

**Lomperis, Timothy J.** *From People's War to People's Rule: Insurgency, Intervention, and the Lessons of Vietnam.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

For many Americans and any number of scholars, the Vietnam War is a defining moment in American history. This is also true for many in the military. Among other things, the Vietnam War is seen as part of the major lessons of war. However, the author of this book views the Vietnam War as a non-lesson contrary to traditional views of lessons of war. The author writes, "But Vietnam is a better ghost than a lesson . . . it can be summoned for any lesson a conjurer wants." (p. 10) A more acceptable approach, according to the author, is to view the Vietnam War in definitional and contextual terms. It must be defined and placed in the context of case studies. He argues that only by a comparative context can proper lessons be drawn. "General lessons can rarely stand on a simple case." (p. 9) While some may disagree with that view, the author makes a good case for his thesis. The two major questions that drive the author's study are as follows: first, what makes a successful insurgency? Second, what is the most effective method and scope of Western intervention? In turn each of these questions embrace a number of elements. The author spends a great deal of time explaining and applying these two questions to Vietnam.

Defining legitimacy as the justification of authority of political rule, the author provides an in-depth, if complex view of the various elements of political rule. An insurgency "is a challenge to authority." (p. 32) Insurgency is further defined as a revolution making it distinct from insurrection. The author acknowledges that there are a number of other explanations of political legitimacy and insurgencies. But he places them secondary to his own perspective.

In terms of what makes a successful insurgency, the primary issue is political legitimacy. He posits six thematic questions ranging from a historical perspective to comparisons of legitimacy in terms of the insurgents in each case study with that of Vietnam.

The study of insurgency and political legitimacy is followed by an examination of intervention and American policy. The author begins with an overview of the American policy.

[T]he international context for this pursuit of the lessons of Vietnam is that the Vietnam War and the other insurgencies studied here were part of a larger, international-level duel between the U.S. foreign policy of containment, and its promotion of evolutionary development, and the communist strategy of people's war, and its call for revolutionary insurgency, over which was the best way in the Third World to bring about some equivalent to this earlier political transformation in the West. (p. 42)

Following an elaborate presentation of an analytical framework using Vietnam as the reference point, the author develops a comparative study of Vietnam and other insurgencies. The case studies are China, 1920-49; Greece, 1941-49; The Philippines, 1946-56; Malaya, 1948-60; Cambodia and Laos, 1949-75; and Sendero Luminoso, Peru. In these cases, the West intervened in insurgencies that basically followed the Marxian

people's war concepts, as established by Mao Zedong or by key members of the Indochinese Communist Party. Referring to other internal wars, the author makes a distinction between Marxian people's war strategy and people's wars in general. Beginning with a brief overview of the history of insurgency in the various countries, the author draws conclusions about the two fundamental questions underpinning the book. After assessing the success or failure of people's war in each case study, he compares these to Vietnam, which he calls a deviant case.

The author categorizes the eight case studies as five successful and three failed insurgencies. The insurgency failures were in Greece, the Huks in the Philippines and Malaya. The failed insurgencies were characterized by the continuing political legitimacy of the existing system and Western intervention that maintained or reinforced that legitimacy. The other cases were successful insurgencies characterized by political legitimacy and a Western intervention that eroded the legitimacy of the existing system. Vietnam was a deviant case because, "Saigon fell, not to the popular uprising of a revolution but to the conquering invasion of a conventional army." (p. 110)

The author is steadfast in his concept of political legitimacy, the elements of a successful insurgency, and the optimal method of Western intervention.

The efficacy of an intervention will succeed or fail on the basis of its effect on the definitional grounds of political legitimacy in the affected society. . . The basic lesson of Vietnam and its companion prismatic cases remains the beacon of democracy, and of a vigorous promotion of it by the United States. (p. 321)

In reference to Vietnam, the author argues that instead of containment, America needs to focus on "[G]lobal democratization in order to redeem the unfulfilled quest of America's longest war." (p. 29) He concludes that the "[V]ictorious era of People's Wars has yielded to one of people's rule in that we live in a more sober period in which historical forces in the Third World between incumbents and insurgents (or reformists and revolutionaries) has become more evenly matched." (p. 315) Four factors create the conditions for this new era. These range from the declining advantage of Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries to a new approach favoring "rule over revolution."

The author's study, often hinting of a "labor of love," encompasses a mass of material, analytical insights, and useful comparative frameworks. There are extensive references to the existing literature. Also, there are more than 60 pages of endnotes and more than 20 pages of appendices.

The analytical effort, however, is periodically overshadowed by the confusing array of questions, themes, elements within each question, and a variety of considerations qualifying one or the other element. For example, in writing about US containment policy, the author identifies two tracks and four handicaps. While this can be digested, it is difficult to digest the concept of transition from tradition to modern society. This concept involves "four cuts" ranging from "Three Levels of Legitimation - First Cut" to "Foreign Intervention - Fourth Cut." In the section on foreign intervention, two traditional

methods are discussed followed by three ways in which the intervention is altered. This fine-tuning is characteristic of the entire book. While such an approach may be important to the analyst, it is difficult for the average reader to follow and decipher.

One can also question the author's concept of people's rule and the assertion about the spread of people's rule (democracy?) around the globe. It may be that people's rule and democracy have different meaning within various cultures. In this respect, Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* may be the more appropriate perspective: different people define people's rule and democracy according to their own cultural parameters. Not necessarily according to Western notions.

There will be some who will disagree with the author's assessment of Vietnam as a non-lesson in traditional terms. For example, Harry Summer's works on Vietnam, H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, and Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect*, offer different views of the lessons of Vietnam.

The author's in-depth analysis and complex framework defy a balanced assessment in a brief review. In any case, the author should be applauded for a comprehensive and in-depth study and analysis. The study provides another dimension of the Vietnam War in a comparative context that should prove important in analyzing that war and other conflicts. Moreover, the author's assessment is useful in analyzing the role of the United States in operations other than war in the current period. But as noted earlier, the number of concepts, frameworks, sub-concepts, additional frameworks, and lingering questions and themes undercut the impact of the book, and detracts from the author's major conclusions. Regardless of these problems, the book is an important contribution to the literature. It is recommended for those who are involved in the study of insurgency, revolution, and US policy.

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