

Vietnam syndrome significantly shaped history essay

[History](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

William PearsonThe "Vietnam Syndrome" significantly shaped U. S. foreign policy toward Central America in the 1980s. Discuss. Despite President Reagan's insistence that Central America would not become another Vietnam[1]regardless of U. S intervention in the region, pressure from both foreign policy circles and the public ensured that the memory of Vietnam would shape U. S foreign policy toward Central America throughout the 1980's. During the 1980's, there were a number of potential foreign policy flashpoints in Central America, and the US's response was distinctly measured and apprehensive primarily due to the legacy of Vietnam. In order to understand how this apprehension and timidity has influence foreign policy, first I will explore the concept of the Vietnam Syndrome, and it's relevance to U. S foreign policy. The influence it has had upon U. S foreign policy will be evaluated via analysis of significant U. S foreign policy actions in Central America during the 1980's, such as U. S funding of the El Salvadorian government, the funding of the Contras in Nicaragua, and their invasions of Grenada and Panama. These actions demonstrate that while the U. S government was not entirely hamstrung by the memory of Vietnam, the memory remained a palpable barrier to prolonged military action. The concept of a Vietnam Syndrome was first proposed by Ronald Reagan in a speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)[2]. He suggested that the guilt and fear clouding the legacy of Vietnam had caused the executive (the Carter administration, at the time) to kowtow to non-interventionist pressure, allowing the USSR to outperform the U. S in the Cold War[3]. In more general terms, the Vietnam Syndrome has come to mean the US's antipathy towards prolonged military action and direct intervention in the aftermath of their

extraction from Vietnam. There were two primary reasons for this, after the US had such a gruelling ordeal in Vietnam, the general public did not want another Vietnam. Public opinions polls in 1983 showed how scarring the experience was for the American public, and their reluctance to go to war was demonstrated by their opposition to Reagan's foreign policy stances, with two thirds of Americas unhappy with Reagan's handling of the El Salvador situation[4], and 25% believing he would start an unnecessary war[5]. The second reason was the government's decision to acknowledge this, and their avoidance in situations which could have provoked prolonged conflict as a result. The foreign policy strategy shift to a more non-interventionist stance can be attributed to the memory of the Vietnam War, and despite Reagan's insistence to the contrary[6]his foreign policy, and the policies of Carter and Bush were in part shaped by the Vietnam Syndrome. In the wake of Vietnam, American foreign policy was affected by Vietnam Syndrome. One aspect of this was the deterrence of direct military intervention. The Vietnam War led to the unpopularity of military intervention in Central America and especially El Salvador, with 70% of the American public believing it would become " another Vietnam"[7]. President Reagan in the 1980's used the Reagan Doctrine[8]-a doctrine promoting the rollback of communist governments worldwide, using a variety of methods. The domino theory (a central tenet of the Reagan Doctrine)[9]suggested that if Nicaragua and El Salvador became communist, other nations in the region would soon follow. Given that significant military action in Central America was politically infeasible, in order to maintain its sphere of influence, the US turned to less conventional methods. In Central America these methods were

primarily funding of anti-communist forces, such as supporting and financing the El Salvadorian government in the El Salvadorian Civil War[10]. However, Reagan did not initiate U. S support of the El Salvadorian government, this first occurred under the Carter administration, with \$5. 7 million in military aid donated in 1980[11], when Reagan took power in 1981, he continued this strategy. In addition to money and military aid, the US provided military advisers to aid the El Salvadorian government[12]. The U. S government supported the rise of the military junta under Jose Napoleon Duarte in 1984, in elections which were held in an " atmosphere of terror and despair, of macabre rumour and grisly reality"[13]. Furthermore, despite accusations that the junta employed death squads among other atrocities the U. S chose to turn a blind eye to these clear human rights abuses, on the condition that their human rights record was 'improving'[14]. Domestic commentators and in 1983, congresspeople in the U. S noted the similarities between the situation in El Salvador and that of the lead-up to the Vietnam war-with some suggesting that " The similarity to Vietnam is so close it's almost uncanny"[15]and this made direct intervention less politically viable. The U. S decision to provide funding for this regime rather than directly helping militarily was in part due to the legacy of Vietnam, and to avoid being dragged into another Vietnam. In addition to funding the El Salvadorian government, the U. S also funded the 'Contras', a rebel movement in Nicaragua to oppose communist forces in the region, more specifically the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. Nicaragua was one of the primary nations targeted by the Reagan Doctrine due to the domino theory, and therefore the Contras received extensive funding, in 1982 the CIA was given

the authority to recruit and support the Contras with \$19 million[16].

President Reagan at the time stated that he had no intention of deploying American troops in the region[17]presumably to avoid the political ramifications of such an unpopular decision, though this reduced the credibility of the claim that it was one of the most important targets in the fight against communism[18]. The switch from direct intervention to indirect aid was again partly caused by the political infeasibility of intervening in a country which many perceived as having similarities to Vietnam. As with the El Salvadorian government, the U. S funded this group in spite of their extensive human rights abuses[19], including the utilisation of human rights violations as a strategy to provoke fear and terror. The group was accused of rape, murder of civilians, torture and a variety of other crimes, and one member of the Contras, Edgar Chamorro suggested that the CIA " did not discourage such tactics"[20], and encouraged any tactics necessary to defeat the Sandinistas. Furthermore, the extent to which some members of the Reagan administration supported the Contras can be seen via the lengths they went to continue funding them against the wishes of Congress under the Boland Agreement. During the Iran-Contra affair, the members of the U. S executive illegally sold arms to Iran to maintain funding for the Contras via U. S intelligence agencies[21]. That members of the Reagan administration were willing to defy Congress shows the level of support the Contras received from the Reagan administration. The invasion of Grenada was the US's first direct military conflict post Vietnam, and as such was a key tipping point. While this signalled that the US was no longer entirely averse to the use of military force, It must however be noted that the US chose it's

target with the Vietnam Syndrome firmly in mind. After Vietnam, American decision makers were wary about getting entrenched in significant conflicts, and with that in mind, the invasion of Grenada was a key post-Vietnam experience. The US chose to act directly in Grenada in part because it was a war which given their military assets they were guaranteed to win quickly and effectively with minimal losses. The invasion was prompted by the political instability caused by a military coup in which the incumbent Prime Minister, Maurice Bishop was murdered[22]. In addition to this justification, the US cited the protection U. S medical students present at St. George's University[23], and their protection drew broad public support for the war[24]. While the UN condemned the invasion as an act in violation of international law[25], the U. S acted at the request of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States several other Caribbean nations[26]. This request prompted the U. S to act, though it could be suggested that it would have acted with or without the request to counter instability in a nation so close to its borders. The fighting lasted just 3 days in an overwhelming display of military superiority, with minimal casualties. Despite Reagan's protestations that the invasion of Grenada proved that the U. S had cured the Vietnam Syndrome[27], the choice to invade Grenada was undoubtedly shaped by the legacy of Vietnam. The entire operation typified the mindset of the Vietnam Syndrome-that the U. S could only risk conflict when it was guaranteed to win, in order to protect a delicate national psyche. The invasion of Panama was in many ways a similar operation to the invasion of Grenada, and was similarly influenced by Vietnam Syndrome. Initiated in 1989 under the Bush Administration, it was another relatively low-risk American operation, without

provision for a long term military operation, due to the weakness of the opposition forces. The U. S justified the invasion with a number of reasons, including the protection of U. S citizens, defending democracy and most importantly protecting the neutrality of the Panama Canal[28]. The U. S deposed the Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega within 2 weeks[29], in an overwhelming victory. As with the invasion of Grenada, this action was deemed in contravention of international law by the U. N[30], and once again the U. S chose to ignore it's protestations. Furthermore, as with Grenada there was an attempt by members of the U. N security council to pass a resolution calling for the U. S to withdraw its forces and as with Grenada this was vetoed by with U. S, with the support of Britain and France[31]. The invasion of Panama was a typical American operation post-Vietnam. Victory was guaranteed, because without this cast-iron guarantee of victory the chances of U. S intervention would have been reduced. However, this was a more substantive operation than the invasion of Grenada, and it's undeniable that the neutrality of the Panama Canal was vitally important to the US, furthermore opinion polling suggests that the public were generally favourable to the invasion of Panama, perhaps signalling that the Vietnam Syndrome, and the associated aversion to military action was declining by 1989. It should be noted that despite the influence of the Vietnam Syndrome, it did not cause total operational paralysis. The U. S still exercised considerable influence upon Central America during the period, funding rebel groups and engaged in two military interventions. Furthermore, it would be questionable to suggest that the U. S would have militarily intervened in El Salvador or Nicaragua had Vietnam not occurred, it would seem unlikely that

they would risk war when funding rebel groups less costly and less risk to U. S citizens. Therefore I am not suggesting that the legacy of Vietnam wholly dictated U. S policy, Reagan, Carter and Bush all acted contrary to public opinion on occasion, but I would suggest that it significantly influenced foreign policy decision making relating to Central America throughout the 1980's. Therefore it did have a 'shaping' role in U. S policy, with the memory of Vietnam being at the forefront of the minds of foreign policy officials. In summary, the U. S foreign policy in Central America was consistently constrained by Vietnam Syndrome. The nationwide anxiety at the prospect of another Vietnam rendered it politically difficult to engage in prolonged military conflicts, and as such this led to the U. S adopting a less direct attitude to foreign policy. This is demonstrated by their actions toward both the El Salvadorian government, whom they funded extensively throughout the 1980's, and the Contras in Nicaragua who members of the Reagan administration defied Congress to continue funding. Furthermore, when the U. S did choose to act militarily it acted decisively and against exceedingly weak enemies such as Grenada and Panama. In these conflicts the U. S was concerned with completing the operations on a fast time-scale, and not maintaining a constant military presence due to their experiences In Vietnam. While the U. S did act in defiance of some aspects of the Vietnam Syndrome, the memory of Vietnam clearly heavily influenced U. S foreign policy in Central America during the 1980's

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