INTRODUCTION

Understanding the Vietnam War

Like all wars, the war the United States fought to preserve the independence of South Vietnam as a non-Communist state has its terrible statistics. It lasted eight years, from 1965, when the first American combat units arrived in Vietnam, to 1973, when the last US combat troops left the country, twice as long as any previous American war other than this country's fight for independence. If, as some historians have done, one goes back to 1950, when the United States began its involvement in Vietnam by making a major financial commitment to help the French retain control of Indochina, then one has what General Bruce Palmer Jr. called "The 25-Year War" or what historian George Herring calls "America's Longest War."[1] More than 58,000 American soldiers died fighting in Vietnam, and more than 300,000 were wounded. More than three million Vietnamese lost their lives in that conflict, almost two-thirds of them civilians.[2] During the fighting the United States employed more explosives in Vietnam than had previously been used in all of human

[1] General Bruce Palmer Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984); George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979). As of this writing, the US combat role in Afghanistan, with 8,000 troops still in that country, has exceeded in length this country's combat role in Vietnam. Since there was no official declaration of war in the cases of either Vietnam or Afghanistan, determining which conflict was America's longest war depends on how one does the dating.

[2] Vietnamese losses increase significantly if one goes back to 1945, the beginning of fighting between the Communist-dominated Vietminh and the French, who were attempting to reestablish their colonial control of Vietnam after Japan's surrender ended World War II. The Vietminh-French struggle, which lasted from 1946 to 1954, often is called the "First Indochina War." This in turn makes the subsequent military struggle that involved the United States the "second" such war.

history, the equivalent of more than 450 Hiroshima atomic bombs. Yet this enormous effort turned out to be a war that the United States was unable to win.

These grim statistics are only part of the story. There are scars as well. The Vietnam War strained and distorted the American economy; it opened social and political fissures and defeated attempts to close them; it sapped the country's will, eroded its confidence, and frayed its nerves; it addicted many of its soldiers to drugs and damaged its military establishment. Perhaps worst of all, it embittered Americans against one another. The Vietnam War became the first American war since the Civil War to spawn what might reasonably be called a secondary war at home, a national fracturing at once political and personal complete with riots, mass demonstrations, arrests, bitter family feuds, and shattered relationships of all sorts. In short, the Vietnam War was an American tragedy, an ordeal that left far more Americans sadder than it did wiser.

The Vietnam War also spawned a debate, one that erupted well before American combat troops became involved in the fighting, before the United States actually was at war in Vietnam. It began as a disagreement over why the American effort to help the government of South Vietnam defeat the Communist insurgency it faced was going badly and what could be done to remedy that situation. Like the war itself, the debate about what the United States should do in Vietnam escalated in scope and intensity as the question of how US ground troops and air power should be employed became a major point of contention. The war ended for the United States with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords and withdrawal of all American military forces from Vietnam in early 1973 and for the people of Vietnam when the North Vietnamese army finally overwhelmed South Vietnamese's weakened and demoralized military forces in April 1975. But the debate in the United States over the war continued, having now expanded to include a clash of views over why the American effort to stem the advance of Communism in Vietnam had ended in defeat. It continues to this day.

The debate over the Vietnam War was and remains multi-faceted, a controversy that has gone on for decades and produced literally thousands of books and uncounted scholarly and journalistic articles. Ultimately, however, it breaks down into two primary questions. First, was it necessary and wise – that is, vital to American security interests – for the United States to get involved in Vietnam with its own military forces, the goal being to guarantee the survival of a non-Communist South Vietnam? Put another way, should the United States have applied its

Cold War policy of containment, which was designed to limit the expansion of the influence of the Soviet Union and prevent the spread of Communism, to Vietnam and Southeast Asia? Second, having become involved, and consequently gotten into a war in which American and South Vietnamese government forces were matched against southern Communist guerrillas and regular North Vietnamese army troops, was that war winnable?

In the end, notwithstanding the enormous variety of ways those questions have been answered, the bulk of the responses may be loosely classified into two competing narratives: the orthodox and the revisionist. The orthodox narrative, which also often carries the label "liberal realist," is the prevailing viewpoint most college and university students encounter in their US and international history courses, and it answers both questions firmly in the negative. This narrative has a pedigree that goes back to well before the United States withdrew from Vietnam and has featured as articulate proponents some of the most prominent American journalists who covered the war, including four who wrote best-selling and influential books during the 1970s and 1980s: David Halberstam (*The Best and the Brightest*, 1972), Frances Fitzgerald (*Fire in the Lake*, 1972), Stanley Karnow (*Vietnam A History*, 1983), and Neil Sheehan (*A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, 1988).[3] It achieved the status of orthodoxy in large part for several reasons. Over time, albeit with modifications, it became and remained the predominant outlook among journalists who had covered the war and then added critical commentary in books and articles after it was over. It also became the prevailing viewpoint among American academics, the people who since

[3] David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972); Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Vintage, 1972); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983); Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988). The outstanding early correspondent of the Vietnam War was Bernard B. Fall, who was born and raised in France but received his graduate education in the United States. Fall covered both the French and the American efforts between his first visit to Vietnam in 1953 and his death in 1967. (He was killed while on patrol with US Marines when the jeep he was riding in hit a land mine.) Fall's work later provided ammunition for commentators on both sides of the Vietnam debate, as he was staunchly anti-Communist but also argued that the United States was repeating the mistakes made by the French and, in addition, that America's reliance on high-tech military methods was so destructive as to alienate most Vietnamese and therefore ultimately futile. Among his highly respected books are *Street Without Joy* (1961), *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (1967), *The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis* (2nd rev. ed., 1967), and *Last Reflections on a War* (1967).

the end of the Vietnam War have produced most of the scholarly books and articles on the subject and, significantly, written the textbooks students read in courses on American foreign policy in general and on the Vietnam War in particular. More generally, it became the prevailing outlook among Western intellectuals. As Andrew Wiest, author of *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (2008) and coeditor of *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (2010), has observed, "It became accepted wisdom that America's war in Vietnam had been a mistake and a tragedy."[4] This remained the case even as this "wisdom" evolved and branched off into many directions as new participants proliferated and added their research and commentary to the debate. As a result most students of American foreign policy are unlikely to encounter in their course assignments a sympathetic or even a reasonably impartial overview of the revisionist narrative, which in contrast to the orthodox/liberal realist narrative answers the two questions listed earlier in the affirmative.[5]

However, the revisionist narrative includes many compelling arguments. They are grounded on two basic premises: first, that the United States became engaged in fighting in Vietnam with good reason in terms of national interest given the context of the Cold War, and, second, that it did so without first developing a strategy for victory and therefore squandered opportunities that in fact existed to secure victory at a far lower price than it ultimately paid in defeat. The premise that the Cold War provided a compelling justification for the United States to defend South Vietnam was argued from the very beginning of the US commitment in the 1950s when the ultimate results of that decision could not be known, and it retains merit despite the fact that the United States and its allies lost their battle in Vietnam while still winning the larger Cold War. The premise that the United States lacked a sound strategy for dealing with Vietnam

[4] Andrew Wiest, "Introduction," in *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War*, eds. Andrew Wiest and Michael J. Doidge (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 8. Wiest uses the term "traditional" rather than "orthodox" to describe that "accepted wisdom." Unfortunately, when it comes to the Cold War in general, the "orthodox" and "revisionist" terminology is reversed. In that case, "orthodox" commentators in most cases support US post–World War II foreign policy, including the effort to preserve a non-Communist South Vietnam while "revisionist" commentators in most cases are critical of many aspects of US foreign policy. The Cold War debate also includes the "post-revisionist" camp, which lies somewhere between the other two camps.

[5] One notable exception is a thematically organized textbook by Gary R Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (2009), which, while finding for the orthodox side on each of seven issues it examines, treats the revisionist narrative seriously throughout.

emerged and then gained support as the conflict deepened in the early 1960s. One might note here that the belief that a sound strategy is vital to success in war is a fundamental military precept with a venerable pedigree. As the Chinese thinker Sun Tzu cautioned more than 2,500 years ago, "Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat." In retrospect, it seems difficult to deny that the American strategic approach to the Vietnam War was deeply flawed and, at a minimum, that approach yielded what was close to a worst-case scenario, at least in Vietnam itself.

An understanding of what revisionist historians have to say about the Vietnam War is essential if students engaged in a serious investigation into that conflict are to have to the background they need to render their own informed judgment on that war, whatever that may turn out to be. This volume will attempt to provide such an understanding. It will do so not only by presenting what the revisionists have to say but also by citing the historical record as presented by orthodox commentators, whose own evidence not infrequently supports arguments made by revisionists. At the same time, it will examine many issues on which the revisionists themselves disagree, including the key question of which strategic approach to the war the United States could have taken that might have produced better and perhaps decisive results on the battlefield and thereby preserved the independence of South Vietnam.

It is important to remember that there is no one or sole orthodox or revisionist case but rather a great variety of analyses, most of which can, with approximation, be placed in one camp or the other. With regard to revisionism, the characteristic that places a given work in that camp is that, in one way or another, it supports the premise that the United States had military options it did not employ that could have enabled it, along with South Vietnam and other countries that contributed to South Vietnam's defense, to win the Vietnam War at less cost than was suffered in defeat. With this caveat in place, it is hoped that this volume will contribute to a more balanced discussion of the Vietnam War.