched in peaceful outrage under the banner "Freedom Now" - they were acting on an ancient hope that is meant to be fulfilled. History has an ebb and flow of justice, but history also has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty.

America, in this young century, proclaims liberty throughout all the world, and to all the inhabitants thereof. (Bush)

Although at one point Bush explicitly denies seeing the U.S. as the "chosen nation" of God, the rest of the text shows a profound sense of divine mission. President Bush clearly believes that "God moves and chooses" in human history and the direction "He" chooses for "all the world" is American style liberty.

Contrast this arrogant assertion that "god is on our side" with John Kerry's admonition in the 2004 campaign that the preferable way to bring religion into politics is to "pray we are on God's side."

### **Texas History: A Very Brief Introduction**

The stereotypes in the first part of this paper are only a crude introduction to Texan exceptionalism. The history and politics of Texas are actually quite complex and from the 1830s through the

1870s quite turbulent. This fascinating story is beyond my means to tell in any detail, but the basic facts are well known.

Texas was originally a province of Mexico. However, East Texas was good cotton growing country, attractive to the plantation owners of the American South. Yet Mexico abolished slavery in 1829. White Americans had been crossing over the border to set up cotton plantations in Texas, and after 1829 they began agitating for independence, with the goal of joining the U.S. Soon there were more white Americans than Mexicans, and in 1836 Texas declared itself an independent nation. Mexico fought to hold on to its rebel province but Texas gained de facto independence, although Mexico continued to claim Texas as its province.

Texas later petitioned to join the United States and was granted statehood, which sparked the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848. The United States won this war and essentially stole the northern 40% of Mexico, what today is the American southwest, the states of Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, and California.

Texas soon became unhappy in its new home however, when Republican Lincoln was elected president promising to recognize no new slave states and upset the historic balance between free and slave states in the U.S. Texas was one of the 11 Confederate states that seceded from the U.S. in 1861, which brought on the U.S. Civil War. After the Civil War, Texas, like all the defeated Southern states, was occupied by the Northern army and forced not only to free its slaves, but to give political and social rights to the freed slaves. Whites resisted fiercely, forming paramilitary resistance groups, the best known being the Ku Klux Klan. The North was finally forced to end its occupation in 1877 and white supremacy and racial segregation



were established in Texas and throughout the South.

During its move from Mexico to the U.S., out of the U.S., and back in again, Texas was a battlefield in three wars, first a war for its independence from Mexico, a war between the U.S. and Mexico over its annexation, and then the U.S. Civil War. Texas was forged in a crucible of fire, like many states born in war, but also having its formative years defined by wars, and its first hundred plus years defined by white domination of black and Latino, with violence and civil strife just barely below the surface.

The political history of Texas since the Civil War is another intriguing story which is beyond the scope of this paper. For almost a century from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 to the presidency of Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s, Texas politics was overwhelmingly controlled by a racist, chauvinistic Democratic Party, determined to keep blacks and Latinos from political participation and the United States on an expansionist, and later militantly anti-communist path.

The Mexican-American War achieved the long-held American goal of a continental territory spanning from the Atlantic to the Pacific. However, many Southerners, particularly Texans, were not completely satisfied that the United States had yet achieved its true Manifest Destiny. They had their eyes on Central America, Caribbean islands, and even Mexico. Sam Houston, the first Governor of Texas and the first United States Senator from the state, openly proclaimed his intention to go after the rest of Mexico.

From the 1870s to the 1960s U.S. military forces were sent to intervene in conflicts in Central America and the Caribbean in dozens of cases, perhaps as many as 100 times. Actual territorial acquisitions were few—Puerto Rico, the Panama Canal Zone, and virtual control of Cuba. But the Caribbean Sea became known as an American lake

and no government in Central America survived long without America's blessing. Texas Democrats were leaders in this expansion of American power.

### **Lyndon Johnson, the Bush Family, and Texas Politics**

The story of Lyndon Johnson embodies several massive transitions in the Texas politics and the national Democratic Party. LBJ rose to power in a racist Texas Democratic Party and never once publicly or privately broke ranks with his segregationist southern colleagues until he began maneuvering for his presidential candidacy in 1960. Johnson failed to win the Democratic nomination for president, but John Kennedy selected him as his running mate and he became vice president in 1961. However, in 1963 when Vice President Johnson was suddenly thrust to power after Kennedy's assassination, he abandoned his segregationist past and staked his entire presidency on civil rights and voting rights for African-Americans and expansive social welfare legislation that would transform American politics, government, and race relations.

In the two whirlwind years of 1964 and 65 Johnson passed 1) enfranchisement of the majority of African-Americans who still lived in the South, 2) a major expansion of the U.S. welfare state, including new medical insurance programs for the poor and aged, the first national aid to local education, and a wide range of new programs to help the poor, and 3) the Vietnam War, a conflict that entangled U.S. forces for almost a decade. These policies unleashed a set of changes in the party system that are still felt today. The character of the Democratic Party was forever altered, as it became the home of African-Americans grateful for Johnson's leadership in getting them

the vote nationwide and ironically also peace activist determined to stop Johnson's war and prevent other similar conflicts in the future. Meanwhile, conservative southern whites, who had once been the base of the Democratic Party, increasingly drifted to the Republicans.

One result of the Johnson legislative blitz was that for the first time in U.S. history African-Americans were effectively able to vote throughout the South, ending centuries of white monopoly on political power. Latinos in Texas and other Southwestern states gained similar advantage from Johnson's legislation. The vast majority of African-Americans and a significant if lesser proportion of Latinos have come to vote Democratic. The once all-white southern Democratic Party is now a multi-ethnic coalition. However, many whites, dissatisfied with sharing power, have over the years gravitated to the Republican alternative, which although not officially segregated like the old Democratic Party, is still overwhelmingly white, particularly in the South.

At the national level, while the Republicans have been making dramatic gains in the South, the Democrats have been making smaller gains among liberals in the rest of the country, but not enough to match the Republicans. The Republicans, once clearly the minority party, have caught up, and perhaps surpassed the Democrats, who are no longer the majority party. With the migration of the southern conservative wing of the Democratic Party to the Republicans and the liberal northeastern wing of the Republican Party to the Democrats, the once ideologically diverse parties are now almost purely polarized, with all the left forces on the Democratic side and all the right forces on the Republican side, although moderates remain in both parties. While from the 1920s through the 1960s Republicans were more cautious about supporting military interventions overseas, this is no

longer the case.

The changes in Texas politics are even more dramatic. Democrats had once held a virtual political monopoly in Texas, controlling the governor's mansion and the state legislature for a century with no serious opposition. But as African-Americans and Latinos moved into the Democratic Party and larger numbers of conservative whites moved to the Republicans, the Texas Republican Party revived and eventually came to rule. Texas is now a majority Republican state, and was the training ground and launching pad for George W. Bush's presidential quest.

The effect of the changing party system on the partisan balance in the Texas state legislature is only a little more striking than in the average southern state. From 1901 to 1959 Democrats held virtually every seat in the Texas state legislature. Republicans held no more than one Texas Senate or two Texas House seats in any Texas legislature and except for one Populist elected in 1901 no third parties were represented. When Republican John Tower took Lyndon Johnson's former Senate seat in 1962, he was the first Republican to win a Texas-wide election in over 100 years. In 1966, after President Johnson pushed through the civil rights and social reform legislation so unpopular in Texas, Republicans re-elected Tower as Texas Senator, elected two Republicans to the U.S. House of Representatives, including George Bush, Sr., and elected more members to the Texas legislature than any time in 90 years. Republican numbers in the Texas legislature and the U.S. congressional delegation grew steadily in the 1970s-1990s. In 1978 Texas elected its first Republican governor in over 100 years. By 1986 Republicans won not only the gubernatorial race, but more than 1/3 of the Texas House seats. By 1996 Republicans won a majority in the Texas Senate to support Governor George W. Bush, who had been elected in 1994.

Thirty years of Republican gains in Texas state politics culminated in 2002 when Republicans solidified their hold as the majority party in Texas. They won all statewide offices under contest, a majority in both the Texas House and Senate, a majority of U.S. House seats, and continued to control both U.S. Senate seats.

Just as the presidency of Lyndon Johnson was a key trigger in this national and Texas political realignment, so the Bush family was a central set of characters in this drama. George Bush senior was a key figure at the beginning of the Republican emergence and George W. Bush was a key figure in the final attainment of a Republican majority in Texas politics. In 1966, Bush the elder was one of the first two Republicans elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Texas in 90 years, which launched his national political career. But as an elected Texas Republican the elder Bush was a very rare bird. By the time of Bush the younger's governorship and presidency the Republicans were decisively establishing themselves as the majority party in Texas politics. When Bush the elder joined the national House of Representatives, he was part of a Republican minority which would remain a minority for 40 consecutive years. In 2002 Bush the younger became the first Republican president to govern with his party in control of both houses of Congress in 50 years.

### **Johnson and Bush: Different Men, Different Presidencies**

While Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush are both sons of Texas, on the surface that seems to be just about all they have in common. The Bushes are a wealthy, powerful political dynasty with roots in New England and the military-industrial complex,

transplanted into Texas oil, and joined by marriage with the Walker family (the W in George W. Bush and George H. W. Bush stands for Walker), another wealthy dynasty tied to the military-industrial complex. (Phillips)

Johnson, on the other hand, came from a simple middle class family in the hill country. (Miller) The contrast between the patrician and the commoner, the boy with a silver spoon in his mouth and the self-made man could hardly be greater. Johnson got his baptism in politics as a student leader at San Marcos Teacher's College. George W. Bush's began his political career running for governor of Texas.

Michael Lind, a Texan himself, argues that Johnson and Bush represent two different Texan political-economic traditions. (Lind 2002) Johnson comes from the modernist tradition, which

is eager to embrace the Space Age and the Information Age...a high-tech state-capitalist economy, in which government, business, and universities collaborate to promote innovation in computer science, biotech, and other cutting-edge fields, and in which public institutions supply needed investment capital, and expertise...a broadly egalitarian meritocracy, not a traditional social order stratified by caste and class. (Lind 2003)

On the other hand Bush represents a different tradition

a society with a primitive extractive economy based on agriculture, livestock, petroleum, and mining, whose poorly educated workers lack health protection and job safety. In this Texas, low wages and inadequate spending on public goods like education

and pollution abatement are considered a source of comparative economic advantage...a cruel caste society in which a cultivated but callous oligarchy of rich white families (dominate). both the elite and the majority in this Texas share a profound social conservatism and an attachment to military values unknown anywhere else in the English-speaking world, except in other Southern states. (Lind 2003)

Certainly in domestic politics Johnson's and Bush's visions were completely different. Johnson was a product of the New Deal, a believer in government activism to solve economic and social problems. In his early presidency Johnson, going against his Texas heritage, used his legendary legislative skills to procure passage of historic civil rights bills that did more to heal the racial wounds of American society than any president since Lincoln freed the slaves. Johnson's Great Society was a second New Deal, the second greatest expansion of government social programs in American history, creating government medical insurance for the elderly and the poor, national aid to poor school districts, great food and other assistance to those in poverty, and more. Many blame Johnson for setting in motion large increases in government spending, but his programs lifted millions out of poverty, provided health care to millions who would otherwise not have had it, and improved the lives of millions of poor people and middle class people experiencing temporary economic hardship. While it has become popular to criticize the expansion of government in Johnson's time in the abstract, with a few exceptions the actual programs created are still hugely popular with the people.

George W. Bush comes from a different background and a different generation, and his domestic policies reflect that. His most

important domestic priority has been tax cuts, which have gone disproportionately to the wealthy. The tax cuts are also quite popular. However, compared to Johnson's programs, Bush's impact on domestic policy has been small. He will be forever remembered for his terrorism war, particularly the Iraq War.

Despite the differences in the men and their domestic policies, both Johnson and Bush led the U.S. into disastrous wars, wars of aggression that were not necessary and not right.

### **Vietnam and Iraq: Common Threads**

There are certain common threads in the Vietnam and Iraq Wars. First of all, the reasons given to the American public and the world for the wars do not fully explain the decisions to go to war. It is not just that both missions have failed to accomplish their goals. It is that the justifications for going to war in the first place have proven to be gross and ultimately transparent rationalizations.

In Vietnam, the U.S. was ostensibly fighting to protect the freedom of the Vietnamese people and keep South Vietnam from going communist. (Furer, Hunt) However, that is not the way the vast majority of Vietnamese people saw the American presence. Vietnam had been fighting for its freedom from the Chinese, the French, the Japanese, and the French again before the Americans stepped in as the last in a long line of foreign forces trying to run Vietnam from afar. It was actually the United States that had insisted on the partition of Vietnam into southern and northern zones after independence from France in a vain attempt to rally minority anti-communist forces in the south. It was the United States that blocked



promised elections to reunify the country because it knew the independence leader, Ho Chi Minh, who was also a communist, would win. By the time U.S. forces began arriving in the hundreds of thousands, to the Vietnamese the U.S. was just another in a long line of foreign occupying powers.

Similarly, while President Bush portrays victory in the war in Iraq as crucial to his terror war, each day the war drags on more terrorists are created in Iraq and the rest of the Muslim world. Saddam Hussein was an evil and aggressive dictator, but he had been thoroughly defeated and humiliated and stripped of his weapons of mass destruction after the first Gulf War. Furthermore Saddam was not likely to share what weapons he had with even Iraqi loyalists much less independent Islamic militants he despised and who despised him and who Saddam could not control.

So what does account for these decisions to go to war? Any explanation of major decisions of U.S. foreign policy must begin with the brute fact that the United States is the global hegemon and all its major actions are driven by a desire to maintain its hegemonic position. The U.S. has world-wide economic, political, and military interests that lead it to intervene in all kinds of conflicts around the world. The U.S. calculates its national interest on a global scale, regarding much of the world as within its strategic domain. That is the basic reality of U.S. foreign policy at least since 1940.

However, the Vietnam and Iraq Wars were massive miscalculations of U.S. national self-interest, highly inadvisable uses of military force for a global hegemon. The outcome of these conflicts shows that neither war was a rational choice for furthering the project of American hegemony. Furthermore, they were errors in

the same direction. More than simple miscalculation led to the same kind of immense mistake being made twice. It is not so much the fact of U.S. intervention, which can be taken as “normal,” that needs to be explained, but rather the same enormous error in judgment being repeated. So something more must be at work, something more is needed to truly understand these tragic fiascoes.

One of the most common explanations given for the Iraq war is access to resources, namely oil. No one can deny that the entire Middle East is a strategic theater for the U.S. and its allies. You don't see large numbers of U.S. troops in Antarctica.

However, there are a couple of problems with the simple “blood for oil” thesis. First of all, there are no such similar resource riches in Vietnam. There are important resources in the Southeast Asian region, but nothing like the oil in the Middle East. So access to resources is not as good an explanation for the Vietnam War.

But more importantly, the Iraq War is a mind-bogglingly costly way to secure oil. The Iraq war has already cost over \$300 billion dollars, roughly half the annual GDP of Korea, not to mention the almost 3,000 American lives and 20,000 wounded or tens of thousands of Iraqi dead or the hundreds of thousands wounded, or the millions terrorized. (National Priorities Project, Zfacts) The global price of crude oil has jumped from less than \$20 a barrel before talk of the Iraq invasion began to spook the markets to the current range of \$55-77 dollars a barrel. (Department of Energy) If the Iraq War is an investment in oil, it is the worst investment ever made.

Another common suspect to explain this over-reliance on military force in both Vietnam and Iraq would be the military-industrial

complex. Certainly one traditional explanation of the recurrence of war in the capitalist era is the profitability of war for the so-called “merchants of death.” And it is certainly true that the U.S. has a massive military-industrial complex. The U.S. spends almost as much on its military as the entire rest of the world combined.

Yet while the military-industrial complex gives the U.S. certain capabilities, it does not require presidents to use those capabilities. Having capabilities is like having tools. Certainly, when an American president looks in his tool belt, he finds a lot of military tools and few diplomatic tools. However, choosing to enter a major war has high domestic and international political costs.

And the military-industrial complex gets most of its profits from high tech weaponry, not simple ground wars. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century world, the artists of the military-industrial complex have become true virtuosos. The war profiteers get their profits whether there is war or not. A sense of foreign threat and some low intensity conflicts are necessary to make the case for weapons sales. But major wars like Iraq or Vietnam are not necessary for business anymore.

Senator William Fulbright, the author of the Fulbright Scholarship program, was an early opponent of the Vietnam War. He gave many speeches in which he denounced American hubris in Vietnam and eventually wrote a book entitled *The Arrogance of Power*. Certainly America’s great power has at times made the United States arrogant and overconfident of its ability to shape events in far off lands with ways of life beyond the ken of Washington or Wall Street. As conservatives are so fond of pointing out about the domestic state, power corrupts and great power corrupts greatly.

In fact, it was to a large degree successes that tempted the U.S. to take the big risks it did in Vietnam and Iraq. In the 1950s the U.S. had successfully waged several low intensity counterinsurgency conflicts against communist guerillas or populist revolutionaries, most notably in Iran, the Philippines, and Guatemala. The U.S. believed it was only applying tried and true methods of counterinsurgency when it began its campaign against the Viet Cong after Vietnam won its independence from France.

Similarly, it was the ease of victory in the first war with Iraq coupled with the fall of the Soviet empire which led the neoconservatives in the U.S. to believe that not only would Saddam's regime topple at the slightest push, but that the Americans would be welcomed as liberators, that they would be perceived in Iraq much as they were viewed in eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet empire.

So in both the case of Vietnam and the case of Iraq a series of recent successes left the U.S. feeling virtually invincible. The Cuban missile crisis or the events of September 11, 2001 which came before each war both would have seemed to have shattered the American illusion of invincibility. However, subsequent behavior indicates these events were both processed more like wounds to narcissistic pride than warnings of the limits of American power. Failure to heed warnings about the limits of one's power and about the consequences of one's actions on others are classic signs of hubris.

No doubt American arrogance engendered a carelessness and disregard of consequences that contributed to the mistakes in Vietnam and Iraq. Yet arrogance alone does not seem to explain errors of such magnitude, particularly mistakes that are so similar.

Is it simply a coincidence that America's two great elective wars

in the past half century have been embarked upon by presidents from Texas? It is worth exploring how Texan mythology highlights elements in American national character and foreign policy thinking that led Texan presidents into making the same poor policy choices. Let us return to the icons of Texan culture to see if they shed light on the behavior of Presidents Johnson and Bush. These characteristics of Texan culture are also found in the national political culture, but they are more deeply held and predominate over other values and habits more completely in Texas than the rest of the U.S.

War is risky business, even if you are a superpower. Exalted ideals can be advanced or defended and great national advantage can be won in war. However, many lives are lost and enormous sums of money are spent even if things go well, and if things do not go well the cost in lives and treasure is exponentially greater.

Yet the Texas oil baron is acculturated to taking big risks. The Bush family has invested a fortune in oil and Lyndon Johnson, although not an oil man, rose quickly to high office as a high stakes political entrepreneur. Once in the White House they were willing to gamble other people's lives and treasure on the promises of military victory and glory. High stakes risk taking is not uniquely Texan, but it is perhaps more highly esteemed in Texan culture than in the rest of the U.S.

Of course, the true believer, convinced that God or the immutable forces of history are guiding his actions, need not fear any worldly power. Driven by self-righteousness, by a kind of Messiah complex, it has become U.S. foreign policy doctrine that only American power can save the world, that in the words of Bill Clinton, the U.S. is the "indispensable nation." Even highly secularized politicians almost

universally believe this special American civil religion.

Presidents Bush and Johnson brought from Texas politics an additional belief that made the Messiah complex more deadly, a superstitious belief in military power as the fetish that solves all foreign policy problems. During its move from Mexico into, out of, and back into the U.S. Texas was the central battlefield in two wars and a minor theater in another, first the war for its independence from Mexico, second the war between the U.S. and Mexico over its annexation, and then the U.S. Civil War. In their formative wars with Mexico Texans achieved their independence and then their integration into the U.S. by military force. Although Texans were on the losing side in the U.S. Civil War, the use of paramilitary violence by the Ku Klux Klan and others helped keep whites in absolute power in defiance of the national government for almost another century. From its formative years up until the civil rights movement and Vietnam War in the 1960s, the “lesson” Texans had learned from their history was that war and violence works, especially when applied to non-white people. The Messiah from Texas is anything but the Prince of Peace.

Superstition is like religious faith in that it cannot be contradicted by reason. But superstition is unlike religious faith in that it makes an unbreakable connection between belief and particular actions in the mundane world. A faithful person can realize that his actions are in error and change his beliefs about the relationship between his faith and his actions in the world. A superstitious belief cannot be contradicted by experience. It becomes a false idol which demands ever greater sacrifices when it fails to produce results.

So for example, when the neoconservatives in the Bush administration interpret the history of the Vietnam War, they do not

see the U.S. on the wrong side of history and the will of the Vietnamese people. They see the failure of the U.S. to apply enough military force early enough and long enough to achieve its objectives. In this religion, the idol of military force cannot fail. Failure can only be explained by acolytes failing to sacrifice enough at his altar.

Those with the Messiah complex have a simple picture of the world divided into good and evil. In the days of the Cold War the U.S. was the leader of the “free world” and the Soviet bloc was the dominion of godless communism. Such simple minded Manichean dualities cloud the mind. Most of America’s allies in the “free world” for most of the Cold War were military dictatorships from South America through southern Europe, South Africa and most of Asia, including South Korea. Socialism was a major force in the liberation movements that ended colonial rule of most of the world’s population. It was exactly this misunderstanding of the nature of the liberation movement that contributed greatly to the American miscalculation in Vietnam.

Similarly, George W. Bush sees an axis of evil in the world. After 9/11 he plainly spoke that nations were either with the U.S. or against us. He has proclaimed a doctrine of unilateral pre-emption that puts the U.S. above international law, unbound by mere human institutions when it chooses to go to war, like a divine power. And like kings of old who claimed absolute divine power, George W. Bush has proven to be quite humanly fallible.

Finally, the cowboy looms so large in American mythology, not because cowboys were so important in building America, but because that is how Americans like to imagine themselves, as rugged individuals alone against nature, unbound by social convention. The

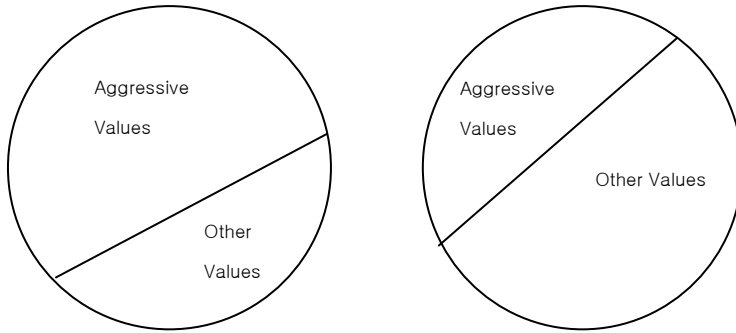
recurrent theme of the cowboy movie, of the lone independent gunman bringing order to the lawless range, captures much of how America wants to see itself in the world.

America's allies counseled against both the Vietnam and Iraq wars. In the case of Vietnam it was almost unanimous, with former colonial power France giving dire warnings and only Australia and South Korea sending their own forces to fight. In Iraq after 9/11 there was marginally more support with roughly half of America's NATO allies eventually sending troops, although many have since withdrawn them. But significantly, none of America's Islamic allies sent fighting forces. In the case of Vietnam the U.S. first avoided the UN and then blocked UN consideration of the issue. The UN was deeply involved in Iraq from the time it sanctioned the first Iraq war, but it specifically rebuffed a U.S. request to authorize a second Iraq war. Cowboy country went ahead on its own anyway.

Texan values are U.S. values writ large, making Texas at once representative of typical American thinking and at the same time unrepresentative in the fervor with which certain values are held over other components of the American creed. The U.S. flag has 50 stars symbolizing the 50 states. The flag of Texas has a single star, symbolizing that Texas was once an independent nation. Texas is nicknamed the Lone Star state, and since Texan presidents elected to invade Vietnam and Iraq I have chosen to call them the Lone Star wars. The term Lone Star also symbolizes U.S. unilateralism, the U.S. acting as a lone cowboy in what it perceives as a lawless world, unbound by the advice of friends and allies much less existing international law.



### Foreign Policy Views in Texas Foreign Policy Views across U.S.



#### Red States, Blue States: The Geographic, Political, and Ideological Divide

Both the Vietnam and Iraq wars eventually proved quite divisive on the home front. In both cases, temporary unity of purpose gave way to weariness with weekly casualty reports and impatience with intractable foreign political chaos.

The ideological divisions over the wars are expressed in geographical fault lines that match the overall patterns of support for the political parties. A southern-western axis, anchored by Texas, often called the red states because that is the color used on TV election maps, tended to support both the wars and these days the Republican Party. A bi-coastal axis, supplemented by Midwestern isolationism, which TV designates the blue states, tended to oppose the wars and these days tends to support the Democratic Party. If a mapping of the opposition in the U.S. Senate to the resolution that gave President Bush the authority to go to war in Iraq is compared to

the 2004 electoral vote map, the geographic pattern is quite similar. President Bush and the war resolution are supported in most of the West and the South, while opposition to Bush and the war are both strongest in the Northeast, the upper Midwest and the Pacific Coast.

These differences can be explained somewhat by demographics. The antiwar states are more urbanized. They have a higher proportion of African-Americans, immigrants, and poor, all groups that historically have been less likely to support adventurist foreign policies, perhaps because they tend to bear most of the burden of fighting while getting few if any benefits that come from victory.

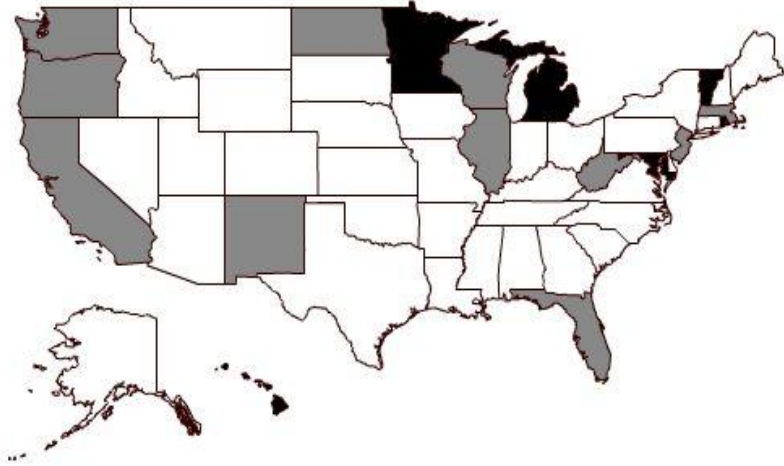
There are regional economic factors at work also. Coastal areas have ports and economies that depend on trade, which can be upset by international conflicts. While Midwestern farmers like to sell their grain and meat abroad, they have strong isolationist tendencies, historically not seeing what their stake is in the conflicts of Europe and Asia.

Rural Southerners, on the other hand, are historically more expansionist and militaristic. The old cotton culture quickly exhausted the land and put a high premium on acquiring new land. Thus historically Southern politicians were expansionist, lusting after territory in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. Controlling the slave population required paramilitarization of Southern society and so military training was widespread among white males. The Civil War experience, when the South nearly won despite being badly outmanned and outgunned because of its superior military training and tactics, further ingrained a tradition of military service as a badge of honor in southern society.

While regional differences in views on foreign policy could be reduced to demographics and economics, there is also an autonomous ideological dimension. Americans from all regions have a strong sense of the superiority of the American way of life over other cultures and of America's mission to reform the world. The Messiah complex runs deep across all regions. But in the red states there is a greater enmity toward the rest of the world, a greater sense that large parts of the rest of the world are implacably hostile to the U.S., and irredeemably evil. The true faith must be spread through the sword.

In the blue states the sense of superiority tends to have a more cosmopolitan flavor. There is more confidence that the rest of the world will eventually come around to the American model and thus Americans can be more reconciled to differences as the inevitable process of Americanization unfolds. The Messiah will win the hearts and minds of the world through the superiority of his institutions and life-style so there is less need for the sword.

### Senate Vote on Resolution Authorizing the War in Iraq



Both Senators Against



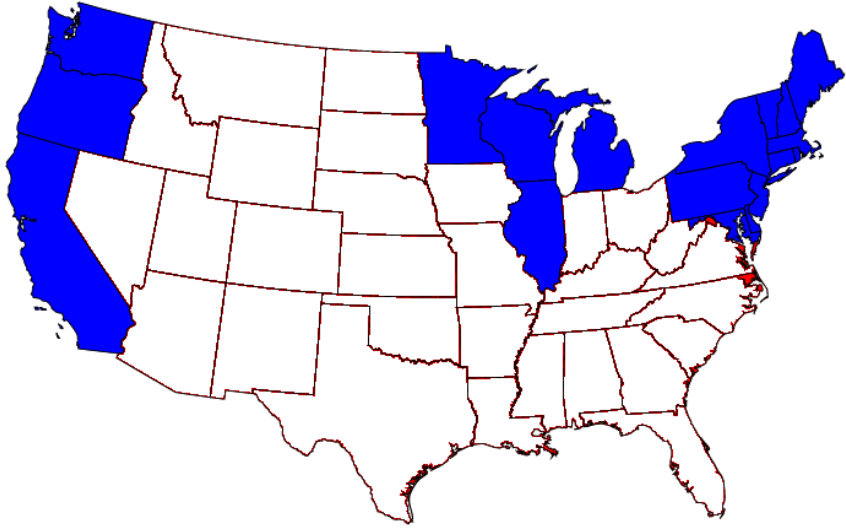
One Senator Against



Both Senators For



### 2004 Presidential Vote



 Kerry

 Bush

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Abstract

**Two Tales of Texans: LBJ, George W. Bush, and the Lone Star Wars**

**Florig**

There are important similarities in the mistakes made in the Vietnam and Iraq Wars, mistakes caused by significant defects in the predominant way of thinking of American foreign policy makers. Perhaps it is no accident that both these wars were undertaken during presidencies of men from Texas, since these characteristic flawed ideological views are more widely and deeply embedded in Texan political culture than in the rest of the country. This article paints in very broad strokes some myths and stereotypes of Texas, some “grand narratives” of Texan culture, analyzing the origin of these grand narratives in Texas history and politics. It briefly sketches the backgrounds and presidencies of Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush. Several theories are considered as the fundamental causes of the mistakes in Vietnam and Iraq. Finally, data on the regional conflict that continues to polarize the U.S. over the war and politics more generally is analyzed.

**Key words:** Vietnam War, Iraq War, Lyndon Johnson, George W. Bush, U.S. foreign policy