

INTRODUCTION

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“There seem to be only two kinds of war the U.S. can fight: World War II or Vietnam,” Marilyn B. Young wrote in 2005. World War II fit neatly into the American self-image, remembered as a triumphant battle against evil in the world. New conflicts have been framed in World War II imagery: 9/11 was Pearl Harbor, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was Hitler. The U.S. war in Vietnam jarred this self-conception, she observed, as the effort to continually reimagine the world in the image of World War II was compromised by a nagging question: “Is this another Vietnam?” Aversion to a repeat of Vietnam was not merely the prospect of defeat. It was “the daily experience of an apparently endless war.”¹

Young’s historical scholarship speaks to urgent twenty-first century questions: Why does U.S. war never end? What are the origins of ongoing military conflict? How have U.S. leaders justified their decisions? Why does the American public support this, and how could opposition be so fractured? What are the consequences for countries and peoples on the receiving end of U.S. military force? Through her teaching, writing, and public speaking, Young argued that a core driver of the forever war is the repeated failure to learn lessons of the past.

Marilyn Young (1937–2017) remains the preeminent historian of war’s place in modern American history. Best known as the author of the seminal 1992 *The Vietnam Wars: 1945–1990*,² Young’s trenchant and often deeply critical historical work on U.S. wars and empire over the forty years of her distinguished career found a wide and admiring audience. Her writings moved across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, making forceful interventions on the origins of the American empire in East Asia, the

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relationship between Cold War and the global processes of decolonization, and the larger meanings of the U.S. wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Young's work remains startlingly relevant today.

This collection makes Young's writings on war accessible to a new generation, bringing historical insight to some of the most pressing problems of our day. If her prescient contributions are more important than ever, some of her writings are hard to access. *Making the Forever War* brings together the most important of Young's essays for the first time. It includes unpublished essays archived with her papers at New York University that have just recently been opened to researchers, along with a curated selection of previously published works. The collection closes with an afterword by Andrew Bacevich, a longtime collaborator with Young, who urges readers to honor her memory by refusing "to sanitize and falsify war."

In what was perhaps her final published essay, Young wrote that "armed with drones and Special Forces, an American president can fight wars more or less on his own, in countries of his own choosing. American wars do not end but continue—quietly, behind the back of the public which funds them."³ Marilyn Young's writings illuminate and sharply criticize how this came about and why it continues. They also fundamentally shift our understandings of the place of America in the world, and suggest how an honest reckoning with the past can change the way we approach the present and the future.

Throughout her career Young played a leading role in the making of a critical history of U.S. foreign policy. A reassessment of American wars in Asia was, for her, the necessary starting point of that critique. "The people who bitch about Vietnam bitch about it because we intervened in what they say is a civil war," President Richard M. Nixon told his national security advisor Henry Kissinger and White House chief of staff Bob Haldeman in an April 1971 Oval Office meeting. "Now some of those same bastards want us to intervene in Bangladesh."⁴ Although we don't believe Young and Nixon ever met one another in person, Young was, to use Nixonian parlance, one of those bastards who bitched. About Nixon policy toward Vietnam and Bangladesh, to be sure, but also more broadly about practices of American war and the all too frequent silence by historians and public intellectuals about their corrosive effects on American state and society.

As a professor in the Residential College at the University of Michigan and later in the History Department at NYU, Young's scholarly interests took her from the war of 1898 and U.S. participation in the Chinese Boxer Rebellion in her first book, *The Rhetoric of Empire: American China Policy, 1895–1901*,⁵ to Vietnam in her celebrated *The Vietnam Wars*. These works along with a series of landmark essays on the Chinese civil war, the Korean War, and the memory of the Vietnam war contributed to a fundamental reconceptualization of the Cold War and American empire in the twentieth century. At the same time they would form the intellectual scaffolding of her late career turn to interrogating ongoing war in the twenty-first century.

Young's inclination to push against received Cold War understandings of the world around her came at a very young age. Indeed, her childhood growing up in Brooklyn put her at the center of American leftist politics. Sixteen years old in 1953, Young watched as more than ten thousand mourners gathered for the funeral of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed after their conviction for serving as atomic spies for the Soviet Union in what remains one of the most celebrated and contested cases of espionage during the Cold War. She did so from the fire escape of her family's East Flatbush apartment, until her father told her to "get back inside" because the "FBI is taking pictures."⁶ The Red Scare came to her high school when the principal and two teachers were brought before a United States Senate subcommittee for circulating a statement that denounced free enterprise.

As an undergraduate at Vassar College in the mid-1950s, Young (then Marilyn Blatt) was a member of the editorial board of the college newspaper, where she took up issues such as civil rights and women's rights. She also began to write about foreign policy, voicing strong support for the United Nations as "the only hope of bringing any kind of peace to a world torn with ideological differences." Young's career-long willingness to speak truth to power emerges in the pages of the *Vassar Miscellany*, too. Commenting on a 1955 speech by the California Republican senator and minority leader William Knowland, a hard-line anticommunist who blamed President Truman for "losing" China to Mao, she wrote, "It is incredibly naïve of Mr. Knowland to ignore the fact that we are living in a world community."⁷

Young's doctoral study at Harvard University, where she received her Ph.D. in history in 1963, produced *The Rhetoric of Empire* (1968). In its

interpretative posture the book is one critical node in an emergent New Left interpretation of the perils of U.S. engagement in the world. University of Wisconsin historian William Appleman Williams's 1959 *Tragedy of American Diplomacy*⁸ was the opening salvo in what became an increasingly contentious scholarly and popular debate throughout the 1960s over the mainsprings of American diplomacy in the wake of the growing failures of American Cold War policies. Young, along with scholars like Walter LaFeber, Thomas McCormick, and Lloyd Gardner,⁹ agreed with Williams that the history of American foreign relations was best understood as a history of empire "through which the preponderant strength" of the United States "would enter and dominate all underdeveloped areas of the world."¹⁰ In *Rhetoric of Empire*, Young fleshed out the ways in which early twentieth-century American policy in China implicitly offered critical genealogies for the assertion of American hegemonic power in the region after 1945.

Young continued to play a central role in the development of New Left historiography and its efforts to reassess American culpability in the Cold War. Scholarly accounts of the origins of the Cold War written before the 1960s generally ascribed primary responsibility to the Soviet Union. In this then prevailing view it was only after repeated provocations by the Soviets that the United States was drawn into the conflict, and even then reluctantly.¹¹ The insistence in much of the New Left scholarship, including Young's, that the United States was to blame offered a powerful revisionist challenge to these more traditional and admiring accounts of American diplomacy.¹²

But Young's concern with the use of "cold war" to characterize world order after 1945 went deeper. "The wars America fought or supported after 1946 were not cold," she wrote in an unpublished essay. Their "incalculable . . . death and destruction is somehow rendered marginal" in the framing of hot wars as cold. A further problem, she argued, with the "meliorating" term "cold war" is that "it tends to cast policies pursued in that period as if they were discontinuous with the past."¹³ For Young, cold war was not a sharp rupture but rather another episode in the long American practice of what she would later term forever wars.¹⁴ These critical perspectives also shaped Young's activism in and outside of the academy. In 1968 she helped found the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, a group that presented a radical critique of the culpability of area studies and the

academy in what its members saw as the recklessness of official American policy in Vietnam and elsewhere in Asia. Through her opposition to the Vietnam war and later the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Young made vital contributions to broader social movements in the United States with rich and enduring traditions of anti-imperialist and antiwar politics.

Young's engagement with second-wave feminism also shaped her nuanced understanding of American society and the wider world. Former colleagues at Michigan in the 1970s recall that Young oversaw the first consciousness-raising sessions there. She later founded the Women's Studies Department at NYU. Young's visits to Maoist China in the early 1970s and the friendships with Chinese women she made there shaped her view, articulated most forcefully in the influential volume *Promissory Notes*¹⁵ that she co-edited on women in socialist societies, that patriarchy was as fully present in socialism as it was in late capitalism.

Young's synoptic history of America's thirty-year involvement in Vietnam in her 1992 *The Vietnam Wars* marked the culmination of her three-decade engagement with American war and empire in Asia. It also reflected what Young said were the ways in which Vietnam "changed the shape of my moral world."¹⁶ Still widely read and frequently assigned in undergraduate classrooms, *The Vietnam Wars* offered a scathing indictment of U.S. Cold War failures in Vietnam. Young argues Vietnam was an entirely unnecessary war waged by American politicians and generals who were blind to on-the-ground political realities and the power of nationalism in a decolonizing world. At the same time she was also insistent on the ways in which the war, including sustained American bombing campaigns that in tonnage exceeded World War II-era bombing of Germany and Japan, devastated states and peoples in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

For Young, a key element of the politics of war was culture, especially how war was remembered. She received an early lesson on the fractured nature of war remembrance from her uncle, who served in World War II. As a child, Young was curious about the war, and she pestered her uncle, asking him what the war was like. He finally responded, snapping at her: "The bombardier's head rolled around the cabin all the way back to base. Now don't you ever ask me that again!"¹⁷ It was an early example of what would become an important theme in her writing: the disconnect between the public memory of war and the soldier's raw experience.

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Throughout Young's lifetime, U.S. armed conflict persisted, but fewer American children would have uncles to ask about war. The military draft ended after the U.S. war in Vietnam, and over time military service became concentrated in particular families and communities. Although conflict was geographically distant, the "shadow of war," as Michael Sherry has written, militarized American culture, so that "war and national security became consuming anxieties and provided the memories, models, and metaphors that shaped broad areas of national life."¹⁸ Meanwhile, after World War II, global conflict fueled global U.S. military expansion and provided a logic for U.S. intervention in Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and elsewhere. The eventual break-up of the Soviet Union did not reset the worldwide projection of U.S. military power. Instead, over a decade before terrorists brought down the World Trade Center buildings on September 11, 2001, U.S. empire was rebranded as a fight against rogue regimes and terrorism, and the U.S. launched what Andrew Bacevich has called "America's war for the greater Middle East."¹⁹ After 9/11, the shadow of war at home hardened through the proliferation of physical security barriers and legal restrictions on immigration, and the public acquiesced in government mass surveillance, touted as protection against another catastrophic attack. Technologies of war, especially armed drones, enabled the United States to use force remotely, so that even soldiers deploying lethal force were protected from bodily harm.

War was both ever present and physically absent for most Americans. This was not a contradiction, Young explained. Limited impacts at home, and a focus on U.S. soldiers without attention to war's devastation and futility, enabled its persistence. The way the culture of American war enabled the forever war became a central theme in Young's work.

Young wrote a torrent of articles and essays beginning in the early 2000s that focused on the wars of the post-9/11 era in the Middle East and beyond. During this period, she was a founder of Historians Against the War in the wake of the Bush administration's 2003 war in Iraq. She helped oversee the group's efforts to foster campus teach-ins across the country by coediting *The New American Empire: A 21st Century Teach-In on U.S. Foreign Policy*.²⁰ She ran a vibrant Cold War Seminar as codirector of the Center for the United States and the Cold War at the NYU's Tamiment Library. In 2011 she served as the elected president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. Her presidential address, which

serves as the closing essay of this volume, explored the meanings of American war across the history of the United States.

Part 1 of this collection draws together some of Young's most enduring essays on America's twentieth-century wars in Asia and the role of empire. It opens with "The Age of Global Power," in which Young argues that prevailing notions of the United States as exceptional, as powerful, and as passive have fundamentally obscured the real exercise of American power in the world. Historians, she claims, need to begin to write a history of America and the world that is mindful of the simultaneous reality of American dominance and its dominant self-absorption over the last century. This essay is followed by works by Young on the Korean and Vietnam wars, and the ways in which American policy toward them presaged elements of the forever wars in the early twenty-first century.

In "Hard Sell: The Korean War," Young examines public doubts about the war in Korea and its acquiescence to the Truman administration's prosecution of war on the peninsula, arguing the Korean case demonstrated to future administrations that American wars could in fact be waged without public enthusiasm and understanding. "U.S. Opposition to War in Korea and Vietnam," a previously unpublished work, addresses why there was so little organized dissent in the United States during the Korean War as compared with Vietnam. She contends that opposition to the war in Korea was just as strong but was stymied by anticommunist repression. Instead of active opposition, there was passive acquiescence and, ultimately, electoral vengeance. "The Same Struggle for Liberty" explores official American framings of war in Korea and Vietnam to bring to the surface what Young calls a persisting American dilemma, "how to acquire . . . an empire without naming it, or better, in the name of the right of self-determination for all peoples." Finally, "Counting the Bodies in Vietnam" considers the ways in which the pressing desire of the United States to locate and return American bodies and the virtual disinterest in the bodies of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians reveals whose bodies really "count" in American wars.

Part 2 of this collection brings together her most significant writings on unlimited war and the perils of forgetting. Importantly, she does not date the forever war from the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Instead, the longer history of limited war gives rise to permanent war. This is in part because limited wars "cannot end in unconditional

surrender and total victory. . . . They do not so much end as stop, until the next one begins.” Ongoing war is enabled by the isolation of American civilians from its violence. They lacked an intimacy with war’s carnage, and could not “imagine being bombed, rather than bombing.”²¹ She illustrates the importance of culture, including novels and films, and the way the memory of war is crucial to war politics. The construction of memory does not happen only after the fact, but during the war itself.

In “The Big Sleep,” Young argues that soldiers have had to confront a tension between their own experience of war and what Americans at home imagined it to be. Soldiers could not bring home what war actually felt like. It was not just that they sought to protect family members from what they knew—like the screams of drowning comrades during a river-crossing accident. Their memories would jar home front ideas of war as victorious. Some soldiers could only reintegrate at home by reimagining their own experience so that it lined up with expectations. Policy was then informed by this revision of memory, so that this “big sleep” enabled the next war.

As the twentieth century progressed, technology changed the experience of killing. Devastating aerial bombing in the U.S. wars in Korea and Vietnam made war seem abstract to American leaders, Young argues in “Bombing Civilians: From the Twentieth to the Twenty-First Centuries.” With their faith that bombing would send a message of strength, limited war became total war short of the use of nuclear weapons. She follows the trajectory of American air power to the use of drones in Pakistan.

In “Permanent War,” Young shows the way the memory of Vietnam continued to haunt American war makers. This led President George H. W. Bush and other presidents and military leaders to do their best to frame wars so that they could be understood as heroic, like World War II, and not like Vietnam. The second Gulf War was “Cold War redux,” Young argues, a permanent war against terrorism instead of against communism.

When the United States attacked Iraq in 2003, Young reflected on the “puerile arrogance” of the George W. Bush administration’s idea of “pre-emptive war.” Engaged in nothing less than a “plot against history,” and enabled by the press, they had falsely convinced many Americans that Iraq was allied with the al Qaeda terrorists behind the 9/11 attacks.²² Five years later, she reflected on the way Vietnam still served as the starting point for American war policy. In the form of a top ten list, “U.S. in Asia, U.S. in Iraq: Lessons Not Learned . . .” discusses the lessons America presidents

have learned from Vietnam—among them controlling the press and historical narratives, upping the ante when the going gets tough, and the need for heroes—but she also argues that a central lesson has been lost on policy makers: the need for accountability for the criminality of American practices of war.

Young's ideas about the way unlearned lessons and failures of memory enable ongoing war come together in her reflection: "I was thinking, as I often do these days, of war': The United States in the Twenty-First Century." Over time, war's persistence has been enabled by its increasing invisibility. The role of historians, she urges, is "to speak and write so that a time of war not be mistaken for peacetime."

Throughout her storied career, Young combined no-nonsense critical bite with enormous warmth and generosity. Here her lifelong love of opera may best illustrate how she managed the potentially conflicting elements through which she most frequently engaged in the world: politics and friendship. Italian opera was her favorite, and she especially liked Verdi's *Don Carlo*. Perhaps this is not so surprising. At stake are the lives and liberty of the people of Flanders at the time of the Spanish Inquisition, and Don Carlo, the independent-minded son of the Spanish king, is there to ensure they get their freedom. But what Young liked best in the opera is the celebrated and rousing duet between Don Carlo and his dear friend Rodrigo as they pledge that "their souls be infused with love, will and hope" in the fight for liberty. "That," Young turned to one of us at a performance of *Don Carlo* at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City and said, "is what it is all about." Critique of American empire and war are central to the enduring relevance of Young's work. But so too is the spirit by which she made her claims and the ends to which she hoped they would be put. Just as she argued as a young editorial writer for the *Vassar Miscellany*, there is no sustainable path before us other than a just peace. Young helped us see how, amidst darkness and ideological division, there is also love and hope.

NOTES

1. Marilyn B. Young, "Permanent War," *positions: asia critique* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 178.
2. Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945–1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
3. Marilyn B. Young, "How the United States Ends Wars," in *Not Even Past: How the United States Ends Wars*, ed. David Fitzgerald, David Ryan, and John M. Thompson (New York: Berghahn Books, 2020), 252.
4. Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and H. R. Haldeman, April 12, 1971, 10:24–10:33 a.m., Oval Office, Conversation No. 477–1, White House Tapes, Nixon Presidential Materials, National Archives; our thanks to Erez Manela for drawing this conversation to our attention.
5. Marilyn B. Young, *The Rhetoric of Empire: America China Policy, 1895–1901* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968).
6. "Marilyn Young, Historian Who Challenged U.S Foreign Policy, Dies at 79," *New York Times*, March 9, 2017.
7. "Knowland and the UN," *Vassar Miscellany*, 39, no. 17 (March 1955): 2.
8. William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1972). The first edition of this classic work was published in 1959.
9. Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansionism, 1860–1898* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1963); Thomas J. McCormick, *China Market: America's Quest to Informal Empire, 1893–1901* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1967); and Lloyd C. Gardner, *Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964).
10. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 45.
11. See, for instance, Herbert Feis, *Roosevelt-Churchill-Stalin: The War They Waged and the Peace They Sought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957).
12. Among the leading New Left accounts of the Cold War, see Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (New York: Vintage, 1965); Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943–1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972); Lloyd C. Gardner, *Architects of Illusion: Men and Idea in American Foreign Policy, 1941–49* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970); and Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–1966* (New York: Wiley, 1967).
13. Marilyn Young, "The Changing Cold War in Asia, 1949–1989," unpublished, undated essay, Cold War in Asia folder, box 2, Marilyn Young Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University.
14. Marilyn Young's first engagement in her writing with the term "forever war" may have been a 1998 essay in which she compared the conception of ongoing war in Joe Haldeman's 1998 novel *The Forever War* with George Lucas's 1977 film *Star Wars*. She argued that Lucas and Haldeman captured the twin poles of the American cultural understanding of war. Lucas portrayed sharp divisions

between good and evil, but Young thought Haldeman's 1200-year slog through never-ending conflict was a more accurate fit. Marilyn B. Young, "The Forever War," *Itinerario* 22 (1998): 79–80.

15. *Promissory Notes: Women and the Transition to Socialism*, ed. Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp, and Marilyn B. Young (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989).
16. Marilyn Young, unpublished essay, circa 1971, box 2, Vietnam Articles (Mine) folder, Marilyn Young Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University.
17. Marilyn Young's recollection, as told to Mary L. Dudziak.
18. Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), xi.
19. Andrew J. Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2016).
20. *The New American Empire: A 21st Century Teach-in on U.S. Foreign Policy*, ed. Marilyn B. Young and Lloyd Gardner (New York: New Press, 2005). On Historians Against the War, see Jim O'Brien, "Historical Notes on Historians Against the War," *Historians for Peace and Democracy*, <https://www.historiansforpeace.org/our-history/>.
21. Marilyn B. Young, "Limited War, Unltd," unpublished lecture, pp. 1–2, emailed from Young to Dudziak, April 2009. Young delivered this lecture at the Kluge Center, Library of Congress, on July 8, 2009, <https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-4683/>.
22. Marilyn B. Young, "Ground Zero: Enduring War," in *September 11 in History: A Watershed Moment?*, ed. Mary L. Dudziak (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 28.