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# The Elephant and the Tiger: The Full Story of the Vietnam War

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Wilbur H. Morrison

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Ley's account is written in the first person; he has included psychological profiles of the subjects of his research and of those he interviewed.

Unfortunately, Ley succeeds neither in proving that Kohler was a German spy (although it is likely that he was) nor in sustaining the reader's interest. This is a strange hybrid of history and psychology that simply does not meet the expectations that the subject matter suggests.

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Morrison, Wilbur H. *The Elephant and the Tiger: The Full Story of the Vietnam War*. New York: Hippocrene Books, 1990. 703pp. \$24.95

This work may be the most comprehensive history of the Vietnam War yet published. It includes the military, political, social, and economic impacts of that war upon all the combatants from 1947 to the aftermath of war and into the 1980s.

While popular films, television, and novels about the Vietnam War have enjoyed great license and prosperity in recent years, very few authors have seriously attempted to provide a complete picture of the war. Wilbur Morrison is one. He has produced a vivid account of how the United States became involved in Vietnam and how it conducted and ended the war there. Divided into four parts, its seven-hundred-page length is not intimidating, thanks to the author's skill in blending facts and

analysis with eyewitness accounts and poignant anecdotes. It is a thorough and well-organized study containing such remarkable detail and clarity that it makes a suitable companion to Harry Summer's excellent book *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context*, published in 1981.

The author begins with the first low-level American contact with the French and Indochina in 1947, when the communists first began to challenge the French reestablishment of control after World War II. Morrison moves in detail through the French defeat and the partition of North and South Vietnam, on to the gradual, creeping increase of American political and military involvement in support of the U.S.-favored government of South Vietnam. It appears that over the next ten years, before anyone realized it, the United States had committed over 500,000 troops to a war it could not win. The author has provided a description of the unique nature of South Vietnam's government and the numerous coups that occurred regularly throughout the war years from 1954 to 1975. The deeply ingrained political instability of that country contributed significantly to the ultimate defeat—but no one made the connection.

Throughout the book, however, the author contends that the United States could have—and should have—easily won the war had it not been for the politicians. While wars should have political purposes and goals, the actual conduct of military operations in pursuit of those goals

should be the domain of the military commanders. This was certainly not the case in the Vietnam War.

In the late 1960s, during the war's greatest escalation, nearly all military decisions (in many cases down to the tactical level) were made by the secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, or President Johnson. The decisionmaking process that governed the military operations was so cumbersome that simple aircraft target lists would often encounter delays of three weeks pending approval from the White House. Military commanders in the field often had no latitude or flexibility in how they fought or where, especially regarding air and naval operations against North Vietnam. McNamara's unrealistic, uncoordinated, and continual interference in all levels of military operations may be the single greatest influence on why the United States lost the war. Morrison states that "McNamara's plan for graduated response . . . was doomed from the start. It was a no-win position that resolved nothing either politically or militarily." There was certainly no resolve, or unity of effort. McNamara simply did not understand the nature of war or how to conduct one. Unfortunately, neither did the politicians around him, nor were they willing to listen to sound military advice from the Pentagon.

In contrast to the high-level political intrigues, Morrison has given, through their words and deeds, the view of the war of many marines, soldiers, sailors, and airmen of all ranks

who served in that war. Throughout are marvelous anecdotes of Medal of Honor actions that bring war's reality directly into the reader's heart.

Supported by numerous photographs and seven maps, *The Elephant and the Tiger* is much better than General Phillip Davidson's *Vietnam at War* (1988) or Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam* (1984). This book is well worth the price and the time to read it. Although unstated, the moral of this work on the Vietnam War could be: For every complex and difficult problem there is a simple and easy solution—which is always wrong!

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Miller, Robert Hopkins. *The United States and Vietnam, 1787-1941*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense Univ. Press, 1990. 324pp. \$10

In the tradition of such distinguished scholar-diplomats as Edwin Reischauer and George F. Kennan, Ambassador Miller has written a much-needed history of early U.S. involvement with an important Asian nation.

The first half of Miller's book, dealing with the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship in the nineteenth century, is largely terra incognita even for Southeast Asia scholars. Miller documents several diplomatic initiatives by the United States in this period to establish trade relations with the Vietnamese, initiatives which failed