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Historians and the Vietnam War: The Conflict Over Interpretations Continues

The Vietnam War, with the exception of the Civil War, was the most divisive conflict in American history. April 30, 2000, marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the real end of the Vietnam War: the “fall” of Saigon—which was quickly renamed Ho Chi Minh City. Although historians have had a quarter-century to reflect on the meaning of US involvement in Vietnam, we are no closer to a consensus on the causes, phases, strategy and tactics, or consequences of that war than we were in 1975, when the war ended. This article will present the main outlines of three major interpretive perspectives which reflected the main divergent viewpoints during the war and after the war: radical, liberal, and conservative. Although there are intramural quarrels within each perspective on various issues, each view can be summarized in general terms. Moderates were usually a blend of the liberal and conservative viewpoints. The goal here is to provide an overview of the literature on the war and highlight the issues involved.

The radical interpretation argues that US involvement in Vietnam was the logical outgrowth of America’s pursuit of global hegemony during the Cold War. Gabriel Kolko, in *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience*, and Thomas J. McCormick, in *America’s Half Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War*, focused primarily on the economic needs of the American Empire and its anti-communist allies while also noting ideological and strategic considerations. They argue that an imperial[ist] US had to try to defeat any Third World nationalist revolution which was also anti-capitalist and/or pro-communist. Specifically, US feared that a communist Vietnam, and other successful wars of national liberation in the region, would deny Southeast Asian resources and markets to Japan as well as the US itself. This led the US to support French imperialist efforts to reconquer Vietnam, its former colony, after World War II. When the French failed, the US stepped in and prevented the elections which, under the 1954 Geneva Accords, were to reunify a temporarily divided Vietnam under one government in 1956. Instead, the US created an artificial nation, South Vietnam, as a hoped-for buffer against further communist expansion in Southeast Asia. As political and then armed resistance grew among South Vietnamese to the repressive regime of Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon, the South Vietnamese military [ARVN] proved unable to deal effectively with the insurgency. The revolt was led politically by the National Liberation Front

[NLF] and militarily by the People's Liberation Armed Forces, usually referred to by the disparaging nickname given them by Diem: Viet Cong [Vietnamese Communist] or, for short, VC. Political and military instability in South Vietnam increased to the point that in November, 1963, Diem's own generals overthrew him with US approval, although US officials had not anticipated Diem's murder by his own officers. As instability in South Vietnam continued, by 1965 President Johnson faced the dilemma of accepting an NLF/VC victory or "Americanizing" the war by sending large numbers of US combat troops to take over the ground war against the VC. He chose the latter option, making the US a total substitute for the French as the white Western power in Vietnam. Radical historian Marilyn Young titled her chapter on this "The American Invasion of South Vietnam." By late 1967, although the US had almost 500,000 troops in Vietnam, North Vietnamese Army [NVA] and VC units matched USA units, leading to a stalemate.

The 1968 Tet Offensive, although ultimately a military defeat for the NVA and VC, shocked the American public, which had believed the optimistic reports from LBJ and General Westmoreland. The general then asked for 206,000 more troops with no assurance of victory while a "gold and dollar crisis" began in the spring. The financial emergency triggered a run on US gold reserves by foreign dollar holders fearful of rising inflation in the US as well as a growing balance-of-payments deficit, both largely caused by the war. As Kolko declared, "The Tet offensive revealed the structural constraints on policy and decision making . . . and compelled the Johnson administration and Congress to acknowledge . . . the limits that economic, military, and political realities inexorably imposed on them." (312) These events led LBJ's senior Cold War policy advisers, known as the "Wise Men," who had always supported the war, to counsel the president to negotiate a settlement. According to radicals, the American Empire's hegemony had reached its limits; the US was not omnipotent. Nixon's "Vietnamization" or "de-Americanization" policy, withdrawing US troops while hoping that better trained and led ARVN troops could handle the ground war, was a four-year effort to save face. This bogus "peace with honor" plan cost thousands of American and Vietnamese lives between January 1969, when Nixon took office, and January 1973, when the Paris Peace Accords were signed. Two years later, in 1975, Vietnam was reunified under one government by force of arms rather than by the elections which should have been held nineteen years earlier, in 1956.

Radical scholars argue that Vietnam was the American Empire's first major defeat. Moreover, this defeat was inevitable because America's overreaching efforts at global economic and political hegemony were bound to meet disaster somewhere—and Vietnam was the place. Many Americans still

resist seeing the United States as an aggressive, imperial power. But respected US diplomatic historian Robert J. McMahon, not a radical, acknowledged that “As they did back in the 1960s and 1970s, the radical revisionists still offer the most serious, the most thoughtful, and the most challenging alternative perspective on the war.” (320)

The liberal interpretation initially saw US involvement in Vietnam as the result of good anti-communist intentions gone awry. Anti-communist moderates [Ike] and liberals [JFK and LBJ], were devoted to the Truman Doctrine of containing the spread of communism; they tended to assume there was an international communist conspiracy headquartered in Moscow. Believing in the “domino theory,” they felt they had to act against the perceived spread of communism in Vietnam and, possibly, Southeast Asia. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and David Halberstam argued that mistakes in judgment or perception gradually led US policy-makers down a “slippery slope” into the “quagmire” of Vietnam. Convinced of their political and moral superiority and emboldened by their overwhelming technological advantage in firepower, *The Best and the Brightest*, according to Halberstam, could not imagine the US unable to achieve its goal of an independent, non-communist South Vietnam. According to this view, the hubris of Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and their advisers led them to assume the US could overcome any obstacles.

Other liberal interpretations, though, found through memoranda, memoirs, and oral history interviews that Ike, JFK, and LBJ had been quite aware of the problems and complications of deepening US involvement in Vietnam, that the chances for success were not good—yet they had proceeded anyway. Why? Ike, JFK, and LBJ remembered the post-World War II Red Scare led by the House Un-American Activities Committee and Senator Joseph McCarthy. They especially remembered the right-wing Republican vendetta against Democrats over the so-called “loss of China” [assuming China was America’s to lose] after Mao and the communist nationalists defeated Chiang and the anti-communist nationalists in 1949. Neither JFK nor LBJ wanted to be the answer to the question: “Who lost Vietnam?” Thus, fear of severe conservative criticism at home as well as opposition to the spread of communism abroad gave JFK and LBJ little political room to maneuver. JFK and LBJ each hoped that more aid and more advisers would save the day. Then, as president, LBJ sent US combat troops to prevent South Vietnam’s imminent collapse. Neither JFK nor LBJ wanted to be president if or when the US “lost” Vietnam to the communists—and they were not! This was, according to Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*—at least for a while. More recently, David Kaiser’s *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War*, while quite critical of LBJ, reaffirms

much of this view.

Whether JFK would have gotten the US out of Vietnam if he had not been murdered in 1963 and had been re-elected in 1964 is discussed in Kaiser's *American Tragedy* and in John Newman's *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power*. However, this thesis cannot be proven; insufficient evidence only fuels speculation. As Robert J. McMahon noted, none of those arguing that JFK would not have sent US combat troops to Vietnam "have produced any evidence that Kennedy had reexamined the core assumption upon which U.S. involvement had been based: namely, that the preservation of a noncommunist South Vietnam was vital to American global interests." Furthermore, "The fact that Kennedy's closest advisers were the very men whose advice Lyndon Johnson followed when he decided to commit U.S. combat forces in the spring of 1965 suggests the strong likelihood that Kennedy would have followed a similar course"(326).

George Herring, author of *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, the most widely adopted college textbook on the Vietnam War, clearly articulates what has been termed the "liberal realist" interpretation. In contrast to earlier liberal views, Herring declared that "U.S. involvement in Vietnam was not primarily a result of errors of judgment or the personality quirks of the policymakers, although these things existed in abundance. It was a logical, if not inevitable, outgrowth of a world view and a policy—the policy of containment—that Americans in and out of government accepted without serious question for more than two decades" (xi). Viewing Vietnam as marginal to American national security, Herring declared "That containment was misapplied in Vietnam, however, seems beyond debate. The United States intervened to block the apparent march of a Soviet-directed communism across Asia, enlarged its commitment to halt a presumably expansionist Communist China, and eventually made Vietnam a test of its determination to uphold world order." Herring then noted: "By wrongly attributing the conflict to external sources, the United States drastically misjudged its internal dynamics. By intervening in what was essentially a local struggle, it placed itself at the mercy of local forces, a weak client, and a determined adversary." Herring concluded: "What might have remained a local conflict with primarily local complications was elevated into a major international conflict with enormous human costs that are still being paid" (314). Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's confessional *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* agreed with this analysis.

While Herring agreed with Kolko and the radical interpretation on Vietnam regarding the limits of American power being reached in Vietnam [although Herring would not agree with the radical view of the imperial(ist)

nature of America], Herring did not see US involvement as inevitable. Nor did he see it as accidental. Instead, Herring saw it as avoidable, that misapplication of what another historian termed “the logical result of an illogical global strategy” (317) of containment in Vietnam had led to an unnecessary tragedy for all concerned.

In contrast, the most recent neo-conservative interpretation of US involvement in Vietnam is titled *Vietnam: The Necessary War*. In contrast to Herring, Lind views the Vietnam War as “less like a tragic error than a battle that could hardly be avoided” (256). Thus, neo-conservative Lind and radical Kolko agree on the inevitability of US involvement in Vietnam, while liberal realist Herring sees US involvement as an avoidable mistake.

Lind would reject being categorized as a neo-conservative; he claims to have “a centrist perspective more sympathetic to American Cold War policymakers than that of their critics on the left and right” (xiv). He sees himself in the tradition of “liberal anticommunists or Cold War liberals, identified with the Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations . . .” (xiii), many of whom did become neo-conservatives in the 1970s. He opposes “the new and misguided consensus” on the Vietnam War which “holds that it was a mistake to intervene in Indochina at all, but that once the United States had intervened, it should have used unlimited force to quickly win an unqualified victory.” According to Lind, this consensus “makes concessions to ‘realistic’ left-liberals (who are acknowledged to have been right about U.S. strategy) and to promilitary conservatives (who are acknowledged to have been right about U.S. tactics)” (xv). But this neat equation oversimplifies too much, especially the conservative position.

Lind reformulates much of the conservative perspective in his strident early Cold War rhetoric. Few conservatives would object to Lind’s portrayal of Ho Chi Minh as a Stalinist pawn and a bogus nationalist. Nor would conservatives object to Lind’s defense of the Diem government or to his denunciation of the antiwar movement. Neither would many conservatives object to Lind’s overall “provisional verdict. The Vietnam War was a just, constitutional, and necessary proxy war [against the USSR and China] in the Third World War [the Cold War] that was waged by methods which were often counterproductive and sometimes arguably immoral,” (284) although some might quarrel with the last word of that statement.

Earlier conservative and neo-conservative interpretations such as Guenter Lewy’s *America in Vietnam* and Norman Podhoretz’s *Why We Were in Vietnam* hailed US involvement in Vietnam as a “noble cause” and asserted that Vietnam itself was vital to American national security. In contrast, Lind declared that Vietnam itself was of “no intrinsic value” to the US. However,

because of the geopolitical imperatives of the containment doctrine, “The war had to be fought in order to preserve the military and diplomatic credibility of the United States in the Cold War . . .” However, when the war’s “costs grew excessive [too many casualties and too much money] the war had to be forfeited in order to preserve the political consensus within the United States in favor of the Cold War” (284). Coming from the other end of the political spectrum, radical Gabriel Kolko had reached the same conclusion. To Lind, Vietnam was a necessary battle in the larger Cold War, although he seemed to utilize US victory in the Cold War as a way to rehabilitate US involvement in Vietnam and elsewhere, unlike Kolko.

Neo-conservative Norman Podhoretz anticipated much of what Lind has to say in 1982 in *Why We Were in Vietnam*. Podhoretz often seemed as interested in defending and/or legitimizing then-current [1980s] US involvement against the leftist Sandinistas in Nicaragua; the Sandinistas named themselves after Augusto Sandino, an anti-American Nicaraguan nationalist leader of the 1920s and 1930s. The US supported the “Contras,” counter-revolutionaries, many associated with the repressive but anticommunist Somoza regime, which the Sandinistas had overthrown in 1979. The US also supported the right-wing government in El Salvador and its “death squads,” who murdered suspected guerrillas and their alleged sympathizers, including nuns and an archbishop. Thus, part of the neo-conservative agenda to rehabilitate US involvement in Vietnam was one way of influencing elite and public opinion in favor of future interventions, as may be “needed.” Lind’s argument that Vietnam was a “necessary war” updated Podhoretz’s position.

The controversy over military strategy and tactics in Vietnam remains lively. Arguments over Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition, counterinsurgency techniques, types of pacification efforts, problems interdicting the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the effectiveness of bombing continue to agitate scholars. The military and its defenders used to blame civilian officials for allegedly putting major restrictions on them, for supposedly making the military fight “with one hand tied behind its back.” Col. Harry G. Summers, Jr.’s *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* and Gen. Bruce Palmer, Jr.’s *The 25-Year War: America’s Military Role in Vietnam* represented this view. In extreme form, this became the classic “stab-in-the-back” argument used by the German military after World War I to rationalize its defeat by blaming the civilian government for losing. While Summers and Palmer did criticize some military leaders, more recently military and civilian historians have disputed the significance of restrictions on the military. These historians have also criticized the Joint Chiefs of Staff [JCS] for poor strategic planning. This was in part a reflection of interservice rivalries and in part a failure of nerve—and/or

principle—by the JCS, who avoided confronting JFK, LBJ, or Nixon on strategy or tactics or by resigning on principle. Robert Buzzanco's *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* is the best recent study on this topic. Taking an even stronger stand is H.R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*. The best summary of the American military experience in Vietnam, given that the US never lost a major battle, is: tactical victory, strategic defeat.

Why did the US lose in Vietnam? US historians and Americans generally tend to focus on what went wrong and what could have been done differently in order to have won the war. But Americans often minimize or ignore the Vietnamese dimension of the war—just as the US too often did while in Vietnam. Utilizing Vietnamese sources, William J. Duiker's *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* concluded that “the most significant fact about that conflict is not that the United States lost but that the Communists won” [251]. The South Vietnamese government never managed to pursue policies or generate leaders who could mobilize enough of the population in voluntary, enthusiastic support of that government. The South Vietnamese army, although it had some good units and officers, never had enough of them to be victorious against the VC and the NVA. South Vietnam remained an artificial American creation. In contrast, the VC [mainly southern Vietnamese] and the NVA [which included many former southerners returning home as well as northerners dedicated to reuniting their country under one government] practiced “people’s war,” an integrated political and military strategy which demonstrated superior motivation, leadership, political program, and willingness to sacrifice to achieve their goal: an independent, united Vietnam under a nationalistic communist political and economic system. While Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* had uncritically idealized the VC and NVA, Duiker and Kolko critically analyzed their strengths and weaknesses—and why they won.

While Americans often view the war as lasting from 1961-1973 or even from 1945-1975, it is significant that an official Vietnamese history of the war is titled *The Long Resistance: 1858-1975*; the first bombardment of a Vietnamese city, by the French, occurred in 1858. From the Vietnamese perspective, their struggle against foreign domination meant over a century of fighting the French, the Japanese during World War II, the French again [1946-1954], and then the Americans to achieve national unification and independence.

American historians, operating from different assumptions, weighing evidence differently, and having divergent views of the appropriate role of the

United States in foreign affairs, will never agree on one interpretation of the Vietnam War. As the title of former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's most recent book suggests, the debate about the Vietnam War is destined to be an *Argument Without End*.

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