

1979

Barometer

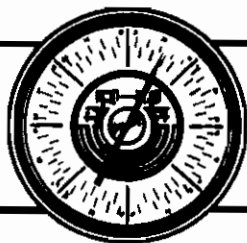
Edwin B. Hooper

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Hooper, Edwin B. (1979) "Barometer," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 32 : No. 1 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol32/iss1/10>

This Additional Writing is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.



THE BAROMETER

27 October 1978

Dear Admiral Stockdale:

The reviewer chosen by the *Naval War College Review* for *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict: Vol. 1, The Setting of the Stage to 1959** indicates that what the volume "should have been all about" was "naval operations in Vietnam," focusing mainly on tactical activities and going into great detail. Something of wider scope seemed to be needed in the first volume of an official series, a volume which provides background, particularly for naval readers, and carries the United States Navy's part of the story only through the early advisory years.

From my own experiences in positions of responsibility during the Vietnam War and service as the Navy Member of the Joint Logistics Review Board (whose report on the Vietnam era consisted of three major volumes and eighteen monographs), I am convinced that by far the most important lessons to be learned will prove to be other than those of a tactical nature.

Summary treatment of historical background on Vietnam and of events leading to and shaping the conflict was believed to be essential to an understanding of the lessons which hopefully will be learned. Some of the decisions during this conflict raise doubts as to whether there was always a full appreciation of the maritime-related strategic importance of Vietnam as revealed by earlier history through World War II. Most works on periods prior to the French-Viet Minh War tend to neglect naval events and their impact on the history of the area, or treat the events in fragmentary fashion. One is reminded of Mahan's complaints that emphasis on the more easily understood war on land had resulted in misunderstandings as to the true purpose and potential influence of sea power. From earlier times navies and their use of the sea and inland waterways had key effects, sometimes decisive, on the course of the history of Vietnam. If these aspects of the past had been better understood, a number of different decisions might have been made during the period of American involvement. In any case, an overall appreciation of the naval impact on the earlier history of the Indo-Chinese area should help in understanding the more recent events.

*Reviewed on pp. 113-115 of the Fall 1978 (Vol. XXXI, no. 2) issue of this journal.

86 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

Another reason for the coverage of historical background was the complexity of Vietnam, its various peoples, and the internal sources of conflict. Your reviewer compiled a "documentary history" on the *Viet-Nam Crisis*. In his preface he saw two issues as important causes of the crisis. The first was the conflict between Communism and anti-Communism. The second issue, which he considered the crucial one, was "the unification of the country." During the Vietnam War and later, there were many who viewed this latter issue in oversimplified fashion. As our volume's brief coverage of earlier history indicates, "future conflict would be influenced by religious, cultural, and political divisions within Vietnam, a country never truly united and under single rule only for brief spans of time." Some overall appreciation of such divisive influences and prior relationships with China is a prerequisite to understanding and evaluating the Vietnam War, including naval aspects and potentials.

The reviewer suggests that the reader who is lacking in an understanding of Vietnam history should start with a more comprehensive historical work. Desirable as this may be, many readers will not start in this fashion. For those who do, a caution is in order. The reading of one such work will not suffice, both because of variations in coverage and the differing impact on contemporary writers of controversial American opinions of the war in its last few years.

With regard to the French-Viet Minh War, the reviewer would have preferred a "more intensive analysis of things such as kinds of craft found suitable (or not), the specifics of armament and protection, logistics and tactics, successes and failures" of the French riverine forces. This was considered beyond the scope of an introductory work on *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict*. In volumes dealing with the period of American combat involvement, additional discussion of such specifics may prove desirable. Those interested in details should go to books and articles devoted to the French-Viet Minh War. It is hoped that the volume's references will provide some useful leads.

As for naval riverine activities, these were essentially an extension of naval power to inland waters, supported by sea power and closely coupled with other naval operations. Thus, the summary treatment attempted to encompass the full range of naval operations during the French-Viet Minh War, including coastal forces, amphibious landings, employment of carriers, naval gunfire support, and the dependence upon sea and coastal lines of supply.

The reviewer identifies one "thread" of the volume as being "the evolution of defense policy and organization and within that, of the Navy itself." To him this "too often seems remote from the main subject." The relevance of such changes should become apparent in later volumes in connection with the ways in which the Vietnam War was directed, controlled in detail, and supported—together with the ways in which the employment of naval forces and results were influenced. Matters of "defense policy and organization" are only a part of the story; for there were other related changes of importance, such as in command and the chains of operational command over naval forces. Before valid lessons can be drawn, it is believed necessary to

understand the process of change which started and gained momentum during the period covered by this first volume.

As for discussions of what the reviewer calls "weapons systems," an overall understanding of changing capabilities is believed of importance to an understanding of actions at the time of Dien Bien Phu, for instance, and of the missions and tasks to be treated in later volumes. Furthermore, important to the story is an overall appreciation of the reasoning advanced by those who believed that the means of war had been so altered as to eliminate the need for certain naval capabilities. The debates, which obviously cannot be covered in depth in such a volume, did have an effect on the composition and strength of the Fleet. Basic assumptions of some of those involved were proven invalid by future events. Some of the same arguments as to the obsolescence of certain forms of naval power are being advanced today in budget-related debates.

In attempting to draw lessons from the past that will be of value in determining the nation's naval power needs for the future and of help in deciding how that power can best be applied across the spectrum of conflict situations, there are grave dangers of misinterpretation if attention is focused too narrowly on the details of naval actions. These actions, and decisions concerning them, must be judged in the light of related considerations, including special features of the particular war or conflict in which they are involved. The danger is especially acute in the case of lessons drawn from the complex Vietnam War, in which the American military involvement, the controlled use of power, and the final outcome were influenced by many factors, subtle as well as direct.

The reviewer's belief that the "best of the various military history series" were written by single individuals is not supported by the actual output of service historians over the last three decades. Other specifics in the review also can be challenged. Nevertheless, the review does perform the important service of reminding naval readers that the Vietnam War—and the volumes concerning that conflict—will long remain a highly controversial subject.

Sincerely,

/s/ Edwin B. Hooper

EDWIN B. HOOPER

— ψ —