

America's Needless Wars: Cautionary Tales of US Involvement in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Iraq. By David R. Contosta. New York: Prometheus Books, 2017. ISBN 978-1-6338-8289-8. Notes. Index. Pp. 206. \$24.00.

The title says it all: *America's Needless Wars*. That's what you call BLUF—Bottom Line Up Front—as today's troops like to say. Professor David R. Contosta of Chestnut Hill College isn't hiding his hole cards in this uncompromising consideration of our country's bungled counterinsurgencies in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Iraq. Spoiler alert: things do not end well.

Contosta's book is not lengthy. Yet in just over 200 pages, he offers a gripping survey of American foreign policy framed to move the reader out of the comfort zone. All the usual suspects show up, from Teddy Roosevelt to his cousin Franklin, from Douglas MacArthur to Condoleezza Rice, as well as Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and two George Bushes, both H. W. and W. With a few exceptions, these people, our elected and appointed representatives, did what they thought to be right. But as the old saw goes, the road to hell is paved with such slippery stones. Time and again, Contosta connects the dots for us. In so doing, he cleverly chooses the right quote, the telling anecdote, and the pithy aside that will stick with you. This is not a happy narrative, but it pulls you in.

The author anchors his assessment on three particularly ugly conflicts. Like the able historian he is, he starts with the one that most of today's Americans don't know well, the Philippine Insurrection. It began in 1899, formally ended in 1902, and sputtered on in remote islands until 1913. More Americans died in this dirty guerrilla conflict than in the much better known Spanish-American War. The Philippine Insurrection featured treachery, water torture, village burnings, and all the other horrors characteristic of irregular warfare among a resistant people. The Filipinos suffered the most, as you'd expect in this sort of brutal confrontation. Some Americans at home objected. A number of U.S. soldiers did, too. The campaign is occasionally, and not incorrectly, counted as an example of a rare event in military annals—a successful counterinsurgency. Still, if this was “winning,” well . . . Contosta saw it as the shape of things to come.

Vietnam held more to form. The U.S. counterinsurgency there floundered from the start. Contosta pulls no punches in tracing the sad course of what passed for American strategy. An attempt to bolster a remote Cold War outpost escalated, to use the favored term of that era, into a major conflict, with American “progress” measured in dead enemy bodies. The smart guys and computer metrics all told us we won in 1967. The North Vietnamese, however, didn't care about the numbers. They bled, and held on, and kept plugging. We bombed. We burned. We chased Charlie Cong.

It went on and on. At home, divided by the war, our country fractured. Young battled old. Black faced off with white. Liberal challenged conservative. Our inner cities and college campuses burned. In the end, we quit the war, with tens of thousands of our own dead, hundreds of thousands gone in shattered Indochina, and nothing left to show for it but bomb craters and graves. Contosta lays it out.

As for Iraq, well, fool me once shame on you. Fool me twice shame on me. Fool me three times and you start to understand why it's very, very dangerous to revel in the moment without ever looking back. We did so in Iraq and as the author points out, that awful bill is still being paid. Henry Ford might have barked that "history is bunk," but David R. Contosta warns us all that if you refuse to do your homework, to understand text and especially context, all the smart bombs and brave Marines in the world won't bail you out.

Why did things go wrong? It's easy to point fingers at zealous presidents, officious counselors, overconfident generals, and overmatched diplomats. But as Contosta demonstrates, the people our Constitution empower to run America—the citizenry and their elected representatives in Congress—proved notably passive in these three awful episodes. Both the Philippines and Iraq prompted grumping and grousing, but no serious legal or electoral challenges. One could say that Vietnam was different, yet the earnest peace marchers and fulminating senators of that time succeeded in closing out the war only after the U.S. phase had ended, with all the damage well and truly done. It resembled tossing a dixie cup of water onto the smoking ruins of the towering inferno.

Yes, *America's Needless Wars* is an angry book. It will frustrate certain scholars, upset other readers, and bedevil a few students, too. But David R. Contosta has marshalled his evidence. He has done the homework. Many of the most damning passages allow the major architects of these gross failures to speak for themselves. It's the kind of stuff that will keep you up at night. It should.

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The War with Germany. Vol. 3. *The Centenary History of Australia and the Great War*. By Robert Stevenson. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-1955-7677-1. Photographs. Maps. Tables. Graphs. Charts. Appendixes. Endnotes. Bibliographic essay. Index. Pp. xvi, 303. A\$62.95.

Stevenson's *The War with Germany* is the third in a set of five volumes that comprise *The Centenary History of Australia and the Great War*, and it is important to remember that when reading this volume. Although very capable of standing alone as an insightful and analytical review of the Australian contribution and participation in the war against Germany, the contents are enhanced when read in conjunction with the other volumes, especially the fifth volume, *The Australian Imperial Force*, by Jean Bou and Peter Dennis (reviewed in *JMH* 81, no. 2 [April 2017], 586–87).

Volume 3 takes the reader from the earliest considerations of the war from the Australian perspective, through the formation and deployment of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF) and that force's successful conquest of German New Guinea, to the participation of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in the war in Europe. Stevenson methodically works from the early

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