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Review Essay

Vietnam 1945 to 1975: Communism on Display

ROBERT PREVIDI

What makes the Vietnam War so complex is the fact that it could have been prosecuted in a number of ways that might have achieved greater success—a guerrilla war using only the South Vietnamese forces, a guerrilla war using the South Vietnamese and American forces, or as a guerrilla and main force war—but it was not. One of the overarching conclusions of this review essay is the fact that the American military never received a set of clear political objectives from its civilian leadership on how to conduct the war. President Lyndon B. Johnson was a dreadful Commander-in-Chief who lacked any semblance of a political strategy for winning the war. This fact, along with Johnson's perceived need to dominate the military leadership, made failure in Vietnam almost a certainty.

The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, by Dr. Arthur J. Dommen, is impressive and thorough. Dommen is an expert on Indochina and was Bureau Chief for United Press International and the *Los Angeles Times* from 1959 to 1971. This well-documented book takes the reader from 1625, when the French first arrived in Indochina, through 1975. It includes 4,090 footnotes. This is at times a difficult book to read, but it is loaded with information and insight about Indochina, including events in Cambodia and Laos that affected the war in Vietnam.

Dr. Dommen makes it clear that the Viet Minh seized power in North Vietnam in August 1945 by using their preferred strategy of brutality and deceit. The author goes on to point out that according to one estimate, the Viet Minh may have massacred as many as 15,000 nationalists. He concludes that the French failed in their efforts in Vietnam because they did not understand how to foster the growth of noncommunist nationalism or how to protect the people under their care.

According to the author, US interest in Vietnam during the 1950s was characterized by President Truman not questioning France's sovereignty over Indochina, as the Roosevelt Administration had. Truman wanted the support of the French in Europe and was therefore willing to support them financially in Indochina, and in fact did so as early as 1950. The Truman Administration provided the majority of this support without the approval of Congress. The precedent set by President Truman of acting without the consent of Congress would later influence both the Johnson and Nixon administrations and would cost the nation dearly.

Dommen writes extensively, if not favorably, about how the French handled the 1954 Geneva Conference. There is also a great deal of thoughtful reflection about the US role in the assassination of President Diem. Major players in the United States' initial development of policy related to South Vietnam, such as Lodge, Harriman, Ball, Hilsman,

Mendenhall, and Michael Forrestal, do not come out favorably in this assessment. The book also devotes considerable coverage to President Johnson's decision to Americanize the war in 1965, the events leading up to the 1968 Tet Offensive, and the Paris Peace Talks that began on 13 May 1968 and lasted for over four years.

On the battlefield, Vietnamization of the war had its problems, but it appeared to be going well under the new leadership of General Creighton Abrams, William Colby of the CIA, and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. By 1972 the war of pacification was essentially won—and the South Vietnamese army was becoming increasingly professional. When Richard Nixon took office he continued the Johnson Administration's decision to temporarily halt the bombing of the North, and would later exacerbate this mistake by refusing to mine the harbors of industrial North Vietnam, thereby losing the advantage of recent tactical and political successes.

This is an interesting history of Indochina containing more than a thousand pages of fact, insight, and references. It is not an easy read.

In contrast to the length and detail of Dommen's work is *Nixon, Ford and the Abandonment of South Vietnam*, by J. Edward Lee and H. C. "Toby" Haynsworth, a short, well-written book of only 157 pages. Dr. Lee is a professor of history at Winthrop University, and Professor Haynsworth is a retired Winthrop business professor. They present an overview of the final days of Vietnam and compare the leadership demonstrated by US Presidents during the period with that of Lincoln and Roosevelt. In the chapter titled "Incursion," the authors make clear the deception of President Johnson in sending a half million men to Vietnam after his 1964 campaign promise "not to send America's sons 10,000 miles away to do what Asian sons should do." The authors also conclude that the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was conceived in duplicity. They focus on the fact that Congress was misled in passing a resolution that permitted the President to escalate the war whenever and to whatever extent he wanted.

Lee and Haynsworth make it abundantly obvious to the reader that President Nixon's main goal in dealing with the conflict in South Vietnam was to protect himself politically. That is why he was willing to accept a communist presence in the South as part of the Paris Peace Accords. Nixon's willingness to remove American troops from South Vietnam without trying to negotiate anything in return from the communists would set the stage for the country's ultimate humiliation.

The invasion of Laos in February 1971 (Lam Son 719) did not go well for the Americans or the South Vietnamese army and government. What it really demonstrated to the world was a glaring lack of leadership on the part of the South Vietnamese, from the tactical commanders in the field all the way up the chain of command to President Thieu. This was also one of the first manifestations of what would become an underlying problem for the remainder of the war, the inability of the United States and the people of South Vietnam to establish an honest and open government in Saigon. The South Vietnamese army had gained a measure of confidence and was fighting fairly well by the Easter Offensive of 30 March 1972. This was perhaps the high point in the entire conflict and the critical time when, as the authors advocate, the United States and the South Vietnamese governments should have taken military and political advantage of what was being accomplished on the battlefield and in the pacification program. Unfortunately, this was not to be.

The authors sum up what happened in Vietnam by giving a clear warning to future Presidents and members of Congress: "The first casualty of war may, indeed, be

truth. When politicians fail to lead and act with integrity, serious damage is done to our system. That is what happened repeatedly under Presidents Nixon and Ford as they abandoned an ally. Private assurances vanished when an aggressive enemy that only respected strength tested them. . . . It all came down to questions of honor and betrayal.”

The Real Lessons of the Vietnam War: Reflections Twenty-Five Years After the Fall of Saigon, edited by John Norton Moore and Robert F. Turner, has a number of fine chapters. Professor Moore teaches law at the University of Virginia, and Professor Turner’s experience includes teaching at the US Naval War College.

The editors make clear their assessment of the nature of the war by stating: “It is difficult to defend the proposition once so widely embraced among American intellectuals that the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) [the Vietcong] was independent of Hanoi now that top communist leaders have acknowledged that the Front was their creation from the start.” Wolfgang J. Lehmann (Former Deputy Chief of Mission, Saigon) in his chapter “Putting the War in Context” points out how tragic it was that the United States could not insist that no matter what the consequences we would not allow the communists to simply ignore the Paris Peace Accords that they signed in 1973. “It was a shameful failure mandated by the Congress with consequences for years to come.”

Jeffrey Record (former staff member, Senate Armed Services Committee) writes in his chapter: “The civilian leadership cannot be blamed for General Westmoreland’s selection of an attrition strategy.” It is this reviewer’s opinion that Westmoreland was the wrong general for Vietnam. President Johnson and Secretary McNamara were not only responsible for selecting him but for keeping him in command for four long years. Generals Harold Johnson, Bruce Palmer, or Creighton Abrams would have been better alternatives.

Record writes further that “as a corporate body, the interservice-rivalry-driven Joint Chiefs were structurally incapable of providing useful and timely advice.” If Record is right, how did we win World War II using a system which was structurally deficient? The fact is that the system used during World War II was sound because it was “joint” in concept, but jointness had not become a rigid mantra. What could be better than the chiefs, with all of their experience and knowledge, taking the political goals of the President and turning them into an overall military plan for the combatant commanders to execute? Eisenhower, MacArthur, and Nimitz had all of the services in their areas of responsibility under their command.

I did not find Douglas Pike’s chapter, “Vietnamese Communism: Understanding the Enemy,” to be terribly enlightening or informative. Instead, I would recommend reading *None So Blind* by George W. Allen, which is not reviewed here.

The chapter “Internationalist Outlook of Vietnamese Communism” by Stephen J. Morris, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, is excellent. He focuses on the big picture. Professor Morris’s insightful analysis that the communist leadership in North Vietnam was composed of a bunch of thugs who were primarily interested in power for themselves places the causes of the war in a pragmatic context. Morris sums up his case: “Twenty-five years after the fall of Saigon, the image of the Vietnamese Communists as merely the authors of another chapter in the heroic saga of Vietnamese nationalism resisting foreign domination remains one basic stock item of Vietnamese government propaganda. The Vietnamese people have known better for decades. The time has long passed for serious foreign observers to acquire such wisdom.”

The chapter “Legal Issues in the U.S. Commitment to Vietnam: A Debate,” by John Norton Moore, is also well worth reading. Moore points out that in 1957 the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to admit the Republic of Vietnam. The author also concludes that at the end of the war it was not the NLF who entered Saigon, it was North Vietnamese tanks.

The book then transitions to a debate between Saul Mendlovitz and Robert Turner related to the War Powers Act and the right of the President to “make war.” Dr. Turner writes: “The framers [were] raised on Locke, Montesquieu, and Blackstone—each of whom I would add, viewed the entire business of war to be Executive in character.” The brilliance of the Constitution is that it rejected the views of these gentlemen. The warmaking authority belongs to Congress, and Lawrence R. Velvel (Dean, Massachusetts School of Law at Andover) makes such a case with logic and clarity in just five and one-half pages. He writes: “The declaration of war clause gives the decision-making power over war to Congress. That is the Constitution we have, and if one wants to change it, one ought to amend the Constitution.” Dean Velvel confirms that the last people one would want to make the decision regarding when the nation goes to war is the executive branch. “I certainly don’t want the people in the Executive making the decision on war. They should be held in as low regard as the Congress, and have richly earned that low regard in both war and peace from 1960 to date by lying, ineptitude, secrecy, arrogance, a failure to understand limits, and plain crookedness.”

Dr. Turner provides an excellent chapter dealing with how we turned victory into defeat. In his opinion the peace movement was critically important in persuading Congress to abandon the people of Indochina. “It may have been great fun to take on the system . . . but the protesters ought to be asking themselves whether the horror that followed for the people of Indochina was a logical consequence of their behavior.”

Robert E. Morris follows the Turner offering with an analysis of why we lost the war in Vietnam. Dr. Morris is a retired Army lieutenant colonel who served as an advisor in Vietnam and later taught military history and strategy at West Point. He believes that America’s conduct of the Vietnam War represents one of the most inept military campaigns in all of history. Morris’s criticism appears justified, at least to this reviewer, in that the United States committed a number of strategic and tactical errors—failing to isolate the battlefield, underestimating the will of the communists, leaving the supply lines from the Soviet Union and China open, and not using enough troops. Most important, we never had more than 100,000 “trigger pullers” in-country at any one time (80 percent of our troops were in support roles; the enemy had the opposite ratio). The author also makes the point that we were overly concerned about the possible role China would play if we were more active in our prosecution of the war.

Dr. Lewis Sorley (West Point graduate and author of *A Better War*) provides the reader with some riveting insights on the conduct of the war. What Dr. Sorley has added to the understanding is that the nature of the war changed in 1968 when General Creighton Abrams took over. Had we continued our material support of the South Vietnamese at the time of the North’s attack in 1973, we would have finally had the North Vietnamese army in the open where the South Vietnamese could have effectively attrited them, and they knew it. Dr. Sorley provides great clarity and insight into our understanding of the war during the critical period following the Tet Offensive of 1968.

Dr. Gregory H. Stanton is the Director of Genocide Watch and has written a staggeringly powerful chapter that should be assigned reading for all students of Ameri-

can history and foreign policy, members of the press, and those serving in both the Congress and the executive branch of government. Stanton, who visited Cambodia in 1980 as a former protester against US involvement in the Vietnam War, returned quite the opposite following his firsthand experience. “I returned convinced that Congress cutting off assistance to fight the Khmer Rouge and to enforce the Paris Accords doomed millions of Cambodians and Vietnamese to unspeakable deaths. I can never again believe that the fight against Communism in Southeast Asia was wrong.”

Why the North Won the Vietnam War, edited by Dr. Marc Jason Gilbert, a professor of history at North Georgia College, was a bit of a disappointment to this reviewer. Dr. Jeffrey Record also provides a chapter for this work, examining how America’s conduct of the war actually aided North Vietnam. Professor Record again makes the point that the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as a body, could not formulate an overall strategy for winning the war. Dr. Record faults the Chairman of the JCS for not having the strength and fortitude to execute the war. He writes, “The Chiefs themselves failed more often than not to agree on what advice to give, and the JCS as an institution in the 1960s lacked the authoritative chairman [that was later] established by Congress in the Defense [Department] Reorganization of 1986.”

The final chapter is provided by Dr. Lloyd Gardner (Rutgers University). This is a short chapter with one point of particular interest to this reviewer. Gardner writes, “Fifty years on, historians will look at the cold war and wonder why the Americans did not understand better the folly of their attempt at nation-building.” That assessment may well be borne out again in the aftermath of the wars in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War, by David L. Anderson, professor of history and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Indianapolis, did little to expand this reviewer’s understanding of the Vietnam War. With regard to the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Professor Anderson expresses his belief that President Johnson did not have escalating the war as an objective when he requested the resolution. If that were true, one wonders why LBJ did not go back to Congress for authorization when he finally decided to escalate the war? The author also chooses to pass along a number of popular myths that are just plain wrong. For example, he provides the old (unsubstantiated) news account: “Reporting on an attack on one village, an American television crew recorded an officer’s comment that it was necessary to destroy the village to save it.” Professor Anderson would do well not to listen to people like Peter Arnett. What B. G. Burkett writes in *The Real Lessons of the Vietnam War* is much closer to the truth.

The final book in this review essay is *Victory in Vietnam*, compiled by the Military History Institute of Vietnam (present-day Vietnam) and translated by Merle L. Pribbenow. This is a difficult book to read, because it is primarily tedious propaganda. The introduction is written by William J. Duiker, Professor Emeritus of History at Penn State University. Duiker is abundantly clear in his well-presented introduction that Vietnam was not a civil war: “A number of questions remain unanswered, but one of the more pernicious myths about the Vietnam War—that the insurgent movement in South Vietnam was essentially an autonomous one that possessed only limited ties to the regime in the North—has been definitively dispelled.”

The major thing derived from this book is the degree to which the North Vietnamese were fighting a total war, while the South Vietnamese and the United States were fighting a defensive war. Unfortunately, unless we had been willing to do everything pos-

sible to galvanize the American people for a total-war effort and actually had Congress declare war on North Vietnam, there was little chance of winning.

One point that might be of interest to the uninformed about the conduct of the war was the fact that even before President Johnson started to Americanize the war, the North was sending troops south. North Vietnamese accounts reflect this: "In 1964 our army began to send to the battlefield complete units at their full authorized strength of personnel and equipment. . . . By the end of 1965 our main force army in South Vietnam totaled almost 92,000." When one ponders our strategy of fighting a war of attrition, did we ever consider the real strength of the enemy? The North Vietnamese go on to say: "Our main force troops grew from 195,000 soldiers in early 1965 to 350,000 soldiers in May 1965 and finally to 400,000 by the end of 1965. . . . During 1966 the strength of our full-time forces in South Vietnam would be increased to between 270,000 and 300,000 soldiers. . . . By the end of 1966 the total strength of our armed forces was 690,000 soldiers."

An interesting observation from this work is that Hanoi was fundamentally defenseless for the period 1963 to 1966. One can only wonder what would have been the result if the B-52s had hit them with a continuous campaign during this period? Instead, the North Vietnamese sources go on to explain that they were fully aware of our "limited war" strategy and knew we could not win with two hands tied behind our backs.

Surprisingly, the North Vietnamese admit that the 1968 Tet Offensive did not go well: "Because of fierce enemy counterattacks, the uprising of the masses in the cities did not achieve results projected in the plan." References to General Abrams' strategy of "clear and hold" are also somewhat revealing and again call our long-term strategy into question: "The political and military struggle in the rural areas declined and our liberated areas shrank . . . and most of our main force troops were forced back to the border or to bases in the mountains." In case there was any doubt, they admit that "most of the cadre and soldiers of the regiments and armed operations teams operating in the lowlands were natives of North Vietnam."

The fact is, as Dr. Sorley writes, we had them on the run. The communists write: "From the enemy's standpoint, during 1969-1971, by making all-out efforts on all fronts, the United States and its puppets successfully carried out a significant portion of their plan to 'pacify' the rural lowlands."

What these six books provide is an insight that communism, not the United States, was the enemy of the people of Indochina. Ho Chi Minh was not the kind old man fighting a civil war for the people as described in communist propaganda and even in segments of the American press. The view from the politburo in Hanoi had to do with how Indochina fit into worldwide communism. To that end these professional communists used power, oppression, and, most of all, killing. Wherever they went, the people who disagreed with them died. Being a nationalist was not enough, one had to be a communist. Well before they seized power the Viet Minh had already acquired a reputation for terror against their fellow countrymen.

There is much to be garnered from these books related to how ineptly the United States fought the war in Vietnam. The result was that in the end we shamelessly decided to give the North Vietnamese whatever they wanted, even if it meant abandoning an ally. As the war dragged on, America became overly focused on getting out of Vietnam and the return of our 591 prisoners of war. Many Americans still believe that what the peace movement accomplished in terms of the war in Vietnam was honorable. The people in Indochina who have suffered so much, and continue to suffer, would disagree.

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