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Assessing the Vietnam War

S. A Swarztrauber

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PROFESSIONAL READING

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H.G. Rickover

Rear Admiral S. A. Swarztrauber, U.S. Navy (Ret.)

Matthews, Lloyd J. and Brown, Dale E., eds. *Assessing the Vietnam War.* New York: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1987. 254pp. $16.95

Grinter, Lawrence E. and Dunn, Peter M., eds. *The American War in Vietnam.* Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987. 165pp. $37.95

Having spent 18 months fighting on the coasts, rivers, and in the jungles of Vietnam and another five years "administering" the war from close to the throne in Washington, I find it very difficult—close to impossible—to read, think, or write about that war dispassionately. Yet, I will try.

These two books, which I will refer to as *Assessing* and *American War* respectively, attempt to criticize the war, years later, in an objective, dispassionate way. Why did we get involved? Why did we fail? What have we learned?

There is no agreement on answers to these questions. Both books are collections of short papers by experts, military and non-military, domestic and foreign, and most illuminatingly, Vietnamese. *Assessing* includes 19 articles by 21 editors and contributors; *American War* includes 15 pieces by 9 editors and contributors. Both books cover the full spectrum of opinion from the so-called hawk view to the so-called dove view.

The classic-in-its-own-time book by Army Colonel Harry Summers, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (1981), triggered the debate that rages in these two volumes, and which is referred to as the "new Vietnam scholarship." Summers stands on the right and has articulated the hawk view

that we could have won the war had we followed the time-honored teachings of Clausewitz: First, ascertain clearly what kind of war it is you are undertaking and second, concentrate your effort against the enemy's center of gravity. We failed to recognize that the war after 1959 was a conventional war of aggression by North Vietnam. Duped by a clever strategic deception by the North, we mistook the war as an insurgency. We wasted our efforts against the Vietcong "symptom" in the South, rather than against the "disease"—the enemy's center of gravity in Hanoi. In Summer's eyes, there is enough blame to go around. Not only was the military stabbed in the back by the Administration, but it also shot itself in the foot.

Nearly all the authors of *Assessing* and *American War* lean towards the "dove" point of view and the prevailing theme attempts to discredit Summer's thesis, while at the same time crediting him with having fathered the new Vietnam scholarship. John M. Gates, among others, makes the case that it was a revolutionary, not a conventional, war. Peter Dunn argues very convincingly that Clausewitz was irrelevant to the Vietnam war. "Had Clausewitz been alive in our time and serving as an American general officer, he too probably would have lost this war. His theory demands a target, an enemy army to destroy; and the Communists would not have offered him such a target." A majority of the authors believe the war was not winnable.

There are numerous interesting views between these two poles. Air Force Colonel Alan Gropman: "we could have won had we not misused our air power." Hung P. Nguyen: "we lost because our large combat unit strategy was inappropriate." Peter Dunn: "it would have made more sense for the United States to have applied the teachings of the Chinese strategist, Sun Tzu, given the nature of the war."

One can draw some conclusions from this potpourri. Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy got us into the war because a euphoric America was riding high at the time having successfully contained communism in Berlin, Greece, Turkey, and to an acceptable extent, in Korea and Cuba. Those Presidents were confident we could also contain communism in Vietnam with a minimum of national expenditure. Once it became apparent that this was not true, no President wished to be "tarred domestically with the brush of having lost another round to communism." (Paul M. Kattenburg). Johnson, hawkish at first, committed combat troops in 1965 but then lost his stomach for the war, allowing himself to be convinced by his State and Defense Secretaries that an all-out attack on Hanoi would bring in the Chinese. For that reason, Johnson made a conscious decision *not* to mobilize the Nation's resources and will to win, and then stepped down. The "hawk" authors chastise Johnson for this stab in the back while the "dove" authors say he had no reasonable alternative because the war was unwinnable.

Where did this leave the American fighting man? While the enemy was fighting a patriotic war with revolutionary passion, we fought the war in cold blood. Remember the fervently patriotic Gregory Peck movies of World War II that ended with "Buy Bonds in this Theater"? Of the thousands of men I spoke with in Vietnam, I never encountered one who felt he was fighting to defend his homeland or to preserve America's freedoms. It was simply kill or be killed; do your duty the best you can and count the days until FIGMO. (Anyone ever in Vietnam will know this little obscene acronym as having to do with orders home.)

These two books become somewhat mired down debating what kind of a war it was: conventional? national liberation? revolutionary? civil? insurgency? conflict? limited war? struggle? etc. This is quite silly; it was all of these things. We know now that it was conventional, as Summers says. In 1959 the North Vietnamese made a decision to overpower and subjugate the South by whatever means necessary and for however long it might take: first by insurgency and guerrilla tactics; later by small regular units from the North; and finally by *coup de grace* with a large-scale armored invasion. There are plenty of historical examples showing that revolutionary wars have a tendency to turn into conventional wars.

It was certainly a civil war inasmnch as Vietnamese were fighting Vietnamese. It was also a "war of national liberation" in the sense that communist governments were supporting an insurgency on foreign soil. And it was a revolutionary war both before and after 1959. For years, nationalistic Vietnamese in both North and South wished to unite and end foreign domination and influence. First it had been the Chinese, then French, Japanese, French again, and finally the Americans.

Peter Dunn curiously steps into a semantic trap. He labels the war revolutionary because, among other reasons, the North Vietnamese have said it was. That is meaningless because in Leninist-Marxist dogma, any war between communists and non-communists is by definition part of the world revolutionary process.

By any yardstick, however, this was a revolutionary war every bit as much as our own Revolutionary War. I agree with Summers that we could have won a victory over the North had we concentrated against Hanoi. Unfortunately, it would have been a temporal victory, necessarily to be followed by a long-term uncomfortable and unpopular occupation. Likewise, the British could have defeated the American colonies with a massive effort had they not lost their stomach for the war. Then, they too could have "sat" on the colonies with garrisons. But for how long? Two years? Ten? Indefinitely, probably, because in either case the revolution would have gone on, underground. Noel C. Eggleston says it nicely, quoting Charles Andrews: "You cannot fight or beat revolutions as you can fight and beat nations. You can kill a man, but you simply can't kill a

rebel. . . . And the reason why no revolution . . . has ever been beaten is that rebels die for something worth dying for. . . ."

In the final analysis, it is probably far better for Vietnam that its revolution to unite and throw off foreign domination succeeded when it did, even as costly and bloody as it was for all concerned. The two Germanies and the two Koreas still have this problem ahead of them. Reunification is inevitable, and human nature being what it is, it will more likely be revolutionary than evolutionary. The unanswerables are when? and how much blood?

America's mistakes in Vietnam are clearer in hindsight. Had we backed Ho Chi Minh, we probably would have a reasonably prosperous and stable Vietnam, which, like Yugoslavia, would have been communist but benevolently neutral towards the United States. Ho Chi Minh had no more admiration for the Chinese than Tito did for the Russians. There are more ways than one to contain communism.

In fairness, I must reveal where I am coming from on this. Some months before the U.S. 1965 invasion, there was a fierce debate over the issue in the Pentagon, Foggy Bottom, and the White House. I wrote a paper proposing we not invade, but tilted towards Ho Chi Minh for just the reasons cited. My paper was squelched "for my own good"; we invaded, and a year later I became a part of that invasion.

Have we learned anything? The authors in these books are not sanguine—from learning little, to learning nothing, and to learning wrong and dangerous lessons. Some authors see a shell-shocked, "stabbed-in-the-back" military emerging, so timid and conservative that they will shrink from any involvement in limited conflicts that do not have ironclad guarantees of full public and congressional support. Other authors view with alarm the fact that the Armed Forces have virtually dismantled and discarded their unconventional and counterinsurgency units because they wish to put the "anomaly" of Vietnam behind them. The services are seen preparing for what they are more comfortable with—a NATO-Warsaw Pact conventional war with big high-tech combat units and equipment. These authors feel sure that future wars will be like Vietnam and that a reluctant military will have to relearn the lessons of that war all over again. One author, David Petraeus, quotes Stanley Hoffman: "Of all the disasters of Vietnam, the worst could be our unwillingness to learn enough from them." There is one note of optimism expressed in *American War:* that no nation ever achieves its full potential until after losing a war.

Both books plow essentially the same ground and one need read only one of them to get the gist. In fact, the first chapter of *American War* could be aptly described as an executive summary of the debate. *Assessing*, a little more comprehensive, contains an outstanding bibliographical essay (Joe P. Dunn) on almost everything in print and on film about the war, plus a paper

by W. W. Rostow on the larger diplomatic consequences of the war. Both books are well-written and edited, provocative and revealing.

There is one point which cannot stand unchallenged. The role of the U.S. Navy is simply ignored. It is as if we were not there. These books, like too many others, focus on ground and air matters. The Navy is mentioned—only in passing—by Alan Gropman as having participated with the Air Force in the air war. Nothing is said of what the Navy did to stop infiltration by sea or to wrest control of South Vietnam's water transportation system. Sailors accomplished every mission assigned and won significant battles. They are largely, still, unsung heroes.

Cable, Larry E. *Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War.* New York and London: New York Univ. Press, 1986. 307pp. $30

This is an intriguing and iconoclastic attempt to address the root of America's failure in the Vietnam war. Cable opens with a damning indictment of American military doctrine for such wars, which he defines as "the officially sanctioned theory of victory outlining the conduct of war on all levels." He asserts that "A powerful but unspoken assumption [before Vietnam] . . . consisted simply of the belief that the United States was a successful, experienced, warlike power whose vast military competence comprised a capability in guerrilla warfare," whereas in fact "the United States was a rank amateur in the arena of unconventional low-intensity conflict. . . ."

According to Cable, the U.S. military in general committed two major errors: it assumed incorrectly that all guerrillas were in fact partisan adjuncts to a hostile regular army, and it misunderstood the lessons of history that could have been drawn from those conflicts in which the United States should have acquired some experience.

In the development of this thesis, Cable divides *Conflict of Myths* into three parts. The first part outlines the author's basic argument and provides critical case studies of five conflicts: the Greek Civil War, South Korea (1948-1954), the Philippines (1946-1954), the Malayan Emergency, and the Marine involvement in the so-called Banana Wars in Central America (1915-1934). Each could have been instructive, in his opinion. For example, the Greek experience demonstrated the near-impossibility of building a local army in the American image while it was engaged against "an able and motivated adversary." Korea's "Pohang Guerrilla Hunt" in 1951 provided a grim foretaste of later "search and destroy" operations in its cost and inconclusiveness. And Malaya showed that