

How the ‘victory trap’ places competing demands on US presidents



Since the events of 9/11 the US has embroiled itself in a number of conflicts as part of the War on Terror, such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Throughout many of these conflicts, US presidents have emphasized the need for victory over opposing forces. [Jonny Hall](#) looks at what he terms, the ‘victory trap’, where fear of losing face – and office – means American leaders work to persuade the electorate that decisive victory is attainable in the conflicts the country is involved in. This rhetoric, he writes, traps presidents between the need for victory and the strategic realities of conflicts and public reluctance towards the costs of war.

As Liana Fix of the Council on Foreign Relations [observed](#) last year in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, defining victory in war is no easy business. This dynamic is particularly powerful in the military conflicts against transnational terrorist organizations that the United States has been fighting since 2001, given that the political tactic of terrorism ‘[can never be eliminated](#)’. Even Donald Rumsfeld – one of the key players in the George W. Bush administration’s “War on Terror” as Secretary of Defense – [recognized](#) as early as 24 September 2001 that “the idea of eliminating” terrorism “from the face of the earth is setting a threshold that’s too high.” And yet, even as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq went awry, George W. Bush stated seven times between October 2005 and July 2006 that “we will never accept anything less than complete victory” over transnational terrorist organizations.

The need to declare victory

Although Barack Obama and Donald Trump used slightly different language when describing the War on Terror, the three presidents to have been commander-in-chief for a full term during the conflict have all emphasized the decisive and conclusive nature of

‘victory’ against transnational terrorist organizations. Given that politicians are keen to maintain their credibility by making achievable promises, why might this be the case?

As I have detailed [previously](#), the idea of ‘winning’ and ‘victory’ plays an important role in dominant ideas about war in the US. For example, in Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s [response](#) to the Pearl Harbor attacks in 1941, he affirmed to Congress that “the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.” The importance of ‘victory’ was consolidated by World War II and became, as Bush (2000) later [contended](#), one of the main “lessons of Vietnam . . . the goal [of war] must be clear, and the victory must be overwhelming.” Influential [research](#) from Duke University political science professor, Peter Feaver, and colleagues has also linked this back to support for specific American wars, arguing that beliefs about the likelihood of future success (i.e. ‘victory’) – as opposed to casualty levels – plays the preeminent role in determining the degree to which the American public will support ongoing military conflicts.

Losing conflicts abroad may mean losing voters at home

Following logically from that, the documentary record [shows](#) that US presidents have been deeply concerned about ‘losing’ in international politics, especially since the ‘loss of China’ to communism in 1949. This aligns with International Relations [scholarship](#) on the strong correlation between losing wars and losing office in both democracies and nondemocracies. In sum then, widespread notions of the importance of ‘victory’ and the perceived consequences of ‘losing’ in war point to why presidents are inclined to try and persuade the American electorate that decisive victory is attainable.

This rhetoric, however, creates a ‘[victory trap](#)’. At the broadest level, twenty-first-century conflict has recently been [described](#) as ‘unseen, ambiguous, and anything but victorious’. Even within the central war zones of Afghanistan and Iraq, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates [reflected](#) how ‘the best possible outcome would not look to most Americans like winning or a victory.’ Furthermore, another legacy of the Vietnam War is the perception amongst policymakers that the impact of wars overseas must be limited on the American public. Then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William Crowe concisely [summarised](#) this view in 1989:

every time I face the problem of having to deploy [troops] in ... third world contingencies, instabilities, what the American public wants is for the U.S. military to

dominate the situation, to do it quickly, to do it without loss of life, to do it without any peripheral damage, and then not to interrupt what's going on in the United States...

Much like inconsistent demands from opinion polls where the American public desires lower taxes and higher levels of government service along with a balanced budget, UCLA political science professor, John Zaller, has [argued](#) that US public opinion effectively wants 'to have its cake and eat it too' when it comes to the use of military force, creating the dual pressures of the 'victory trap'.

The 'victory trap' explains the reasons why presidents use the unrealistically decisive language of victory and the political consequences of this rhetoric. On the one hand, the electoral consequences of 'losing' wars lead presidents to make claims about 'winning' and eventual 'victory.' On the other hand, strategic realities and public reluctance to bear the costs of total victory result in policymakers facing criticism for being unable to produce results proportionate to their rhetoric.

The 'Victory Trap' in practice: The necessity of 'Victory'

How did the 'victory trap' manifest itself during the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations? According to [Richard Jackson](#) of the University of Otago, 'victory' was a central theme of Bush's rhetoric concerning the War on Terror, and 'in virtually every case' was 'stated grammatically as a certain fact', such as in the quote above. Focusing on the Iraq War for example, the Bush administration emphasized successes and the likelihood of eventual victory when public support was falling, particularly with the 2005 'National Strategy for Victory in Iraq' that reflected the [influence of Feaver](#) who had recently joined the National Security Council.



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Jonny Hall of the LSE Department of International Relations writes on how the ‘victory trap’ places competing demands on US presidents.

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Bush’s only significant divergence from this approach attests to the first pressure of the victory trap I’ve outlined. Asked during the 2004 presidential election campaign whether the US could “win” the War on Terror, Bush [answered](#) “I don’t think you can win it. But I think you can create conditions so that . . . those who use terror as a tool are less acceptable in parts of the world”. This was the language of administration strategy documents but was subject to fervent criticism from Democrats. For example, Senator John Edwards [contended](#) that the “War on Terrorism is absolutely winnable” and asked “what if President Reagan had said that it may be difficult to win the war against Communism?” Indeed, Bush promptly [reverted](#) to the language of ‘victory’, proclaiming days later that “make no mistake about it: we are winning [the War on Terror] and we will win”.

Obama was subject to similar critiques when he put forward more realistic accounts of what ‘victory’ in the War on Terror would constitute. Boosted by a turnaround in his first term national security approval ratings, in 2013 Obama tried to move beyond the ideas of ‘total victory’ in the War on Terror, [arguing](#) that “victory against terrorism” would not be “stamp[ing] out every danger to our open society”, but in everyday events such as “parents taking their kids to school; immigrants coming to our shores; fans taking in a

ballgame; [and] a veteran starting a business”. Conservative critiques echoed the response to Bush’s comments in 2004, [claiming](#) that Obama could not “pretend. . . that the war is over”, and should [instead](#) do what “America does best” by following history and fighting “its wars to a successful conclusion”. Similarly, Obama also hardened his rhetoric with the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, pledging 51 times during his presidency to “destroy ISIL” (as opposed to the more precise rhetoric used to describe the conflict against al-Qaeda).

The ‘Victory Trap’ in practice: The challenges of results

President Trump’s emphasis on ‘victory’ went beyond even Bush’s rhetoric, [positing](#) during his first presidential campaign that the “Washington establishment” had given the United States “decades of endless wars producing only death and bloodshed, but no victory.” In office, Trump suddenly [announced](#) in December 2018 that “we have won against ISIS. We’ve beaten them, and we’ve beaten them badly.” This sparked a rare degree of bipartisan agreement against Trump, along with the [resignations](#) of Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS Brett McGurk. The policy was contested over whether ‘victory’ had been achieved, such as Trump ally’s Senator Lindsey Graham’s [argument](#) that to claim that ISIS was “defeated is an overstatement and is fake news”.

Having had his withdrawal efforts tempered, Trump’s second withdrawal attempt from Syria in October 2019 played out almost identically: Graham [claimed](#) that “the biggest lie being told by the administration is that ISIS has been defeated”, 73 percent of American voters answered that they did not believe that ISIS “had been defeated in Syria”, and 600 troops [remained](#) in northeastern Syria. Indeed, towards the end of Trump’s term in office, 55 percent of respondents to one poll in early 2021 felt that the United States had “stood still” or “lost ground” in terms of counterterrorism.

This was similar to the political problems created by the ‘victory trap’ in the Bush and Obama presidencies. For the former, Bush’s continued emphasis on future success in Iraq was unable to prevent the Democrats winning control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate in the November 2006 midterm elections (which neither party had achieved since 1994), and a then-record low of just 28 percent of respondents felt the United States was “winning the War on Terrorism” in January 2007. For Obama,

the rise of ISIS meant that the president was [criticized](#) for being weak and not sufficiently pursuing ‘victory’, with only 34 percent of Americans [approving](#) of his handling of ISIS. Furthermore, on the only occasion out of 70 polls across the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations, more respondents after the 2015 [San Bernardino terrorist attack](#) (40 percent) felt that “the terrorists” were “winning the war on terrorism” than the United States (18 percent).

The continuing weight of the victory trap

As such, all three presidents I’ve mentioned here have been subject to the pressures of the effects of the ‘victory trap’. The drop in Biden’s approval ratings after the American withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 and [criticisms](#) that the US had “defeated ourselves” suggest the relevance of the ‘victory trap’ even with the termination of broadly unpopular conflicts. By illustrating that presidents are ‘trapped’, the ‘victory trap’ suggests the limits of a range of relevant scholarship on (foreign) policy related messaging, such as the importance of [accurate predictions](#), the ability of policymakers to [‘sell’](#) war, the value of [‘flip-flopping’](#) to popular positions, or simply remaining as [ambiguous](#) as possible. Instead, the ‘victory trap’ adds further weight to the [claim](#) that electoral pressures may create incentives for American presidents to mislead the public.

- *This article is based on the paper, [‘The War on Terror and the Victory Trap’](#) in *Foreign Policy Analysis*.*
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