

1989

Vietnam at War; the History: 1946-1975

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Recommended Citation

Marolda, Edward J. and Davidson, Phillip B. (1989) "Vietnam at War; the History: 1946-1975," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 42 : No. 2 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol42/iss2/19>

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flowed from it is vital in thinking about the future. In that context this book provides unique and valuable insight.

DOUGLAS KINNARD
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Davidson, Phillip B. *Vietnam at War; the History: 1946-1975*. Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1988. 838pp. \$27.50

Lieutenant General Davidson's 838-page tome should become an essential reference on the conflict that raged in Indochina from 1946 to 1975. It answers the long-standing need for a military history of the war that encompasses its grand strategic, diplomatic, political and, of course, operational aspects. As in any good military history, *Vietnam at War* discusses the special features of the combat arena: Vietnam's geography, climate, and demographic makeup and the composition of the opposing forces. The book's other strengths are its clear, straightforward prose and general readability and simple but informative maps.

What sets this work apart, however, are Davidson's intellectually stimulating, forcefully stated, and above all, provocative analyses of many aspects of the war; no shrinking violet here. Characterizing the Vietnamization program as a "cut and run" and "peace at any price" strategy and labeling Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford a "Judas" for his actions to decrease the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia are only

a few examples of his approach to the subject. The author, a military officer of many years service, several of them spent in key positions in Vietnam, clearly comes out on the "Hawk" side of the debate in his often used "Hawk"- "Dove" construct. Indeed, Davidson's work provides a forum for views that are often voiced in military circles: that the American news media, the antiwar movement, and the Congress bear much of the blame for the Vietnam defeat; that overwhelming military force applied against the enemy would have produced allied victory, especially after the enemy's militarily disastrous Tet offensive; and that civilian theorists and policymakers forced a flawed "limited-war" strategy on the resistant warriors.

At the same time, however, Davidson is no captive to the conventional wisdom. He does not aver that the United States would have won the war in 1965 if it had executed a 1972-strength bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Further, the General doubts that the use of nuclear weapons would have produced an outcome favorable to America and its allies.

Similarly, Davidson does not ascribe the communists' victory in the Vietnam War to the overwhelming use of conventional arms, an interpretation of growing popularity since publication of Harry Summers' *On Strategy*. Instead, he credits the enemy's superior revolutionary war strategy. With an obvious debt to strategist Karl von Clausewitz and

Vietnam scholar Douglas Pike, the author cogently and persuasively concludes that North Vietnam's winning approach stressed: the primacy of political over military objectives; the importance of fighting a total war embracing all facets of the nation's political, military, diplomatic, economic, and psychological power; the maintenance of a unified response to the American-directed threat; the conduct of a protracted conflict; and the adaptation to changing international and battlefield conditions. Conversely, the deficiencies of the United States and its allies in each of these categories doomed the noncommunist war effort.

Having elaborated on the strengths of Davidson's generally commendable work, one must also point out its shortcomings. Chief among them is the contradiction between his overall conclusions, which detail the importance of political-military revolutionary war, and the body of the book, which focuses on the big-unit conventional battles. The enemy's pervasive use of political assassination, proselytization, guerrilla ambush, and other actions at the local level receives scant attention, while the 1954 battle of Dien Bien Phu warrants four chapters. In the same vein, only one chapter treats the period from 1954 to 1964, when many historians would conclude the South Vietnamese lost the war because they failed to develop a viable nation. Indeed, Davidson acknowledges that inadequacies in the South Vietnamese society and the armed forces were deep and lasting.

Further, one questions the need or the success of using North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap's military career as a unifying thread for the work. Certainly, he was the architect of the Viet Minh victory over the French Union forces in 1946-1954 and a major player in the struggle against the South Vietnamese and Americans in the period after. As the author relates, however, prior to the Tet offensive, Giap's strategic views did not always carry the day, and from 1968 to 1975 his star was in decline and thus his influence on the war is hard to gauge for that period. One is not persuaded that Giap should get the credit for the collective North Vietnamese leadership's superior grand strategy and conduct of the war.

Finally, while *Vietnam at War* reflects familiarity with many of the best secondary sources available on the war, there are relevant omissions from the bibliography. For this military history, Davidson might have made greater use of the scholarship of the U.S. military historical offices. For example, Ronald H. Spector's *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (1983); Edward J. Marolda and Oscar P. Fitzgerald's *From Military Assistance to Combat, 1959-1965* (1986); and Robert F. Futrell and Martin Blumenson's *The Advisory Years to 1965* (1981), would have shed different light on such subjects as the military's role in the development of "limited war" strategies, the Tonkin Gulf incidents of 1964, and the early days of the conflict. Incidentally, this reviewer

suspects that the Navy would love to take credit for knocking down the famed "Dragon's Jaw" bridge at Thanh Hoa, North Vietnam. The author implies it did, but that honor must go to the Air Force.

These drawbacks aside, *Vietnam at War* will be basic reading for any serious scholar seeking to understand the complex evolution of the decades-spanning conflict in Southeast Asia.

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Sheehan, Neil. *A Bright Shining Lie*.
New York: Random House, 1988.
861pp. \$24.95

The subtitle of this superb work is *John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. It is a masterful interweaving of biography and history that combines the personal experience and insights of a combat correspondent in the Vietnam war with 16 years of research, 385 interviews (170 of which were tape-recorded on 640 cassettes) and two three-month trips to Vietnam in the early 1970s.

The book's title is an excerpt from John Vann's letter to a U.S. Army historian in 1963 and is apt for this account of the flawed hero of a flawed war. The experiences and influence of John Vann are a metaphor for the American hubris and South Vietnamese corruption that doomed any honest hope of establishing a political reality capable of winning the support of the people

south of the 17th parallel in what was called South Vietnam.

This is a painstaking recounting of the delusions of the American military and political leadership and the deceptions of the Saigon cliques. It is a montage of the professional honesty of John Vann the warrior and the personal mendacity of John Vann the man. Yet, the leaders who John Vann depicted as deluded came to his funeral at Arlington in 1972; some, including General Westmoreland, as pallbearers. One was a pariah and turncoat to the others. Dan Ellsberg of the "Pentagon Papers" and Vann's one-time alter ego was there as a friend of Vann's divorced wife, who still considered herself John's widow and who now shared Ellsberg's antiwar views.

The Vietnam decade encompassed by Vann's contrapuntal domination of the scene started with Vann as a renegade lieutenant colonel military adviser (to a cowardly Vietnamese division commander who was losing the war in the Delta), watching helplessly as Vietcong guerrillas butchered a mismanaged and miserably led ARVN force at Ap Bac in 1962. He spent the rest of his career trying to manipulate the U.S. military to force the South Vietnamese to fight. It ended with Vann, as a civilian generalissimo, winning the battle of Kontum against NVA regulars in 1972 with American firepower and South Vietnamese troops, then losing his life in a helicopter accident.

Vann wanted an American proconsul to force the South Vietnamese