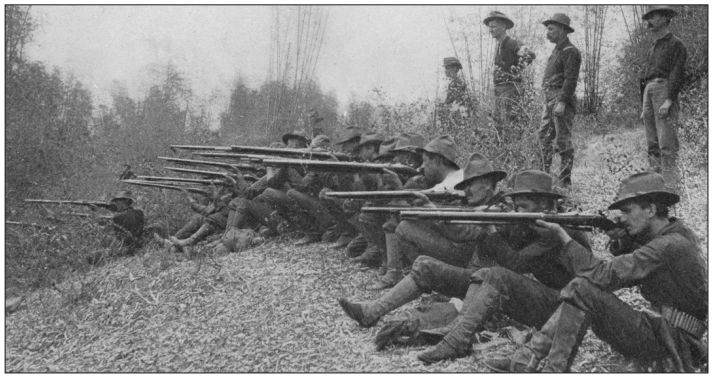
What is Americas Longest War?



By Christopher Bates

You might think this question would have a pretty clear and easy answer. This is not the case, however. To explain why, let's first take a look at the list of wars that are widely known, along with the years in which they took place (the dates are from an American perspective; in some cases, other countries were at war for a year or two or three before U.S. involvement):

1. The Revolutionary War (1776-83)
2. The War of 1812(1812-14)
3. The Mexican-American War (1846-48)
4. The Civil War (1861-65)
5. The Spanish-American War (1898)
6. World War I (1917-19)
7. World War 11(1941-45)
8. The Korean War (1950-53)
9. The Vietnam War (1964-71; some say 1964-75; some say 1954-75)
10. The Persian Gulf War (1990-91)
11. The War in Afghanistan (2001-2014)
12. The Iraq War (2003-2011)

There are various other incidents/time periods/engagements that SOME people might add to the list. Among them:

1. The Quasi-War (1798-1800)
2. The Barbary Wars (1801-05; 1815)
3. The First Seminole War (1817-1818)
4. The Black Hawk War (1832)
5. The Snake War (1864-68)
6. The Cold War (mid-1940s-1991)
7. The Invasion of Panama (1989-90)
8. The War on Terror (1990s-present)

So, how do we know what actually belongs on the list of ''wars"? You might answer that question by saying "a formal declaration of war," but that doesn't actually resolve the issue. In fact, the U.S. doesn't declare war very often, for a couple of reasons. The first is that a formal declaration of war must be approved by Congress, and the members of Congress are generally unwilling to give this approval, for fear of being blamed if the war goes badly. What they prefer—particularly today, when war is a very dangerous and difficult business — is to hand the responsibility for the decision to the President, so he can take the blame if things go south. This is what happened with, for example, the Vietnam War (in which Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which left the decision to President Lyndon B. Johnson) as well as the Iraq War (in which Congress passed the Joint Resolution to Authorize the Use of United States Armed Forces Against Iraq, which left the decision to President George W. Bush).

The second reason we do not usually declare war is that a formal declaration of war has legal implications that we sometimes prefer to avoid. For example, there exists an internationally-agreed upon set of "rules" for war called the Geneva Convention (created in 1863 and updated several time since). The Geneva Convention specifically forbids certain interrogation techniques, particularly those that involve torture. The United States utilizes these techniques in Afghanistan. We do not wish to violate the Geneva Convention, since that would be unpopular with other nations and with our own citizens, and could also give other countries an excuse to ignore the Geneva Convention if they got into a war with us. Consequently, we avoid declaring war in Afghanistan, which means the Geneva Convention is not in effect.

As a result of these considerations, the United States has only formally declared war five times in its history: The War of 1812, the Mexican-American War. the Spanish-American War, World War I, and World War II. Clearly, then, it is possible to have a war without a formal declaration. Nobody would deny that the Civil War, Vietnam War, Korean War. Revolutionary War, War in Afghanistan, etc. are all wars, despite the fact that none of them was formally declared.

What is it, then, that separates the wars from the non-wars? I would suggest that there are three essential features that define a war:

1. Wars are waged between one or more sovereign nations: "Sovereign nation" is the more proper term for "government," and it is governments that have the legal power and the extensive resources needed to wage war.

   If one of the combatants is not a sovereign nation, then the conflict is not called a war. For example, there has been a lot of violence between the United States and Al- Qaeda, the terrorist group that was led by Osama bin Laden. Al-Qaeda is not a sovereign nation, and so our engagements with them are not characterized as a war (except, perhaps, in the context of the larger "War on terror," a very broad term that includes our fights with various terrorist groups as well as various terrorism-supporting nations like Syria). To take another example, tens of thousands of citizens of New

York rebelled violently against the government of the United States in 1863. We do not refer to this as the "New York War" because the people of New York are not a sovereign nation. Instead, we call this incident the New York Draft Riots.

2. The combatants must all acknowledge the existence of hostilities: Not too long ago, the nation of North Korea declared war against South Korea (and possibly against the United States, as well, we're not sure). Neither South Korea nor the United States has acknowledged the declaration, and North Korea has not taken any action in order to force our acknowledgment. As such, there is not a "Korean War" going on right now.

3. The combatants must commit acts of violence against one another on a fairly regular basis. For example, in 1981, 1986, and 1989, the United States launched airstrikes against the nation of Libya. Libya and the U.S. are sovereign nations (#1 above) and were openly hostile to one another (#2 above). We do not call this the Libyan War, however, because three engagements in nine years is really not frequent enough to qualify as a war. Similarly, the Cold War featured two sovereign nations (the U.S. and U.S.S.R.) that were definitely hostile to one another. However, the U.S. and U.S.S.R. never committed acts of violence against each other (the closest they came was to fight with one another indirectly by getting involved in other countries' wars). As such, the Cold War is not generally regarded as a "war" in a traditional sense.

Note that the gap between engagements can actually be somewhat lengthy. Before the twentieth century, for example, it was difficult to fight wars in the winter months. As such, there were sometimes periods of four or five months during the Revolutionary and Civil Wars in which there were no engagements. It is when the gaps get to be six months or longer that the use of the term "war" starts to become questionable.

And now we are in a position to answer the question posed by the title of this essay. Based on the standards outlined here, then, the longest war in American history is...the conflict between the United States government and the Apache Nation, which lasted 37 years (far longer than even the lengthiest timeline for the Vietnam War). Both the United States and the Apache regarded themselves as sovereign nations, both recognized the existence of a state of hostility, and the two sides fought regularly—never going more than three months without a battle during that 37-year span.

And ultimately, the larger point is this: Because the definition of "war" is flexible and open to interpretation, it gives us a fair bit of leeway to pretend some wars never happened if we decide—for whatever reason—that we would prefer to forget. This week's lecture will cover one such war.