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Refighting Vietnam in the History Books: The Historiography of the War

Given the burgeoning literature devoted to it, the Vietnam War is surely a contender with the Civil War for the title of America's most studied conflict. It has attracted an enormous amount of academic attention and continues to absorb the energies of many scholars. At the most recent meeting of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, Vietnam featured in almost a fifth of the conference panels. Lavish attention, however, has not led to scholarly consensus. Indeed, the war continues to generate vigorous disagreement among historians, as well as the wider public. This ongoing debate testifies not only to the kind of differences in interpretation that are part and parcel of the study of history but also to the extraordinary passions that the conflict still arouses nearly thirty years after the fall of Saigon.

Disagreements about the war have revolved around several key issues. The first concerns the origins of America's intervention in Southeast Asia—why did the U.S. become involved in Vietnam? Walt Rostow, an adviser to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, once chided the maker of a documentary for asking what he called this “sophomoric” and “goddamn silly question” (1). Historians, however, have not found it so easy to dismiss. Why was Washington prepared to expend so much blood and

treasure to defend a relatively small piece of territory, thousands of miles from America's shores? Was the U.S. commitment necessary, or a terrible mistake? The second issue concerns the outcome of the

conflict. Why, in spite of the enormous power at its disposal, was the U.S. unable to preserve an independent South Vietnam? Would different military tactics have altered the outcome, or was the war simply unwinnable? Finally, scholars have sought to divine the larger meaning of the conflict and draw lessons from it. For example, did Vietnam illustrate the folly of U.S. intervention overseas, especially in the cause of nation building, or merely demonstrate the need for better strategy and leadership next time around? This kind of exercise has inevitably become caught up in contemporary political debates. From Central America in the 1980s to the present-day Middle East, the “lessons” of Vietnam have served as a point of reference for arguments about the merits of U.S. involvement overseas.

While scholars have adopted many variations in approach and interpretation, we might usefully divide them into two main camps. In the first camp are those who are critical of America's intervention and view Vietnam as a bad war. Given the circumstances of the conflict, they also doubt whether the U.S. could ever have achieved its aim of



President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (from left) greet South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem at Washington National Airport, May 8, 1957. (Image courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration, NAIL NWDNS-342-AF-18302USAF.)

establishing a strong, anti-Communist South Vietnam. In the second camp are those who tend to view the U.S. intervention as a legitimate enterprise and believe that the war could have been won, especially with changes in tactics and strategy. There are, of course, some important differences within, as well as between, these two positions, but this basic division will serve as a useful way of examining the historiography of the war.

The "Bad War"

Critics of the U.S. role in Vietnam dominated the early literature. As several commentators have noted, this initially critical stance reversed the pattern of historical analysis that had developed in the case of America's other major wars. Whereas the initial interpretations of other conflicts, such as the two world wars, tended to defend U.S. policy, the first analyses of the struggle in Vietnam reflected the war's unpopularity and were almost all very critical; it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that a revisionist school emerged to challenge this standard or orthodox interpretation (2).

Journalists and former officials led the way in criticizing the conflict. Their works, which began to appear long before the war's end, generally describe Vietnam as a tragic mistake. In *The Bitter Heritage* (1967), Arthur Schlesinger Jr., an adviser to the Kennedy administration, argued that the roots of U.S. involvement could be traced to Washington's knee-jerk anticommunism and a foolhardy conviction that America could determine the destiny of the world. U.S. policymakers had mistakenly assumed that every Communist Party was an instrument of the Soviet Union or China, and failed to recognize the local sources that fueled revolutions in the Third World. Consequently, the U.S. had engaged during the postwar period in an indiscriminating effort to combat communism everywhere. This

impulse culminated in America's doomed adventure in Southeast Asia, with U.S. troops dispatched to chase an elusive guerrilla enemy through the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam (3).

Frances FitzGerald leveled similar charges in her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Fire in the Lake* (1972), in which she accused the U.S. of an "invincible ignorance" about the Vietnamese, friend and foe alike. By imposing on events their vision of a global contest between freedom and communism, U.S. policymakers had blundered into what was, in fact, a struggle by the Vietnamese people to throw off the legacy of colonialism and build a modern nation. Moreover, by creating and trying to sustain an anticommunist contender in this struggle, the U.S. had set itself against the tide of history; it was the Vietnamese Communists, not the corrupt and inefficient parade of American-backed presidents in Saigon, who proved most adept at mobilizing popular support (4). In short, FitzGerald and other writers argued that Washington had committed the nation to an unnecessary and unwinnable war. The lesson to be drawn from this debacle was that the U.S. ought to pursue a more discriminating foreign policy that took account of the limits of American power.

These early works posited a "quagmire" thesis to explain U.S. involvement in Vietnam. From Eisenhower's support for Ngo Dinh Diem to Johnson's military escalation of the war, successive administrations had inadvertently led America deeper and deeper into a bog. "Each step," noted Schlesinger Jr., "was reasonably regarded at the time as the last that would be necessary." In each case, he noted, policymakers had acted with the best of intentions and with the expectation of overcoming the mounting problems in Vietnam. Thus, America's involvement was a "tragedy without villains" because no president ever envisaged the mess that might eventually result from these incremental decisions (5).

In 1971, however, the publication of the so-called Pentagon Papers effectively challenged this "quagmire" thesis. Leaked by Daniel Ellsberg, the renegade Defense Department official, the Pentagon's in-house study of U.S. decision making raised some new and disturbing questions about the formulation of America's Vietnam policy. Far from being unaware of the potential consequences of their decisions, the authors of the Pentagon Papers argued that successive presidents knew full well that their efforts might fail to bring victory in Vietnam. Why, then, if the prospects for success were so uncertain, had they been so determined to hold the line in Southeast Asia?

Ellsberg offered one answer to that question. He rejected the "quagmire" thesis in favor of a "stalemate machine" explanation of U.S. policy. In this view, a deadlock was the best the U.S. could hope for in Vietnam because the war could not be won. Moreover, successive presidents preferred such a stalemate to the prospect of admitting defeat. Ellsberg identified domestic political concerns as an important source of this rather short-sighted and ignoble behavior, specifically the fear that haunted Democratic presidents of the accusation that they were "soft" on communism (6). Other commentators took a dif-



Two soldiers crouch in a rice paddy while fellow soldiers move across the paddy, April 1965. (Image courtesy of Douglas Pike Photograph Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Photograph VA002335, April 1965.)

ferent tack. In *America's Longest War*, first published in 1979, George Herring argued that mistaken assumptions about communism, and the strategic importance of containing it, explained Washington's determination to persevere in Vietnam. U.S. intervention was driven by the dictates of a flawed policy, containment, "which Americans in and out of government accepted without serious question for more than two decades" (7).

Whatever their differences over the origins of U.S. policy, all of the above works treated America's involvement in Vietnam as a tragic error. Not so the most radical critique of U.S. intervention. In this view, Vietnam was certainly a bad war. Yet, given the economic imperatives underlying American policy, it was also probably inevitable. Radical historians argued that after 1945 the U.S. sought to fashion a new, capitalist world order out of the chaos and upheaval caused by the Second World War. In its drive to create an international system conducive to the needs of the American economy, Washington confronted revolutionary movements in the Third World that threatened to close off areas of the globe to free trade. Thus, the U.S. effort to stop the progress of the Vietnamese Revolution represented an entirely predictable response to that threat. Gabriel Kolko's *Anatomy of a War* (1985) is the most thorough and vigorous articulation of this radical interpretation (8).

Like other critics of the war, radical historians showed no sympathy for America's cause in Vietnam—indeed, Kolko stated that he "fully welcomed" the Communist victory there (9). However, their portrayal of the U.S. as an imperial power, driven by economic imperatives, contrasted sharply with those who explained U.S. behavior by emphasizing factors that were not structurally determined, such as security fears or domestic political considerations. In fact, this philosophical rift goes beyond explanations of American policy in Vietnam and represents the main interpretative fault-line in the study of U.S. foreign relations (10).

The Revisionist Challenge

While the first analyses of the war were highly critical, a revisionist challenge to this orthodoxy began to appear at the end of the 1970s. Revisionism fed off various changes in the political and intellectual climate in the U.S., epitomized by Ronald Reagan's electoral triumph in 1980. Reagan's call for a national revival, and for the country to put aside post-Vietnam feelings of guilt and self-doubt, went hand in hand with a full-blooded assault on the standard interpretation of the conflict. Vietnam was not a bad war, Reagan argued; it was a "noble cause" that would have ended in victory if the U.S. had shown more resolve. To some extent, this reinterpretation of the war reflected the desire of conservatives to overcome the country's fear of ending up in

another overseas debacle, which they saw as an obstacle to the pursuit of a more active foreign policy. Conditions in Vietnam after 1975 also encouraged the revisionist critique. Wracked by economic problems and run as a police state, postwar Vietnam provided plenty of ammunition for exponents of the "noble cause" thesis and tarnished the romantic image of the Vietnamese Communists that had infused the work of some orthodox writers (11).

Revisionists attacked both of the central tenets of the standard interpretation—that U.S. involvement in Vietnam was wrong and that the conflict was unwinnable. They sought to justify the war's purpose on several grounds. In the first of a multivolume history of the conflict, Ralph Smith defended the strategic rationale for U.S.

intervention. While rejecting the idea that there had ever been a monolithic communist movement controlled by Moscow, Smith also dismissed the notion that Vietnam's revolution was a purely national one that had little, if anything, to do with the Marxist-Leninist pursuit of world revolution. The Vietnamese Communists, he argued, were part of an international movement that, for all its internal differences, presented a real threat to America's global position. Thus, Washington could not ignore the challenge presented by Sino-Soviet support for the Vietnamese Revolution and other "wars of national liberation" in the Third World (12). Other commentators were less certain that the situation in Vietnam constituted a strategic threat to the U.S., but nevertheless sought to make a moral case for American intervention. Surveying the "sad fate of the people of Indochina since 1975," Guenter Lewy concluded that the "attempt to prevent a communist domination of the area was not



Napalm bombs explode near a hamlet south of Saigon in a battle with Viet Cong guerillas, 1965. (Image courtesy of the National Archive and Records Administration, NAIL NWDNS-342-C-K20652.)

without moral justification." Norman Podhoretz concurred in his *Why We Were in Vietnam* (1982), asserting that the U.S. had gone to war "to save the Southern half of that country from the evils of Communism" (13).

The main focus of the revisionists, however, was not so much on the rights and wrongs of U.S. involvement as America's conduct of the war. Why was the U.S., the most powerful nation on earth, defeated in a Third World country by an army of peasants? U.S. Grant Sharp, former commander in chief Pacific, was one of the first of a number of senior officers who served during the war to make the case that America's defeat was not inevitable. "This war was not won by the other side," he argued, "It was lost in Washington, D.C." According to Sharp, the nation's civilian leadership forced the U.S. military to fight with one hand tied behind its back, especially with the restrictions it placed on the bombing of North Vietnam. His ire fastened, in particular, on Washington's strategy

of gradual escalation and the attempt to induce Hanoi to negotiate. "The application of military, war-making power is an ugly thing," the retired admiral concluded, "and it cannot be made nicer by pussy-footing around with it." Sharp's postmortem also touched on another concern that became a recurring theme in many revisionist accounts, namely, that dissent at home and a sensationalist media had undermined America's efforts in Vietnam (14).

Although they believed that the war was winnable, revisionists did not agree on the question of how it could have been won. In fact, they offered two alternative and conflicting strategies, one that focused on a more vigorous, conventional prosecution of the war and the other that placed more emphasis on counterinsurgency warfare. Harry Summers's *On Strategy* (1982) was the clearest statement of the first approach. Summers argued that the U.S. had misjudged the nature of the conflict, confusing the source of the war—North Vietnam—with the symptom—the insurgency in South Vietnam. Consequently, U.S. forces fought the wrong kind of war, a counterinsurgency campaign. By opting for the difficult and time-consuming business of searching for and trying to destroy guerrilla forces in the South, the Americans played into the hands of their weaker enemy. Instead, the U.S. should have waged a more conventional war against the real threat, North Vietnam. Summers contended that U.S. forces should have taken the war to the North Vietnamese by eliminating the sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia that sustained Communist operations in South Vietnam (15).

While Summers suggested that America should have fought a conventional rather than counterinsurgency conflict, other critics argued exactly the reverse. Notwithstanding *On Strategy's* claim that U.S. forces had waged a counterinsurgency campaign, these commentators contended that the Americans had actually fought an essentially conventional one. According to Andrew Krepinevich, General William C. Westmoreland's strategy of attrition followed tried-and-trusted methods, relying on firepower and technology to overwhelm the enemy. This "big battle" approach, however, proved ill-suited to rooting out insurgents and counterproductive in terms of the destruction inflicted on the South Vietnamese countryside. In short, U.S. forces had failed to adapt their standard operating procedures to the demands of a guerrilla war. Ironically, Krepinevich noted, when the Communists switched in 1972 to a more open pattern of warfare that made them a more suitable target for conventional firepower, the process of Vietnamization meant that the U.S. military had already "lost the opportunity to fight the war it knew how to win" (16).

Recent Scholarship

Revisionism has not eclipsed the standard or orthodox interpretation that the war was a bad one and could not be won. This view continues to dominate the scholarly literature. Nevertheless, the orthodox/revisionist debate over the origins and conduct of the conflict remains an important feature of Vietnam historiography. For example, David Kaiser's *American Tragedy* (2000), as its title implies, argues that the war was neither necessary nor winnable; in fact, it was "the greatest policy miscalculation in the history of American foreign relations" (17). In stark contrast, Michael Lind's *Vietnam: the Necessary War* (1999) describes U.S. intervention as an entirely appropriate response to communist aggression and the need to preserve America's global credibility. Hence, the war was "neither a mistake nor a betrayal nor a crime"; it was one military defeat in a wider struggle against communism that ultimately ended with America winning the cold war (18). Lewis Sorley's *A Better War* (1999) does not even concede defeat,

arguing that General Creighton W. Abrams, Westmoreland's replacement, had succeeded in effectively winning the war by 1971, only for this achievement to be squandered by the reduction in U.S. support for South Vietnam (19).

Although such conflicting views indicate that we have yet to witness the emergence of some grand postrevisionist synthesis, if such a thing is possible, recent scholarship has helped to refine previous interpretations and bring fresh insights into this most studied of events. Unlike earlier contributions—many of them journalistic accounts or memoirs, and some of them frankly polemical—the literature is increasingly scholarly in tone and content. Even though the subject still generates disagreements and strong emotions, works on the war in the last decade or so are generally more complex and reflective than previous studies. No doubt, this trend follows from the passage of time, which naturally brings with it new perspectives on the past, and the emergence of a younger generation of scholars, for whom the war is truly history; it also reflects the fact that historians working in the field can now draw upon a vast body of literature and mountains of documentary evidence. Consequently, the latest scholarship has taken the study of the war in some new and important directions.

First, historians have reexamined presidential administrations and the policymaking process. These studies do not represent the last word on their subjects, as is apparent from the conflicting interpretations of the Nixon administration put forward in recent works by Jeffrey Kimball and Larry Berman (20). Nevertheless, the declassification of documents and the release of taped material have allowed their authors to offer more informed and authoritative judgments about the making of U.S. policy. In addition, these new studies provide fresh insights into the domestic and international settings that shaped decision making. For example, H. R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty* (1997) examines the fraught relationship between America's civilian and military leaders to explain how domestic politics affected the way in which the Johnson administration escalated and fought the war. Fredrik Logevall's *Choosing War* (1999) devotes particular attention to the attitudes of other countries towards U.S. policy, in order to make the case that, as far as the thinking in foreign capitals was concerned, America's international credibility was not at stake in Vietnam. "The importance of viewing the war through this wider lens," Logevall opines, "becomes starkly clear when we consider that U.S. officials typically explained their decision to escalate the war in international terms" (21).

One development that has certainly widened our view of the war is the opening of previously inaccessible archives in the People's Republic of China and the former Soviet Union. Such works as Ilya Gaiduk's *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (1996) and Qiang Zhai's *China and the Vietnam Wars* (2000) shed light on the policies of America's two great cold war adversaries and help us to understand the broader international context that influenced the war's origins and evolution. Zhai, for example, examines the mix of ideological and security concerns that led China to extend substantial support to the Vietnamese communists in the 1950s and 1960s. This level of assistance, he argues, served to fuel the conflict in Vietnam and make U.S. escalation more likely (22).

Besides developing an international history of the war, scholars have also begun to pay more attention to the long-neglected Vietnamese side of the story. As historian Huynh Kim Khanh once complained, Vietnam is all too often regarded merely "as a battlefield or a piece of real estate to be fought over" and its people "as passive bystanders in a historical process engineered elsewhere" (23). This approach has relegated the Vietnamese to the status of bit-part players

in their own history; it has also severely hampered our understanding of events. After all, how can we adequately explain the roots of the war without reference to Vietnam's past, or the conflict's outcome without appreciating the country's social and political dynamics? To understand the Vietnamese aspects of the struggle, students have been able to draw upon several older studies, such as Jeffrey Race's *War Comes to Long An* (1972), as well as the work of Vietnam specialists like David Marr (24). Nonetheless, as one observer has noted, the literature on the war is dominated by "American scholars asking American-oriented questions and seeking answers in documents produced by Americans" (25). Recently, some historians have sought to remedy this shortcoming, using Vietnamese-language sources and newly available archival materials to illuminate this neglected dimension of the war's history. Perhaps it is too early to identify a common theme among their diverse offerings, but these works do tend to suggest the enormous political, military, and cultural obstacles that the U.S. faced in achieving its goals in Vietnam (26).

The increased attention to the Vietnamese side of the story, together with the new emphasis on the international aspects of the war, will help to ameliorate the tendency to view the Vietnam War simply as "American" history. As a major event in the twentieth century, the conflict needs and deserves to be considered in a wider context. In any case, only by appreciating these other dimensions of the struggle will we be in a better position to answer those long-standing questions about Vietnam that continue to divide Americans. □

Endnotes

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14. U. S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 269, 271.
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Marine Staff Sergeant Ermalinda Salazar was nominated for the 1970 Unsung Heroine Award presented annually by the Ladies Auxilliary to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Sergeant Salazar, determined to help the children of the St. Vincent de Paul Orphanage in Vietnam in her off-duty hours, holds two of the youngsters in June 1970. (Image courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration, NAIL NWDNS-127-N-A700730.)

18. Michael Lind, *Vietnam, The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 284.
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26. See, for example, Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002); William J. Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1995); David W. P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003).

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