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PALMER, KARNOW, AND HERRINGTON: A REVIEW OF RECENT VIETNAM WAR HISTORIES

by

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VIETNAM: A History. By Stanley Karnow. 670 pages. Viking Press, New York, 1983. \$20.00.

PEACE WITH HONOR?: An American Reports on Vietnam, 1973-75. By Lieutenant Colonel Stuart A. Herrington. 240 pages. Presidio Press, Novato, Calif., 1983. \$15.95.

THE 25-YEAR WAR: America's Military Role in Vietnam. By General Bruce Palmer, Jr. 236 pages. The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, Ky., 1984. \$24.00.

A century and a half ago that master military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, warned of two impediments to comprehending the true nature of war. One was what he called "the *vividness* of transient impressions" and the other "the tyranny of fashion."¹ Presenting an elective on Vietnam War Strategy at the Army War College for the past four years to classes composed almost entirely of Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine combat veterans of the war has reaffirmed the validity of that Clausewitzian insight.

Paradoxically, for military officers their own combat experience works against them.

Their view of the nature of the war is very much dependent on when and where they served. The "vividness" of the battlefield experiences of officers who served in Vietnam prior to 1965, or officers who served in the Mekong Delta, led them to believe that the war was exclusively a guerrilla war against lightly armed Viet Cong insurgents. The "vividness" of the battlefield experiences of officers who fought the Battle of the Ia Drang in November 1965 or of officers who served along the Demilitarized Zone led them to believe that the war was primarily against well-armed North Vietnamese army regulars. Few American officers witnessed the North Vietnamese tank- and artillery-supported Eastertide Offensive of 1972 and even fewer witnessed the North Vietnamese four-corps, cross-border blitzkrieg in 1975.

In academia the "tyranny of fashion" evidently served a similar function. In lecturing at several midwestern universities in the aftermath of the Cambodian incursion in 1970, it was remarkable to discover how rigid and doctrinaire opinions had become (and, as *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz found in his examination of attitudes among

the intellectual and academic communities during the Vietnam War, this was more than just a local phenomenon²). Everyone, students and faculty alike, agreed that the war was patently illegal, immoral, and unjust, and woe betide anyone who had the audacity to challenge this received truth. Recent articles in these pages have illustrated that this mindset lingers on, for there are those who still contend that the struggle in Vietnam was a civil war pure and simple, a war in which the United States—and, for that matter, the “illegitimate” Republic of Vietnam—should never have become involved. They have attempted to lock history into place circa 1970, but unfortunately for their peace of mind, historical truth is and has always been subject to reexamination, revision, and reinterpretation.

Many found their beliefs specious to begin with—a much better case could be made that the Korean War or, closer to home, the attempts by the United States to invade Canada in 1812, were both “civil wars” since both warring factions involved a common ethnic stock, a common language, and common histories and traditions. Much depends on which side you are on. As Clausewitz said, “The aggressor is always peace-loving (as Bonaparte always claimed to be); he would prefer to take over [a] country unopposed. To prevent his doing so, one must be willing to make war.”³ While the North Vietnamese may well have justified their actions as a “civil war,” the South Vietnamese—and the majority of the world’s nations—saw it as naked aggression. Not only was the sovereignty of the Republic of Vietnam recognized by some 60 of the world’s nations, but, as journalist Stanley Karnow reveals in his *Vietnam: A History*, “The Soviet Union even suggested a permanent partition by proposing in early 1957 that both North and South Vietnam be admitted to the United Nations as ‘two separate states,’ ” an initiative rebuffed by the United States.⁴ Ironically, however, it has been not American “revisionists” but the Viet Cong themselves who have most decisively challenged the 1970-era misconceptions.

Founder of the National Liberation Front (NLF) and former Viet Cong Minister of Justice Truong Nhu Tang ruefully now admits that not only American academics but the Viet Cong themselves were deliberately blinded to the true nature of the war. The Viet Cong leadership, “southerners committed to the idea of a separate policy for South Vietnam,” discovered too late that from the very beginning “the North Vietnamese communists had engaged in a deliberate deception to achieve what had been their true goal from the start, the destruction of South Vietnam as a political or social entity in any way separate from the North.”⁵ This disillusionment was corroborated by Stanley Karnow during his 1981 visit to Vietnam. “I’ve been a communist all my life,” former Viet Cong Deputy Minister of Health Dr. Duong Quynh Hoa told him, “but now, for the first time, I have seen the realities of communism. It is a failure—mismanagement, corruption, privilege, repression. My ideals are gone.” She went on to decry “the northern communists who now ran the south,” and such “animosity toward northerners” led Karnow to question the presumption “that the communists were a monolithic force in the country.”⁶

Yet another “tyranny of fashion” still lingers on—the notion that the war in Vietnam was a “revolutionary war” and that defeat there was caused by failure to implement properly the doctrines of counterinsurgency. This misperception is the more dangerous of the two since it clouds and confuses the very real problems we confront

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today in assisting allies faced with an internal insurgency. Emphasis on “counterinsurgency” obscures the fact that (unlike the French in Indochina or the British in Malaya who were in political control) for the United States the war in Vietnam was not a counterinsurgency war but instead a coalition war in support of an ally attempting to combat an insurgency. Failure to make this distinction led to American overinvolvement in the war and subsequent undermining of the confidence, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance of the very ally we were attempting to support.

Such arguments over the nature of the war are not limited to the United States. A recent *Parameters* article perpetuates this guerrilla mythology with a synopsis of the memoirs of Viet Cong General Tran Van Tra.⁷ What the article does not say is that these memoirs were an attempt by the Viet Cong to reestablish their claim to power and to challenge the (from my personal experience, correct) version of the North Vietnamese final offensive written by North Vietnamese army General Van Tien Dung.⁸ As Stanley Karnow points out, Tra’s memoir “was banned almost immediately after its publication [and] he himself disappeared from sight,” concluding that “Tra, who was dedicated to the cause of communism in the south, may have been purged for criticizing his northern comrades.”⁹

The war in Vietnam did not validate counterinsurgency doctrine. What it did validate was the truth of Clausewitz’s dictum that “In war, the will is directed at an animate object that reacts.”¹⁰ From 1954 to 1959, according to former CORDS [Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support] Director Ambassador Robert W. Komer, “MAAG concentrated on . . . preparing ARVN for a conventional delaying action against what it regarded as the most serious threat: a conventional, Korea-style NVA attack across the DMZ . . . [and] little was done . . . to develop an effective counterinsurgency capability.”¹¹ The North Vietnamese reacted to these preparations not by meeting them head-on but instead by launching a Hanoi-directed guerrilla war.

According to public statements on French television in 1983 by North Vietnamese army commanders Vo Nguyen Giap and Vo Bam, the North Vietnamese government set up the NLF in Hanoi in 1959 to “reunite the country.” Two years before President Kennedy stepped up American support by sending 685 advisors to South Vietnam, the North Vietnamese army sent 20,000 guerrilla-war cadres along what was to become the Ho Chi Minh Trail and in 1961 committed 30,000 laborers to expand that infiltration route.¹² This tactic almost succeeded, and by 1965 the Hanoi-directed guerrilla war had brought the Republic of Vietnam to the verge of collapse. All this changed, however, with the intervention of American combat forces. From that point until the Tet Offensive of 1968, the war was a mixed bag waged by local Viet Cong guerrillas, organized Viet Cong battalion- and regiment-sized main force units, and North Vietnamese army regular units. As the Viet Cong now admit, however, the guerrilla-war phase was decisively ended in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive of 1968,¹³ and for the next seven years the war continued under North Vietnamese control and direction.

With guerrilla war an obvious failure and the shattering of their ideological illusion—a tenet of “revolutionary war” doctrine—that, given the opportunity, the majority of the people would flock to their colors, they again reacted by changing from guerrilla to conventional tactics—i.e., their abortive Eastertide Offensive of 1972 and their successful blitzkrieg in 1975. Among the other great ironies of the war is the fact that the North Vietnamese final victory was won by “a conventional, Korea-style NVA attack across the DMZ.” Within two decades, the war had come full circle.

The Public Broadcasting System series “Vietnam: A Television History,” advertised as derived from Karnow’s *Vietnam: A History*, has given many a false impression of that work. The truth is, as the foregoing quotations illustrate, that Karnow’s book is far more objective and evenhanded than the

television series. Part of the reason is structural. Karnow could portray all of the facets of a situation—for example, not only the Saigon police chief's execution of a Viet Cong terrorist, but also the depravations of the Viet Cong death squads that led to that incident—but the television program was restricted to the footage available, and no TV camera crews accompanied the Viet Cong death squads.

A former *Time/Life* and *Washington Post* war correspondent, Stanley Karnow drew on 30 years' experience in the field and thus was able to avoid both the "vividness of transient impressions" and the "tyranny of fashion." With one of the most balanced overviews of Vietnam yet written, *Vietnam: A History* begins with the heritage of Vietnam's legendary past, including the French colonial period, the Japanese occupation in World War II, the First Indochina War between France and the Viet Minh, and thereafter provides a detailed account of America's involvement in the Second Indochina War between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. As a result of a 1981 visit to Vietnam, he also gives insights on the aftermath of that war. As he reports, soon after their conquest "the communists proceeded to shunt 400,000 South Vietnamese civil servants and Army officers as well as doctors, lawyers, teachers, journalists, and other intellectuals into 're-education' centers." "Locked in the same 'tiger cages' that the South Vietnamese government employed to incarcerate its dissidents—and which aroused protests in America during the war," these prisoners included "opponents of the Saigon authorities . . . [and] Viet Cong veterans." He goes on to discuss the "nearly a million people [who] have risked their lives to escape from the country."¹⁴

Some have complained that Karnow has perpetuated the myth that Ho Chi Minh was the George Washington of Vietnam. But while Karnow may have overemphasized Ho's nationalism, he accurately portrays the excesses of the 1955 land reforms where "thousands died and thousands were interned in forced labor camps," as well as the brutal

suppression of the revolt in Ho's own home province where Ho Chi Minh "sent a division of troops out to quell the disorders, and they killed or deported some 6,000 peasants."¹⁵ (And just to think, if when General George Washington moved out of Carlisle Barracks to put down the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794, he had killed the rebels instead of putting the revolt down without bloodshed, he could have gone down in history as the "Ho Chi Minh of America.") The question of whether Ho was more a nationalist or more a Stalinist functionary is still very much alive, most recently debated in an article in the January 1985 *Atlantic*.¹⁶

A more telling criticism is that in his 670-page book, Karnow devotes only some 15 pages to the fall of South Vietnam. But this deficiency is more than compensated for in *Peace With Honor?* by Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Herrington. Although a personal bias is involved—Herrington was my Deputy Negotiations Officer with the United States delegation Four Party Joint Military Team in 1974-75 and we worked together on the Saigon evacuation—other sources confirm my belief that he has written the landmark book on the final days of the American presence in Vietnam. Combining the analytical skills of an intelligence officer with the initiative and drive of an operations officer, Colonel Herrington played a key role in the evacuation and—as with his earlier book, *Silence Was a Weapon*—he has given us a remarkable testimony on American actions during the war.

Although Karnow did not dwell on those final days, he does report that "after the war was over . . . Americans overwhelmingly repudiated the intervention as having been a blunder. But roughly the same proportion of the nation holds in retrospect that, once involved, the United States ought to have deployed all its power to succeed. Postwar opinion polls show that Americans blame their political leaders for denying victory to the US Forces in Vietnam."¹⁷ These public opinion polls—polls corroborated by public response to recent lectures on campuses and in the civilian community on the war in

Vietnam—reveal not so much the truth of what went wrong in Vietnam as they do the strange role the military plays in American society.

Thanks to the lasting legacy of Oliver Cromwell, as former MACV Commander and Army Chief of Staff General Fred C. Weyand once put it, “Americans have a long and proud tradition of irreverence for and distrust of their military.”¹⁸ But from the very beginning of the Republic, the military has provided the foundation for America’s security, and “security” (as Maslow pointed out in his famous hierarchy of needs) is a basic and fundamental necessity upon which all other societal requirements are built. Thus while Americans may not revere their military, they have always taken it for granted that their military would protect them from harm. When this subliminal belief is threatened—as with America’s defeat in Vietnam—primordial passions are aroused. If the American people sense that their military is incompetent and unable to provide for their security, then their basic foundations become unstable. Better, then, to place the blame elsewhere—on the media, for example, or on the anti-war movement, or on (as Karnow found) “their political leaders”—for with such explanations, their feeling of security remains intact. Too many today, especially those come of age after the Vietnam War, have placed the blame for America’s failure on such scapegoats.

And those who served in Vietnam—including the senior leadership of the Army today whose combat service was at the platoon, company, and battalion levels—are not immune from such illusions. As Karnow reported, “A survey conducted in 1980 for the Veterans’ Administration disclosed that 82 percent of former US soldiers involved in heavy combat there believe that the war was lost because they were not allowed to win.”¹⁹ Since at the tactical level, as the North Vietnamese themselves admit, America’s combat forces won every major engagement on the battlefield, the “vividness of their transient impressions” blinds combat veterans, in and out of the Army, to the military’s

strategic failures. But the senior leadership of the Army during the war knew better. A most poignant example was provided in a recent letter from a retired brigadier general which told of a 1977 conversation he had with General Harold K. Johnson, the Army’s Vietnam-era Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and later Army Chief of Staff. The retired general asked General Johnson, “If you had your life to live over again, what would you do differently?” General Johnson replied:

I remember the day I was ready to go over to the Oval Office and give my four stars to the President and tell him, “You have refused to tell the country they cannot fight a war without mobilization; you have required me to send men into battle with little hope of their ultimate victory; and you have forced us in the military to violate almost every one of the principles of war in Vietnam. Therefore, I resign and will hold a press conference after I walk out of your door.”

According to the general’s letter, General Johnson then told him “with a look of anguish on his face” that “I made the typical mistake of believing I could do more for the country and the Army if I stayed in than if I got out. I am now going to my grave with that burden of lapse in moral courage on my back.”²⁰ The story has the ring of truth, for in a visit to the Army War College shortly before he died, General Johnson revealed the terrible despair and deep sense of personal responsibility that continued to haunt him. “For over five years after the war,” he said, “I could not even bear to think about it.”²¹

Fortunately for the future security of the United States, his former deputy, General Bruce Palmer, Jr., *has* been thinking about it. Army Operations Deputy in the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the early days of the war, Commander of II Field Force and later of USARV during the war itself, and Army Vice Chief of Staff in the closing days of the war, General Palmer has provided an insider’s account unequalled in the literature of the war. His book *The 25-Year War: America’s Military*

Role in Vietnam is of particular value to the military.

General Palmer's analysis begins at the Army War College. A member of the Class of 1951, he took part in an examination of US policy in Southeast Asia. Among other things, his study group concluded that "the United States had probably made a serious mistake in agreeing with its allies to allow French power to be restored in Indochina." They went on to find that "Indochina was of only secondary strategic importance to the United States" and that "militarily, the region in general and Vietnam in particular would be an extremely difficult operational area."²² These findings came back to haunt him when in 1963 General Palmer became the assistant to then Lieutenant General Harold K. Johnson, the Army DCSOPS. "During the next twenty months," General Palmer "had a ringside seat at the deliberations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff." Detailing the deliberations that led to the commitment of American ground combat forces to Vietnam, General Palmer admits that "there seems to have been insufficient timely discussion in Washington as to how and to what purpose US forces were to be employed in South Vietnam, that is, the US strategy to be pursued in conducting the crucial ground war in a decisive way."²³ He concludes his account of his 1963-67 experiences on the Joint Chiefs of Staff with the admission, "Not once during the war did the JCS advise the Commander-in-Chief or the Secretary of Defense that the strategy being pursued most probably would fail and that the United States would be unable to achieve its objectives."²⁴

Among the more valuable contributions that General Palmer makes is his detailed discussion of alternative strategies. While this drives historians wild, it is, as Clausewitz has emphasized, an essential element in critical analysis. "Critical analysis is not just an evaluation of the means actually employed, but of *all possible means* . . . One can, after all," Clausewitz wrote, "not condemn a method without being able to suggest a better alternative."²⁵ While General Palmer does

not claim that such alternatives would have been successful, he does point out that they would have played to America's military strengths rather than to its military weaknesses.

The 25-Year War concludes with "the larger lessons." Among these lessons is the need to reexamine our organization for combat. As General Palmer says, the principle of "*Unity of Command* . . . did not exist with respect to US efforts in Southeast Asia."²⁶ To correct this deficiency General Palmer lays out five proposals to strengthen our chain of command. These are recommendations that cannot be ignored, for as General Palmer states, "The United States cannot afford to put itself again at such enormous strategic disadvantage as we found ourselves in in Vietnam."²⁷

As these three volumes indicate, the literature on the war in Vietnam has undergone significant improvement in the past several years. Once dominated by emotional, one-sided, and in some cases deliberately distorted accounts, now at long last evenhanded and objective works are finding their way into publication. Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History* is the best single-volume overview of the war, a book particularly recommended for those who would put our involvement in Vietnam in perspective. Reminding us of the terrible price of our failures, Stuart Herrington's *Peace With Honor?* is likewise the best account of the last days of Vietnam and the evacuation of Saigon. Both of these volumes would be valuable additions to any military library.

But while these two volumes would be nice to have, *The 25-Year War*, by General Bruce Palmer, Jr., is an absolute must for any officer who considers himself a military professional. Moral courage is an all-too-rare commodity and it is especially rare when it is combined with intellectual acumen and practical battlefield experience. By exemplifying these virtues, General Palmer has given us a standard toward which to aspire. As Confucius said a few thousand years ago, "The way of the superior man is like that of the archer. When he misses the center of the

target, he turns and seeks the cause of his failure in himself." In Vietnam the Army missed the center of the target, and we owe it to the American people not to blame this failing on others but to seek the causes in our own institutional structure, in our own internal policies, plans, and operations. General Palmer has given us the tools to do just that.

NOTES

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2. Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), pp. 138-93.
3. Clausewitz, p. 370.
4. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), p. 224.
5. Truong Tang, "The Myth of a Liberation," *New York Review of Books*, 21 October 1982, pp. 31-36.
6. Karnow, p. 37.
7. Hung P. Nguyen, "Communist Offensive Strategy and the Defense of South Vietnam," *Parameters*, 14 (Winter 1984), 3-19.

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9. Karnow, p. 658.
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11. Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on US-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, August 1972), p. 130.
12. "Vietnam: We Lied to You," *The Economist*, 26 February 1983, p. 56.
13. Tang, "Myth of a Liberation."
14. Karnow, pp. 29, 34.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 225-26.
16. Stephen J. Morris, "Vietnam's Vietnam," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 255 (January 1985), 79-80.
17. Karnow, p. 15.
18. Fred C. Weyand, "Serving the People: The Need for Military Power," *Military Review*, 56 (December 1976), 8.
19. Karnow, p. 15.
20. Personal correspondence.
21. Personal interview.
22. Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1984), pp. 2-3.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
25. Clausewitz, p. 161.
26. Palmer, p. 193.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 210.

