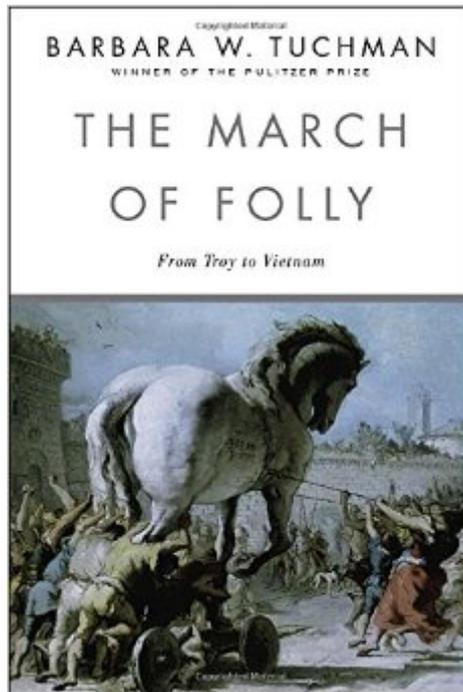


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# The March Of Folly: From Troy To Vietnam



## Synopsis

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Barbara W. Tuchman, author of the World War I masterpiece *The Guns of August*, grapples with her boldest subject: the pervasive presence, through the ages, of failure, mismanagement, and delusion in government. Drawing on a comprehensive array of examples, from Montezuma's senseless surrender of his empire in 1520 to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, Barbara W. Tuchman defines folly as the pursuit by government of policies contrary to their own interests, despite the availability of feasible alternatives. In brilliant detail, Tuchman illuminates four decisive turning points in history that illustrate the very heights of folly: the Trojan War, the breakup of the Holy See provoked by the Renaissance popes, the loss of the American colonies by Britain's George III, and the United States' own persistent mistakes in Vietnam. Throughout *The March of Folly*, Tuchman's incomparable talent for animating the people, places, and events of history is on spectacular display. Praise for *The March of Folly* "A glittering narrative . . . a moral [book] on the crimes and follies of governments and the misfortunes the governed suffer in consequence." "The New York Times Book Review" "An admirable survey . . . I haven't read a more relevant book in years." "John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Boston Sunday Globe*" "A superb chronicle . . . a masterly examination." "Chicago Sun-Times"

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Barbara Tuchman has a way of viewing history as few can. Instead of falling back on just "telling of a story," Tuchman does what few historians are able to pull off without sounding self-righteous. She

gives us a commentary. Kind of like the "color-man" while listening to a sporting event, Tuchman examines the idea of "folly," or the persistent pursuit of a policy by government or those in power that is "contradictory to their own interests." Since a topic like this could take volumes, the author chooses 4 primary historical examples: the Fall of Troy, the breakup of the Holy See in the 16th century, the British monarchy's vain attempt to keep the American colonies, and America's own arrogant persistence during the Vietnam War. The fault in this book is that this subject matter can be pretty exhausting even with the only 450 page book. The examples used are valid and make sense. The author finds something different within each one that allows us to see the many levels of government folly. However I found the chapters dealing with the six terrible popes to be mind-numbing. Perhaps it's due to the fact that this history is not examined extensively in current day curricula like the American Revolution and Vietnam, but I think this section was tedious and repetitive. Also, within the Vietnam chapters, Ms. Tuchman tends to reveal her adoration towards Kennedy--like many historians of her era--and her disdain of the Johnson and Nixon administrations. This can distort her objective examination of the topic in some areas, but if it is noticed and ignored, the rest of the study is outstanding. Some may read these excerpts and label them as "liberal" but they are ignorant of history. In any event the book is an excellent supplement to studying Machiavellian politics. The governments' "wood-headedness" towards policy that is counter to anything rational (as well as contrary to respected voices of reason) is something that all ordinary members and voters of a democratic society ought to take heed of. The example of Troy is used simply as an example of how Homer and the Greeks had foreseen and probably experienced, the lack of reason when pursuing particular policy. This is usually done because those in power are so consumed by power and what it brings, that their arrogance and ignorance blinds them. Without carrying this review too far into the book's wonderful and biting commentary, I will just say that this book is recommended, but not for those that have no real experience with intellectual historical study. Some areas will be interesting, such as the Vietnam chapters, but otherwise the book would dull the amateur historian. But if you do wish to challenge yourself and your understanding of how power corrupts and destroys after it corrupts, then "March of Folly" will be admired. All politicians should be forced to read this book. Kind of like a supplement instructional manual for their job...paid for by taxpayers. Within 100 years, they might actually learn something.

Other reviewers have suggested that this is not one of Tuchman's best books. This may not be a fair observation in comparison to "Guns of August" or "The Calamitous 14th Century". Overall I found this book to be a concise and well-written work with the chapters well organized and

consistent. Some reviewers have pointed out that this book may have been intended to elicit a criticism of the US war in Vietnam. Whether that is the case or not, it seems evident that referring to the Vietnam war as folly is hardly controversial these days. True, her points may be relevant to the current Iraq war, but I think that the larger point that she is trying to make is that folly applies to many political and military conflicts between nations. If her comments apply to the Iraq war, could they not also apply to Serbia's Balkan wars, or Chechnya, or the UN's disjointed attempts at reining in North Korea or Iran? Her points and concerns raised through these case examples are worth considering in modern times throughout dozens of current conflicts worldwide. All in all, this is an excellent book. Fans of Tuchman or history in general will not be disappointed.

In the same way that Pauline Kael used her movie reviews, Barbara Tuchman uses history as an outlet of moral yearning. Every book is a cry of pain and joy for the injustices and beauty of life. Tuchman chooses her subjects carefully to convey a message to her readers, usually a cautionary tale of the abuse of power. "The March of Folly" is her most direct message yet. In it, she describes the folly of government-defined action against self-interest despite an overwhelming preponderance of evidence to act otherwise—and how it led to several notable disastrous events. Namely, the sack of Troy, the split of the Catholic See, the loss of the American colonies, and the policy of Vietnam. But let's face it. Tuchman wrote this book with the Vietnam chapter in mind. Each chapter simply lays the groundwork for the material on Vietnam. The chapter Trojan Horse provides us the groundwork, the mythic case of folly we are all familiar with, and the lasting image we carry as we consider Vietnam. The Renaissance popes provides us an example of a self-perpetuating and stale system we can remember when thinking of a moribund Congress mindlessly voting appropriations for a war no one wanted. Consequently that same chapter gives us the image of a pope throwing lavish parties for which he hired prostitutes to crawl about on all fours, completely naked, picking up scattered chestnuts with their mouths—which might remind some of our own nation's zeal in its misuse of third-world nations—El Salvador, Iran, Panama, and Vietnam spring to mind—in Cold War play. The chapter on the loss of the American colonies allows readers to take pride in their forefathers' proaction and righteousness in comparison to the slothful and ignorant course corrupt, money-bought English Parliament followed, before comparing U.S. government in the 1950s-60s to those same English aristocrats of the 1770s. This chapter later raises uncomfortable questions about the U.S. anti-nationalistic policy in Vietnam, which worked against self-determination and, consequently, democracy. But by the time she arrives in Vietnam, she has stored up too much information. Tuchman bombards us with so many facts, memos, and bad

decisions that we get lost in a labyrinth. Her prose gets bogged down. We forget where we are in the war, every page sounds the same, and it ends up so overwhelming that it's ineffective. It's like she's waited years to write this chapter, and has done too much research and wants to cram it all in a few pages. In the end, I have to agree with other reviewers who say it's not her best work. It is a work of passion. And as such, it's admirable for its passion, because it all rings true. PS - Ignore all that conservative/liberal claptrap. Both sides of the political coin had their hands bloodied in Vietnam. And if you can't learn from your mistakes, you're bound to repeat them.

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