

Study Guide Questions for David Vine's
The United States of War:
A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts,
from Columbus to the Islamic State
(University of California Press, 2020)

Below you will find questions that may be helpful for discussing *The United States of War* in a book club, classroom, or any other setting. I start by offering a few suggestions for discussions about war, drawn from my article ["Unpacking the Invisible Military Backpack: 56 Suggestions for Teaching about War."](#) I hope you and others find the book helpful! -David

Start where people are. Assume that people aren't where we are in their understanding and knowledge about war (especially if you have strong feelings about the subject). Like all good teachers, we should put ourselves in the shoes of others.

Discuss "triggers." From the start, acknowledge the difficult, painful, deeply personal subject matter often involved when discussing war. Explain why the subject matter must be difficult. Offer the freedom to leave the discussion and care for their wellbeing if necessary.

Start with the personal. Ask people to explore their personal and familial connections to war, the military, and the Military Industrial Complex. Start, for example, by asking about experiences with military recruiting. Anthropologist Hugh Gusterson asks people to bring in and discuss an item, a thing, a piece of material culture, illustrating their connection to war.

Build empathy. Ask them to imagine how it would feel to live in a war zone, to lose a parent or sibling to war, to be forced to flee their home. Be aware and sensitive as some likely will have lived these experiences.

Assume defensiveness. This is understandable. For many, the book could be among the first to present critical views about U.S. wars, the military, and the United States itself. Many, consciously or not, will experience this as a personal attack, an attack on their identity as "Americans" given how central war is to hegemonic ideas about national identity.

PREFACE AND INTRODUCTION

How did war shape your life/your childhood?

How does the history in *The United States of War* compare to what you learned about US wars in school; in films, books, and other popular media; from family; and other sources growing up?

Were you surprised to learn that the US military has fought so consistently, in so many foreign lands since independence? Why do you think the US government has fought so frequently? (This should be a helpful question to return to throughout the book and especially at the end.)

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PART I

Is the concept of empire/imperialism helpful to understanding U.S. history? How? What, if anything, does it help us to understand? What does it not explain?

If you agree that the US is an empire, what similarities and what differences do you see between the US and other empires?

What do you think of the maps in the book? Does the "Empire of the United States of America" map on pages 12–13 help you to think differently about the US and what the US is? Do any other maps stand out to you? Why?

PART II

"Settler colonialism" is a term one hears increasingly today. How, if at all, does it help us understand U.S. history?

The hundreds of cities, towns, and other places in the US named "Fort" are, as *The United States of War* reveals, evidence of the critical--but largely overlooked--role that U.S. Army forts played in the country's history of expansion and imperial conquest. What other evidence of the United States' history and present-day reality of war is, as anthropologist Catherine Lutz says, "hidden in plain sight" in your daily life? (Some more recent examples to consider: the popularity of camouflage in fashion, exercise "boot camps," first-person-shooter "Call of Duty"-style war video games, and military flyovers at football games, to name a few.)

Did Map 6, "Native Lands and Early US Military Bases Abroad" (pages 46–47), make you think differently about the history of the US? For those readers who live in the 48 contiguous states, did it make you think differently about where you live?

How did you react to the discussion (pages 49–51) of the role of atrocities and "extravagant violence" in what John Grenier calls "America's first way of war" that developed in US wars against Native American nations and peoples?

What's the relationship between racism and U.S. wars? Note that the book suggests that in the case of early wars waged by Euro-Americans against Indigenous Americans, "violence largely led to racism rather than vice versa" whereas later U.S. "Indian Wars" became "race wars."

What's the relationship between capitalism and U.S. wars? Note how the U.S. Navy maintained leasehold bases around the world not long after independence, located near "important

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overseas markets," while the expansion of U.S. Army forts was also closely intertwined with Euro-American settlers' business and individual economic interests.

The United States of War suggests that the U.S. war with Spain in 1898 was not a new phase in U.S. history (and U.S. imperialism) but instead a continuation of the pattern of expansion underway since independence. Do you agree? Should we see the war of 1898--and the conquest of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Guam, and Cuba--as new or different in any ways?

PART III

What role has religion played in the pattern of U.S. wars and empire? What about gender and masculinity? Nationalism? How have these forces intersected with the forces of racism and white supremacy? How, if at all, do you see "assumptions of white, Christian, U.S. American, and male supremacy" (page 135) playing out in and shaping the actions of U.S. leaders and others?

How did the U.S. empire transform in the first part of the 20th century, before World War II?

During World War II U.S. leaders developed a contradictory relationship with colonized territories controlled by the U.S. and other colonial powers, in some cases supporting decolonization and in other cases maintaining colonial relations. Discuss the role of colonies in the changing U.S. empire during and after World War II?

The United States of War explains how the outcome of World War II "could have been different in many ways.... There were other options than the false choice often presented in foreign policy debates between isolationism or the hypermilitarized garrisoning of the globe that emerged from the war" (page 172). What other options and alternatives could U.S. leaders have pursued during and after the war?

PART IV

Beginning in World War II, U.S. military bases abroad took on even greater significance than before the war, as the United States became an "empire of bases." Discuss the role of bases in U.S. imperialism during and after World War II?

During and after World War II, U.S. leaders developed a "vision of the world as intrinsically threatening. Instability, no matter how far removed from the United States, was seen as a threat" (page 180). How do you think this kind of a vision has shaped the US and U.S. citizens in the decades after World War II and to this day?

The United States of War shows how during the so-called Cold War U.S. leaders supported Portugal and other colonial regimes, backed coups, manipulated elections, displaced local peoples like the Chagossians, and engaged in deadly proxy wars, as well as direct U.S. wars in

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Southeast Asia. What do you think and how do you feel about the choices U.S. leaders made during the Cold War that for so many around the world was not at all "cold"?

On page 238, *The United States of War* describes a "continuum of violence" connecting victims of 20th century U.S. wars with Native Americans displaced and killed in prior centuries, the oppression of enslaved Africans and their descendants, the poor, and many others. Beyond similarities in the types of violence involved, what connections do you see between these types of violence?

Can you think of other examples of *blowback*--strictly speaking, the unintended consequences of covert U.S. actions--or of blowback understood more broadly as the unintended consequences of U.S. wars and other foreign policy decisions?

What do you think of the series of "U.S. Bases, Wars, and Expansion Abroad" maps (numbers 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17, 20, 22, 24) tracing the expansion of the US? Do any of the other maps stand out to you at this point in the book? Why?

PART V

What opportunities did U.S. leaders miss for transforming the role of the US in the world at the end of the Cold War? What can we learn from those missed opportunities?

There was nothing inevitable about the post-2001 U.S. wars and the way the George W. Bush administration responded to the attacks of September 11, 2001. What can we learn from the Bush administration's choices? What can and should we do now?

How has racism continued to shape U.S. wars in the 21st century?

What's the relationship between capitalism and U.S. wars in the 20th and 21st centuries? How have military bases abroad and wars been intertwined with U.S. business and individual economic interests?

CONCLUSION

Whether you live in the US or not, how do you feel looking at the "How Would We Feel?" map (page 311)? How would you feel living next to a military base belonging to a foreign military? Go beyond what you *think* to really consider what you would *feel*.

The United States of War shows how the Military Industrial Congressional Complex has been a major foundation of the pattern of U.S. wars since World War II (see especially pages 259–262,

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284–285, 317, 328–329). How has the Military Industrial Congressional Complex shaped your life for good or for ill? How do you see the Complex as shaping the US and the world?

As of October 2020, the U.S. government had spent or obligated \$6.4 trillion on the post-2001 wars. President Eisenhower called such military spending a "theft" (pages 320-321). Do you agree? How else could the U.S. government have spent \$6.4 trillion?

More than half of the federal government's spending controlled by Congress goes to military purposes. Does this match your priorities for spending tax dollars? If you could control federal spending, what percentages of tax dollars would go to education, health care, affordable housing, infrastructure, environmental protection, diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, the military, and other priorities?

Why do you think the U.S. government has fought so frequently throughout U.S. history?

How has *The United States of War* changed how you think about the United States and U.S. history?

What do you think of the book's proposals for change on pages 324–330? What changes would you like to see? What ideas do you have for greater change?

How can we end the pattern of U.S. wars? What can you do to help end wars involving the US and other nations? What can organizations you are part of do? What local movements or organizations can you join to end U.S. wars and make the world more peaceful?

For information about how to get involved in the struggle to end wars, please see <https://www.davidvine.net/takingaction>

To learn more about David's work see www.DavidVine.net and www.BaseNation.us.