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Vietnam - The Scar That Will Not Heal

Edmonds, Anthony O. *The War in Vietnam*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998.

Shultz, Richard H. Jr. *The Secret War against Hanoi: Kennedy's and Johnson's Use of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.

Tucker, Spencer C. *Vietnam*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999.

The Vietnam War remains the single most important subtext of America's Cold War experience. Like the Berlin Wall and the Cuban Missile Crisis, it is synonymous with the measure of America's resolve to contain communism. Unlike Berlin, however, it has come to represent failure. Unlike Cuba, its physical and psychic costs continue to haunt virtually every American political and social institution. Stretching from 1945 to 1975, it was America's longest war even though it did not see substantial US military involvement until the early 1960s and did not significantly register on American public opinion until well into the last of its three decades. We now tend to look back on that time as "The Vietnam Era," when in fact the American experience in Vietnam was only one part of the broader Cold War. Despite all the singular attention paid in retrospect to the war, it is worth remembering then Attorney General Robert Kennedy's lament, "Vietnam, Vietnam; we have thirty Vietnams a day here."¹

Books on Vietnam began to appear even before America's involvement in the war peaked. Predictably, most had a clear agenda based on either a pro- or anti-war point of view. The years since have brought more writings on the Vietnam War as well as writings about the writings on the Vietnam War.² Some re-fight the battles - political as well as military³ - while others explore social consequences or personal memories.⁴ Add to this the Vietnam War journalism, itself a controversial topic for numerous authors.⁵ Extensive press coverage of the war ensured that by 1975 as the last helicopters left the US Embassy roof in Saigon virtually everyone from that generation had some memory, however inadequate, of the war and the accompanying domestic political turmoil. Finally, Hollywood continues to present Vietnam to new generations even if it has sacrificed accuracy and context to do so. The average undergrads born long after the Tet Offensive do not recognize the names "Komer" and "Giap," but they probably recognize "Kurtz" and "Gump."⁶

One would think the forbidding landscape of this complex and emotionally laden territory would intimidate new authors. Those who try to publish new works on the Vietnam War are frequently asked, "Do we really need another book on Vietnam?" Despite these obstacles, some 25 years after the end of the war new works continue to proliferate. Books on the Vietnam War far outstrip works on other Cold War crises to include the equally divisive and still unresolved Korean War. The keywords "Vietnam War" on

Internet book order websites produce a list of more than 1,700 titles with at least 75 more pending publication in the coming months.

The majority of recent works that take on the daunting challenge of exploring the history of the Vietnam War generally fall into three categories. First are the overviews. These are primarily extensive histories of the war. The goal of these works is to provide the complete story of the war with a significant portion of the related context. Most often this context is the complex politics that led to intervention, escalation and the eventual withdrawal of US forces.

A recent example is Spencer C. Tucker's excellent book titled simply, Vietnam. A concise and focused work of barely 200 pages, Tucker's account still manages to be thorough and comprehensive. Tucker begins with an overview of the important but frequently overlooked history, geography, ethnology and international relations of Vietnam. Where many scholars are content to begin their accounts in 1961, Tucker starts at 2000 BC. One could easily bog down in so much detail, but the author moves quickly and effectively through this crucial background on a well outlined path that leads to the modern era.

In the next two chapters, he does an impressive job of chronicling the French experience in Indochina. Beginning with early trade and missionary efforts, Tucker effectively records the often contradictory mix of Enlightenment Idealism and Classic Realism that would later plague America's role in the region. One of the greatest strengths of this book is the author's careful attention to the pivotal period at the end of World War II. The strategic miscalculations, the trading of short-term gains for long-term crises, the catalog of missed opportunities and might-have-beens in 1945-46 has rarely been so well cited in similar comprehensive works.

As he turns his attention to America's role in the war, Tucker impressively balances the details of battle with the details of diplomacy. He notes small points often lost in other studies that prove important to the big picture. For example, virtually every student of the Vietnam War knows how American retaliation for the attack on Pleiku in February 1965 was the opportunity some of Johnson's advisers had sought to demonstrate America's resolve. "Pleikus," it was said "are streetcars."⁷ Wait long enough and one will come along. Less well-known, however, is how the Viet Cong attack came after pleas for restraint from the Soviets. Occurring during a visit to North Vietnam by Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin, it forced the USSR to significantly alter its own policy of limited involvement.⁸

Finally, Tucker does not end his book with Americans fleeing as Saigon falls. His last chapter traces the fate of reunified Vietnam through the invasion of Cambodia, the brief war with China, and up through the normalization of relations with the United States and the struggles to catch up with the booming economies of the Asian dominos the US initially sought to protect. This comprehensive text - studying more than 4000 years of history - puts the American experience in Vietnam in important perspective. To most Americans, the Vietnam War was something that happened to us and because of us.

Tucker reminds us that America's role was one important but brief period in a much longer and richer story. A solid introduction for post-Vietnam undergraduates, a thorough update of the record for faculty, a well-written account for the casual readers of history; Tucker's book is one of the most impressive and comprehensive works on Vietnam since George Herring's benchmark text.⁹

The next category of Vietnam books can best be labeled as "collections." The compilation of anthologies and encyclopedic texts of key documents can prove useful to those looking for a quick introduction to an array of varied sources. Anthony O. Edmonds attempts this in *The War in Vietnam* but with less success than Tucker. He begins with a 90 page overview of the war to include a very brief account of French Indochina. His chapter on the role of news coverage during and after the Tet Offensive is balanced and effectively challenges many of the myths about the power of mass media. The impact of the so-called "living room war" has long been overstated, and Edmonds meets this challenge nicely. (pp. 59-69) Much of the rest of his work is rushed, choppy and very thin. The US decision to intervene with ground troops is discussed in a few brief paragraphs. As a stand-alone text on Vietnam, this work pales in comparison to Tucker's more effective and comprehensive book.

The remainder of Edmond's book is a catalog of biography, documents, key terms and an annotated bibliography. Some of these entries suffer from poor editing. For example, Undersecretary of State George Ball's date of death is listed as 1964. This is two years before his celebrated role as LBJ's in-house dove, four years before his part in the "Wise Men" advisory group that helped convince Johnson to change policy direction and 18 years before publishing his own memoir. (pp. 95-96)

Edmonds attempts to provide useful, balanced context through poems, interviews and recollections of veterans of both sides of the conflict. On their own they are too brief and limited to make a complete picture, but they can prove useful by encouraging students to look to other more comprehensive works on these same topics. Likewise, the use of government documents, while introduced with summary overviews laced with distracting opinion ("... Johnson employed the usual rhetoric..." p. 137), will help direct students back to primary sources.

The final category of Vietnam texts is comprised of those works that fill a particular niche by attempting to exhaustively study a particular element of the war. What is sacrificed in context and breadth is made up for in depth. Many of these books are best appreciated by the true aficionado or the author looking for credible details to add to a more comprehensive work. Few succeed in measuring obscure detail against larger implications. Richard H. Shultz's outstanding study of covert military operations against North Vietnam is a rare and most welcome exception.

There are other books on the market that report the wide array of covert operations conducted by elite units. But while some are the unblinking and straightforward accounts by truly brave and selfless warriors, all too many carry the aura of tales told in a smoky bar that begin with "There I was..." Shultz does not avoid the tales of bravery and

daring. However, his writings are buttressed by extraordinary access to previously classified documents and by the opportunity to interview those low key, self-effacing public servants who never talk outside of the classified arena yet whose observations are crucial.

This is more than just a catalog of war stories. Shultz begins with an impressive, well-documented overview of the roots of American covert operations in Vietnam. Set against the backdrop of the Cold War and more than a decade of Central Intelligence Agency actions in Iran, Guatemala and other locations around the world, the book correctly depicts actions in Vietnam as part of a much broader policy. The title of the first chapter - "If They Do It, So Can We" - also speaks volumes about the underlying tone of the conflict. "Since the communists were promoting insurrection," said Kennedy advisor Walt Rostow, "he wanted to do the same thing to put Hanoi on the defensive." (pp. 289-90)

For the Kennedy administration this was not a simple matter of intelligence gathering or patient containment of communism. The shift of these operations from civilian to military agencies was spurred in large part by Kennedy's tremendous frustration with the perceived failure of the CIA to bring down communist regimes. Shultz's account of how Kennedy shifted direction of the policy toward the military also chronicles the complex and often Byzantine nature of White House decision-making. As a result this book is a superb study in decision-making and organizational and bureaucratic politics. The battles between the White House and the CIA and the Department of State, the reluctance of the military to embrace elite special operations units, the waging of an undeclared war under the eyes of an increasingly unsupportive public: all are thoroughly analyzed in this well-written account. Not lost in all this is the problem of waging covert operations in the middle of a civil war. Many of the tragic outcomes reported in this book can be attributed to problems of security and domestic political infighting in Saigon.

Ultimately this book is all about tragic outcomes. Despite great personal bravery and sacrifice, despite an exceptional edge in technology, despite the marshalling of tremendous intellectual firepower, covert operations failed. No significant strategic success can be attributed to these efforts and, in fact, virtually every single covert operative was either captured, killed or turned. This scholarly account does not try to downplay the outcome or sugarcoat the implications. The very reasons that covert operations are so exciting and alluring - the high stakes, the danger, the risks inherent in the smallest details - are the same reasons why they often fail to produce the desired results.

In the final analysis, no single work will satisfactorily resolve the questions about the Vietnam War. There are several reasons for this. First and foremost, the failure to resolve these questions cannot be fully attributed to the fact that they have never been answered. In fact, they have been asked and answered again and again. Few students of the war - be they dove or hawk - are ever fully satisfied with the answers given. Their complexity defies the desire for simple answers that lead to simple lessons that provide simple prescriptions for future policy makers. As Ernest May and others have shown time and

again, the "Lessons of Vietnam," - like the "Lessons of Sarajevo (1914 Edition)" and "The Lessons of Munich" - are often incompletely drawn, poorly evaluated and inappropriately applied.¹⁰ One could quickly lose count of the number of times the lessons of the Vietnam War have been summoned up by policy makers since 1975. One would be hard pressed to count a significant number of times the "lessons" of that war have been correctly read and applied.¹¹ For many students of the war, the search for the metaphorical (or, in the case of filmmaker Oliver Stone's account, the literal) "smoking gun" has not and likely never will reach a clear and unambiguous end.¹²

A related problem is the complex facts and the still unfolding consequences of the war. Those who seek to clarify the fundamental framework of this case are frequently rewarded with newly declassified documents, misplaced files that reappear and lost witnesses who come forward to flesh out the details. They must also deal with carefully crafted memoirs offering rationalizations and apologies. Those who studied the archival record of Vietnam for any length of time could not have been surprised by Robert McNamara's account of his years as Secretary of Defense.¹³ Nonetheless, McNamara's book was hailed in the popular press as a bold new contribution to the Vietnam literature. In the end it was just one more piece of a complicated and still partially obscured puzzle. Viewing what is known and what is still in dispute about the total story of the Vietnam War, one is tempted to echo the legendary cautious history professor. When asked by one of his twentieth century students to assess the impact of the French Revolution he replied, "It's too soon to tell."

Most scholars of the Vietnam War are also still too mired in emerging detail to fully and adequately integrate their works into the broader history of the Cold War or into more comprehensive works on international relations and comparative politics. The positive response to Timothy Lomperis's award winning work on post-revolutionary states, drawn in part from his own extensive scholarship on Vietnam, shows there is an audience for Vietnam studies with a wider perspective and broader utility.¹⁴ However, a casual review of contemporary international relations literature finds far more references to early twentieth-century European political crises than to the Vietnam War.

We also cannot avoid the fact that the generation of historians and political scientists grappling with Vietnam are seeking answers not out of idle, intellectual curiosity. Their values and beliefs were shaped by their own Vietnam Era experiences. Many were drawn to the studies of politics and history because of the deep passions evoked by that time. Those passions are still evident in the response to each new book. David Kaiser's long awaited study of the origins of America's escalating intervention provides a case in point. Carefully and exhaustively researched for at least eight years by a distinguished historian not formerly tied to any given perspective on Vietnam, the book is already the subject of commentary by those looking for support for their part in or their existing analysis of the war.¹⁵ Former Kennedy and Johnson staffers are already offering this book as a rebuttal to other works critical of their policies and actions.¹⁶

In the end, the most useful and objective studies of the war are yet to be written. If such a thing is possible, future generations not directly touched by those times are the best hope

for the definitive work on Vietnam. In the interim, however, one must applaud the rare contemporary scholar who can attempt to apply the true scholar's thoroughness and distance without sacrificing a sensitive awareness of the strong emotions that must be counted when cataloging that time in history. In the case of the three works reviewed here, all try and at least two succeed.

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Endnotes

The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not purport to reflect the position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense.

1. David Halberstam, *The Best and The Brightest* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1973), p. 98.
2. See for example Joe P. Dunn, "In Search of Lessons: The Development of a Vietnam Historiography," in Lloyd J. Matthews and Dale E. Brown, eds., *Assessing the Vietnam War* (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1987), pp. 19-31, and Timothy J. Lomperis, *Reading the Wind: The Literature of the Vietnam War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987).
3. For the most recent and controversial of these, see Michael Lind, *Vietnam the Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999).
4. For a critical review essay of a number of recent works, see Christian G. Appy, "The Muffling of Public Memory in Post-Vietnam America," in *The Chronicles of Higher Education*, 12 February 1999, sec. B, pp. 4-6.
5. The most thorough and credible account of this often emotionally and inaccurately chronicled topic is W.M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and The Media* (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History, 1988).
6. See Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, eds., *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1991); see also Jeremy M. Devine and Thomas Schatz, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second: A Critical and Thematic Analysis of over 400 Films About the Vietnam War*, Texas Film and Media Series (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999).
7. McGeorge Bundy, quoted in Townsend Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention: An Inside Account of How the Johnson Policy of Escalation in Vietnam was Reversed* (New York: Van Rees Press, 1969), p. 30.
8. *Ibid*, pp. 111-12.

9. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: Knopf, 1986).
10. Richard Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decisionmakers* (New York: Free Press, 1986).
11. One group of scholars conducted an extensive study of this question ten years after the war. Their sad but well documented conclusion was that the lessons of war had little impact. George K. Osborn, Asa A. Clark IV, Daniel J. Kaufman, Douglas E. Lute, eds., *Democracy, Strategy, and Vietnam: Implications for American Policymaking* (Lexington, KY: Lexington Books, 1987).
12. Stone's account of the Vietnam War and its roots in a conspiracy to assassinate President John F. Kennedy are indicative of the problems facing even the most serious attempts at careful history. Stone credited John M. Newman's *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York: Warner Books, 1992) as the factual basis for his controversial film. Newman, however, has since argued that Stone drew his own conclusions from this study of the continuity in Vietnam policy from JFK to President Lyndon Johnson. Jay M. Parker, "JFK, LBJ, and Oliver Stone. Political Psychology and Revising Revisionism," unpublished paper presented to the Fifteen Annual Scientific Meeting, International Society of Political Psychology, 1992.
13. Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect, The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995).
14. Timothy J. Lomperis, *From People's War to People's Rule: Insurgency, Intervention, and the Lessons of Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
15. David E. Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
16. Kaiser's book, not yet published at the time of writing, is offered by some former policy makers as a rebuttal to the accounts by H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harperperennial, 1998), that present an unusual twist on the "stab in the back" argument that military leaders were prevented from winning the war. McMaster argues that the military leaders were stabbed by their own failure to assert their views when confronted with civilian dictates. He, in turn, at least partially contradicts the contentions of the more convincing but mutually opposing views found in Richard Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises* (New York: Columbia, 1991) and in Harry Summers, *On Strategy* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982).