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No More Vietnams: Historians Debate the Policy Lessons of the Vietnam War

By David L. Anderson

Summary

*In this article, Anderson explores the reasons that make the resolution of key historical questions regarding the Vietnam War elusive and that make it difficult for scholars as well as laypersons to understand the conflict and consider the ramifications of its meaning for American diplomatic and military doctrines. His compelling reflection leads to an unavoidable conclusion of particular relevance as the American people face the challenge of Iraq: the American war in Vietnam could have and should have been avoided. This article has been previously published in *The War That Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War*, edited by David L. Anderson and John Ernst and published by the University Press of Kentucky, 2007.*

It has been thirty years since the end of the Vietnam War, and historians of American foreign relations are still vigorously debating the historical questions of why the United States chose to persist in a major military campaign in Vietnam for so long and why, ultimately, that costly and controversial intervention failed to achieve Washington's stated objectives. Thousands of books and articles have been published on the American war in Vietnam advancing knowledge and understanding of the conflict, and yet the lessons learned and the meaning of the war for American diplomatic and military doctrine are still contested. What makes resolution of such important historical questions remain so elusive?

The war has left conflicting mythologies that continue to battle with each other. Boiled down to an extreme simplification, the debate is over the concept of "no more Vietnams." One interpreta-

tion of this term is that the United States must abjure from virtually all types of military intervention abroad. The term "Vietnam syndrome" came into use after the war to describe a pathological aversion among American policy makers to the use of force as an instrument of foreign policy. The other understanding of the term "no more Vietnams" is that the United States must never again "lose" in cases in which defense of the nation's security requires military intervention. Proponents of this view argue that the United States should get over the Vietnam syndrome and regain the political will to use America's massive power to achieve foreign policy objectives. In both cases, there is an implication that the United States, because of its power and the global reach of its interests, can choose where and when to engage its military force.

The Vietnam War was a war of choice. The Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and

Nixon administrations chose to define the survival of South Vietnam as a vital strategic interest of the United States in the global policy of containment of Soviet and Chinese power. Official American rhetoric increasingly exaggerated the value of the objective as domestic opponents of the war questioned the choice and the cost of the intervention. There is a proclivity when policy makers choose war to over-promise to the nation the results of the intervention and to under-state the costs to the nation in order to justify continuing the intervention. One example of such an over-promise is to couch the reason for continuing the intervention in terms of preserving America's international "credibility." Wars of choice, like the Vietnam War, leave a gap between ends and means that almost invariably produces division, dissatisfaction, and domestic debilitation.¹

The last American war that was not a war of choice was World War II. The danger to U.S. interests posed by the strength and ideology of the Axis powers left the United States no choice but to defend itself and its historical allies. World War II is often termed the "good war" and the Vietnam War the "bad war." The Korean War in between the two gets obscured as a forgotten, stalemated war. The reasons for fighting the good war were much more self-evident to Americans than were the reasons for the bad war. Moreover, the United States won the good war by the rational standard that the hostile power and oppressive ideology of the nation's enemies had been nullified. American forces came home to well-deserved victory celebrations and national self-congratulations. The reasons for fight-

ing the bad war were much less evident, however. The small, rural country of Vietnam lacked the power to threaten the United States directly, and its internal politics were much too localized to be a crucial test of American ideology. In the end, there was no U.S. "victory" in Vietnam, and thus the questions were left open as to whether a victory was ever possible, how it could have been achieved, and, most challenging, what would have constituted victory.

At the end of Oliver Stone's movie *Platoon* about the realities of combat for American soldiers in Vietnam, the young G.I. who is the main character reflects: "I think now looking back that we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves and the enemy was within us."² In the context of the film, the line is a well-know literary allusion to works such as Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* that explore the presence of evil within the human psyche. The line could also be applied to what has become the historical exploration of the essence of American foreign policy as revealed by the Vietnam War. In much of the writing on the war, Vietnam and the Vietnamese are backdrops to what is more an examination of America and the Americans. Conflicting ideas of what Americans are as a people and of their values and beliefs become the points of analysis and argument.

Throughout its history, the United States has been shaped by both ambition and altruism. As a young nation, it was purposefully and consciously expansionist and idealist. It sought to build its own power and influence, and this ambition was at times at the expense of weaker nations, including Native Ameri-

1. "Interchange: Legacies of the Vietnam War," *Journal of American History* 93 (September 2006): 487-88.

2. Quoted in Katherine Kinney, *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

can peoples, Mexico, and Spain. It sought also to share the benefits of liberty. The American self-perception forged in the American Revolution was of a nation that was the freest, most democratic, most republican, and most progressive in history, and with that perception was a sense of responsibility to share this ideal with others. This sense of mission combined with a sense of survival in a competitive world to form a potent prescription for an assertive and ambiguous U.S. role in international affairs. In World War II for a brief historical moment, American might and right converged in a victory over tyrannical forces. In Vietnam, the United States experienced the limits of its power and its righteousness. Consequently, the Vietnam War has become not just the bad war but the endless war, a subject locked into a protracted debate over the responsibility for and the significance of the outcome.

This debate over the policy lessons of the war is not an abstract academic exercise in critical thinking. The United States failed to insure the survival of its ally, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), but its enemy, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), did not defeat the United States as a nation. America remained a world power that was able, perhaps even expected, to apply its strength and influence in other international conflicts. Historians, policy analysts, and national leaders have offered numerous explanations of what the Vietnam War reveals as a guide to U.S. policies in the present. This process of reflection began even while the war was in progress and has continued ever since in some clearly discernable phases.

The official rationale for U.S. intervention in the affairs of Vietnam, as presented by American presidents from

Truman through Ford, was the importance of the future of Vietnam in terms of the global Cold War that pitted the interests and ideology of the United States against the interests and ideology of the Soviet Union. When the French war with the Communist-led Vietminh began in 1946, the Truman administration initially took a neutral position in a conflict that was manifestly an attempt by France to regain the colonial authority over Indochina that had slipped from its grasp during Japan's wartime occupation of the region. By 1950, however, the increasingly dangerous Cold War in Europe, the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in China's Civil War, the USSR's successful test of an atomic bomb, and Senator Joseph McCarthy's reckless claims of Communist agents within the U.S. government had caused Washington to reexamine its perception of the Indochina conflict. When Truman ordered American troops to Korea in June 1950 to counter the threat of Communist North Korea to the U.S.-backed republic in South Korea, the Cold War went to Asia. In 1954, as the French grew weary of their eight-year war against the Vietminh, President Eisenhower employed the metaphor of falling dominoes to declare the containment of the spread of communist regimes in Southeast Asia to be a vital strategic imperative of the United States. By the early 1960s, there was a consensus view among American leaders that the United States must contain communist political power wherever it appeared—a consensus seemingly reconfirmed by a U.S.-Soviet arms race, communist-led revolution in Cuba, military confrontation over Berlin, civil war in Laos, and a mounting armed insurgency organized by Communist Party cadre against the government in South Vietnam.

The idea that the containment of world communism somehow required the United States to be involved in Vietnam appeared in all the official explanations of the growing commitment of U.S. support for the survival of a South Vietnamese state independent of the communist North Vietnamese regime that had grown out of the Vietminh's successful resistance to the French. Although historical scholarship on Vietnam was woefully slim in the United States in the early 1960s, a body of American scholarship slowly developed as the U.S. involvement in Vietnam grew. In the 1960s and the 1970s a first wave of historical analysis emerged.

Unlike the early historical studies of the Cold War that largely supported the validity of Washington's decision to seek to contain Soviet and later Chinese power, the initial American histories of the Vietnam War questioned the applicability of the Cold War paradigm to the internal conflict in Vietnam. Pioneering scholarship such as *The United States in Vietnam* by George M. Kahin and John W. Lewis and *The Two Vietnams* by Bernard Fall criticized U.S. policy makers for overlooking the nationalism of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communists and for failing to understand the internal politics of Vietnam. Departing from the Cold War model in which the orthodox scholarship was sympathetic to official policy, the standard or orthodox interpretation of most historians writing about the Vietnam War was highly critical of the official rationales. These criticisms did not all take the same form. Liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and David Halberstam believed that American officials were often well-meaning but were too ignorant of Vietnam and arrogant about their own and America's abilities to understand the

conflict. These writers characterized U.S. policy in Vietnam as a "quagmire" that had gradually trapped the United States in an unintended military commitment. Department of Defense analysts working in the late 1960s on a study that became known as the Pentagon Papers, after one of its author's—Daniel Ellsberg—leaked it to the press in 1971, disagreed with the quagmire thesis. These scholars, including Ellsberg and Leslie Gelb, developed a so-called stalemate argument that maintained that U.S. leaders understood early on that there was no good American solution to the civil war in Vietnam but that these leaders persisted in the war rather than admit a mistake and risk the loss of their political power. Radical historians such as Gabriel Kolko went beyond the cynicism of the stalemate argument and contended that it was not lack of political courage that compelled U.S. policy but rather an American drive for hegemony and world order that made all revolutionary movements enemies to be defeated.³

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the various criticisms of the government's strategic thinking about Vietnam began

3. George M. Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, rev. ed. (New York: Delta, 1969); Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Praeger, 1967); Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy, 1941-1966* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966); David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1964); Leslie Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: They System Worked* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1979); Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972); Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); Robert A. Divine, "Vietnam Reconsidered," *Diplomatic History* 12 (Winter 1988): 79-93.

to coalesce into a prevailing historical interpretation that came to be labeled “flawed containment” or “liberal-realist.”⁴ Relying on classified documents made public in the Pentagon Papers, journalists’ accounts, and other evidence, many historians agreed that the containment policy originally conceived to counter Soviet political and military power in Europe after World War II had only limited utility, if any, as an American policy doctrine in Southeast Asia. The realist aspect of this critique noted that the Soviet army was not in the region as it was in Eastern Europe and that the post-colonial nations of Indochina were not closely connected economically and historically to the United States as were the nations of Western Europe. Many U.S. strategists considered China to be America’s enemy but also had been wary, since the Korean War, of the huge risks entailed in any military conflict with China. Consequently, the strategic value of Vietnam to the United States was low, and the costs of intervention there were high. The liberal portion of the argument came from recognition by many historians that the nationalist aspirations of Vietnamese leaders such as Ho Chi Minh, who had resisted French colonialism, were not unlike historic American values, despite the Vietnamese Communists’ professions of Marxist ideology.

One of the first books to synthesize this flawed containment thesis from then available records and scholarship was *America’s Longest War* by George Her-

ring. Herring’s 1979 book acknowledged that policy lessons from the war remained elusive, but on the central point he was direct: “That containment was misapplied in Vietnam, however, seems beyond debate.” His book has had four editions. Although he has revised many sections based upon the outpouring of documents and monographs over the years, his conclusions have remained basically the same. His argument is that the external or global U.S. strategy of blocking Soviet and Chinese communist influence wherever it spread led the United States to seriously misjudge the internal dynamics of Indochina. “By intervening in what was essentially a local struggle,” Herring argued, “it placed itself at the mercy of local forces, a weak client, and a determined adversary.” Despite the use of abundantly destructive military force, Washington found its power to settle the political questions of Vietnam “beyond the ability of the United States.”⁵

In addition to Herring, a number of other historians have penned studies with a similar argument that is sometimes termed “neo-orthodox” to distinguish from the earlier quagmire thesis.⁶ In the 1980s, the journalist-historian Stanley Karnow produced a sweeping narrative history of how the United States was “playing for global stakes” in Indochina, and George Kahin revived his earlier argument in a new book, *Intervention*: “Nearly all American officials . . . perceived Vietnamese communism as one of the fronts of contest with the So-

4. Gary R. Hess, “The Unending Debate: Historians and the Vietnam War,” *Diplomatic History* 18 (Spring 1994): 246; Robert J. McMahon, “U.S.-Vietnamese Relations: A Historiographical Survey,” in *Pacific Passage: The Study of American-East Asian Relations on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Warren I. Cohen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 316.

5. George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002), 357-58. Compare George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 1st ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), 270-71.

6. Hess, “Unending Debate,” 246.

viet Union and China—critically dependent on the two major communist powers rather than drawing most of its strength from a fundamentally autonomous national foundation.”⁷ In a specific examination of the containment policy in Indochina, William J. Duiker, an acclaimed biographer of Ho Chi Minh, concluded that the Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy administrations “defined Vietnam as a ‘test case’ of U.S. capacity to stem the advance of communism into vulnerable areas throughout the Third World.”⁸ In another major study, Robert Schulzinger declared that “had American leaders not thought that all international events were connected to the Cold War there would have been no American war in Vietnam.”⁹

The liberal-realist explanations of why the United States intervened militarily in Vietnam in support of the Republic of Vietnam lead to the proposition that the war was not winnable in any meaningful sense for the United States and hence should never have been undertaken. Historians of this school recall the assessment made by General Matthew Ridgway, when he contemplated the possibility of U.S. military involvement in Indochina during the French war. He contended that it would be the wrong war, in the wrong place, and against the wrong enemy. The orthodox historians argue that American intervention was a misapplication of containment, a failure

to understand local conditions in Southeast Asia, and a product of arrogance or ideological obsession. These factors prevented a clear definition of objectives and of the means available to attain those objectives. In other words, there was no successful American strategy that is apparent to these authors.

As the liberal-realist interpretation was emerging in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a conservative revisionist school began to challenge what had become the orthodox view. These revisionist historians largely accepted the official reasoning that U.S. intervention in Vietnam was necessary to contain international communist expansion. Just as the Vietnam War orthodoxy reversed the pattern of Cold War scholarship in its criticisms of U.S. strategy, the Vietnam War revisionists departed from the Cold War labels and became the defenders of American interventionism. One of the earliest revisionists was political scientist Guenter Lewy, who wrote in 1978 that events since 1975 had demonstrated that the American failure to prevent a communist triumph in Southeast Asia had weakened the faith in American commitments. “In the wake of the trauma of Vietnam,” Lewy maintained, “America is in the grip of a ‘No more Vietnams’ psychology which stands in sharp contrast to the spirit of active involvement in global affairs prevailing in the years since World War II; . . . there is no reason to assume that the weakening of America’s will to act will make for a better and more peaceful world.”¹⁰

The failure of containment in Vietnam concerned the revisionists, and they concentrated their research, not on the origins of the U.S. commitment, but on the way the United States fought the war

7. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 169; George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 126.

8. William J. Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 2.

9. Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 329.

10. Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 426-28.

and how it could have been successful. There were three types of revisionist arguments: (1) that the United States did not make sufficient use of its enormous conventional military power, (2) that the United States military tactics were too conventional and failed to adapt to the challenges of guerrilla warfare, and (3) that military victory may not have been feasible but that the effort still had moral and strategic value.

The first argument that a conventional military victory was available in Vietnam to the United States could be found in memoirs and histories written by high ranking officers who had led U.S. forces in Vietnam. U.S. Army colonel Harry Summers wrote a particularly influential book, *On Strategy*, published in 1982, that began with the premise that the war was basically an assault by the DRV across an international boundary against the separate and sovereign RVN. Citing the classic military doctrines of Karl von Clausewitz, Summers reasoned that the United States should have positioned its forces to isolate the battlefield in the South in order to concentrate its superior firepower on enemy targets. Instead, he claimed, civilian U.S. strategists in the Department of Defense fashioned a dispersed and gradual deployment of U.S. forces against guerrilla forces that had little chance of stopping the DRV aggression against the RVN. Summers's book became a standard military history text for educating a new generation of U.S. officers. A number of general officers who had served in Vietnam, including General William C. Westmoreland and Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, who held the highest level command positions as the U.S. war escalated, agreed with this analysis. They insisted that higher levels of U.S. ground and air power and fewer restrictions from offi-

cial in Washington would have enabled them to force Hanoi into a negotiated settlement that would have preserved the RVN.¹¹

The orthodox historians have challenged this argument, sometimes labeled the "win thesis," on a number of points. They begin at the beginning—noting the lack of attention it gives to the political and social origins of the conflict. The demilitarized zone along the seventeenth parallel, rather than form an international boundary between North and South Vietnam, delineated two "regroupment zones" for implementation of the cease-fire ending the French-Vietminh war in 1954. Within South Vietnam, the government was corrupt and oppressive. It had little or no allegiance from many in the population, and no level of American military power could make it popular. In the view of some historians, American air power and other high technology and destructive warfare inflicted so much damage on the South Vietnamese population that this form of support for the RVN government only served to alienate the population from the Saigon regime. If the liberal-realists are correct that no amount of force could have produced an American victory in Vietnam, then was the United States incapable of winning

11. Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1982); Bruce Palmer Jr., *The 25 Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984); Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History, 1946-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1988); Shelby L. Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio, 1985); Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: US-Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio, 1978); William R. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976); Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio, 1978).

the war?¹²

The advocates of the second version of revisionism maintain that the United States could have overcome the political insurgency against the Saigon government by following a pacification strategy. Rather than relying on massive force, the approach should have been to provide population security and government services, such as health care and agricultural technology, to win the population to the government's side. In actual practice, General Westmoreland and other commanders put more effort into attrition, killing the enemy, than in pacification, but some military historians and former aid officials have argued that, had counterinsurgency been made the primary approach, the result would have been better and certainly no worse than it was for the United States and its Saigon ally.¹³

The notion that there was an American solution to the contest for internal political power in Vietnam is dubious, however. The course and outcome of the

Vietnam War were not a question of American failure but also of Vietnamese success. Some studies of individual U.S. combat units that gave serious attention to village security and local improvements have found that these programs did not translate into loyalty to the Saigon regime after the Americans left the area. Other localized studies of particular villages or provinces have shown that the resistance to external interference—Chinese, French, American—has deep historical and cultural roots in Vietnam. Similarly, real economic and social inequities and injustices provided fertile ground for revolution. The Vietnamese communists were not infallible and had their own internal divisions, but they also had advantages. They combined their disciplined and ruthless political tactics with appeals to patriotism and justice to create an effective strategy for withstanding the might of the powerful Americans.¹⁴

It is, in fact, because the communist-led DRV and NLF were such formidable

12. George C. Herring, "America and Vietnam: The Debate Continues," *American Historical Review* 92 (1987): 350-62; Gary R. Hess, "The Military Perspective on Strategy in Vietnam: Harry G. Summers's *On Strategy* and Bruce Palmer's *The 25 Year War*," *Diplomatic History* 10 (1986): 91-106; Jeffrey Kimball, "The Stab-in-the-back Legend and the Vietnam War," *Armed Forces and Society* 14 (1988): 433-58.

13. Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995); Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986); William E. Colby and James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989); Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988).

14. Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991); Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972); Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); James W. Trullinger Jr., *Village at War: An Account of Revolution in Vietnam* (New York: Longman, 1980); Douglas Pike, *History of Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1976* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978); James P. Harrison, *The Endless War: Vietnam's Struggle for Independence* (New York: Free Press, 1982); David W. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002); William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Hyperion, 2000); Marc Jason Gilbert, "Introduction," in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, ed. Marc Jason Gilbert (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 1-45.

opponents that the third school of revisionists, labeled “legitimatists” by historian Gary Hess, developed their analysis.¹⁵ Like other revisionists, they accept the premise that Washington’s global credibility as a deterrent to Moscow and Beijing in the Cold War required the United States not to yield the future of Vietnam to the regime in Hanoi without a fight. The international strategic balance of power was at stake, in their view. They also point to the executions, re-education camps, forced emigration, and other abuses of the communist regime following its 1975 reunification of Vietnam as evidence of the brutality and immorality of Hanoi’s leaders. Another variation on this revisionism are those studies that contend that the Saigon regime, for all of its weaknesses, was not so corrupt and venal as to be worse than its opponents. The legitimatists acknowledge, however, that the chance of American success in Vietnam was never very good. In effect, they borrow from both the orthodox and revisionist schools to contend that the United States was correct to intervene in Vietnam and also correct to get out.¹⁶

The end of the Cold War in 1990 affected this debate among historians of the Vietnam War but did not end it. For revisionists, the dissolution of the Soviet Union confirmed the validity of con-

tainment as a strategy. Journalist Michael Lind wrote in 1999, for example, that “the sound and ultimately successful Cold War grand strategy of global military containment of the communist bloc required Presidents Kennedy and Johnson to escalate U.S. involvement in Vietnam rather than withdraw without a major effort. . . . Once the Vietnam War is viewed in the context of the Cold War, it looks less like a tragic error than like a battle that could hardly be avoided.”¹⁷ A new, post-Cold War generation of liberal-realist scholars, however, reaffirms that containment was a flawed concept in Southeast Asia. These scholars, some of whom have made significant use of Vietnamese historical archives now open to research, go beyond the orthodox-revisionist debate to refocus study of the origins of the American intervention from the Cold War context to a post-colonial context. Mark Philip Bradley, for example, describes his research on American and Vietnamese images of each other at the end of World War II as an effort “to locate and analyze the relationship between Vietnam and the United States within the larger sweep of the international history of the twentieth century in which the global discourse and practices of colonialism, race, modernism, and postcolonial state making at once preceded, were profoundly implicated in, and ultimately transcended the dynamics of the Cold War.”¹⁸

Another example of this new scholarship is Mark Lawrence’s *Assuming the Burden*, which details how British,

15. Hess, “Unending Debate,” 243-46.

16. Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983); Timothy J. Lomperis, *From People’s War to People’s Rule: Insurgency, Intervention, and the Lessons of Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); R. B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, 3 vols. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984-90); Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: Dutton, 1987); Patrick L. Hatcher, *The Suicide of an Elite: American Internationalists and Vietnam* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

17. Michael Lind, *Vietnam, the Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America’s Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 256.

18. Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 8.

French, and American leaders came to identify Vietnam as a Cold War battle ground in 1949-1950. He terms it “a tragic moment when Western governments moved decisively toward forceful solutions that reduced complex social conflicts in many parts of the world to mere expressions of the confrontation between Western liberal capitalism and Soviet-led communism.”¹⁹ Bradley provides a good summary of the current liberal-realist position: “Without question the Cold War provided the larger frame that shaped American involvement in Vietnam. . . . But if one accepts the premise that Vietnam was the wrong place to fight the larger Cold War battle (as I and I think many others do), you have to look elsewhere to understand the forces shaping American commitment and policy toward Vietnam.”²⁰

Not only has some form of the orthodox or critical view of the U.S. decision to intervene militarily in Vietnam in the name of containment persisted and been buttressed by new archival research, the American public’s doubts about the war have remained fairly consistent over the years. When Presidents Kennedy and Johnson first increased the deployment of American ground and air power to Vietnam, members of the press, of Congress, and the public generally accepted Washington’s official Cold War explanations of the policy. By 1967, however, hundreds of thousands of Americans had served a tour of duty in Vietnam, thousands of tons of American bombs had rained down on Indochina, millions of dollars had been spent, and

thousands of Americans and tens of thousands of Vietnamese had been killed or injured in the conflict. Americans grew increasingly skeptical of their government’s explanation of how the survival of a weak and corrupt government in Saigon justified these high costs and the massive level of destruction. In early 1968, the DRV and NLF surprised American military commanders with a military operation throughout South Vietnam known as the Tet Offensive. Although the attacks did not topple the Saigon government as Hanoi had hoped, the ability of the Communists to launch the offensive after three years of pounding by American power persuaded many Americans that the drama in Vietnam was not worth the price of the ticket. Most historians of all types agree that the Tet Offensive was the turning point when American leaders began to respond to political pressure to find a way to end the active U.S. participation in the war. The public sense that somehow the Vietnam War was “fundamentally wrong and immoral,” that first gained broad acceptance following Tet, has continued to appear in public opinion polls. Although every president beginning with Nixon has asserted, as have the revisionist historians, that the American intervention in Vietnam was honorable and credible and was consistent with American strategic and historic interests, one careful analysis of American public memory of the war has found: “A strong majority have long held, and continue to hold, that U.S. intervention represented not just an instrumental failure but a moral failure.”²¹

Why and how the Nixon administra-

19. Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 282.

20. “Interchange: Legacies of the Vietnam War,” 472.

21. Robert McMahon, “Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and American Society, 1975-2001,” *Diplomatic History* 26 (Spring 2002): 175.

tion continued to wage the American war for four more years after the Tet Offensive before withdrawing the last U.S. forces has generated further historical debate over the meaning of the Vietnam experience and its meaning for present American policy making. What has emerged is a curious dichotomy between the prevailing understanding among historians and the public on one hand and the revisionist historians and many policy makers on the other hand of the term “no more Vietnams.” The first group is instinctively wary of military intervention since the Vietnam war if the alignment of American interests and the local issues in a conflict are not perfectly clear, and the second group is determined to apply overwhelming American power in the name of American ideals in any case in which America decides its specific or general interests are at stake.

The historical debate over Nixon’s actions that has continued the orthodox and revisionist split over the policy lessons of the war comes from differing versions of what has come to be known as the “decent interval” thesis: the idea that the Nixon administration believed long before 1973 that the U.S. objective was not victory but the creation of a significant period between the U.S. military withdrawal and the inevitable collapse of the Saigon government. This decent interval presumably would protect the credibility of U.S. foreign policy by separating American actions from the war’s outcome. Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his national security advisor and principal foreign policy aide, have argued in their memoirs that they wore down the DRV through firm diplomacy backed by Vietnamization—the preparation of the RVN to defend itself—and the willingness to use American air power, and that they produced a “peace with honor” in Viet-

nam in 1973. Kissinger has insisted that the agreement signed in Paris “could have worked” and that “the agreement could have been maintained.” “We sought not an interval before collapse,” he declares in his account, “but lasting peace with honor.” Kissinger concludes that, without Watergate, the congressional investigation that led to articles of impeachment against Nixon, and the resulting “collapse of executive authority,” the United States “would have succeeded” in Vietnam.²² Nixon and Kissinger charge that the DRV flagrantly violated the terms of the peace and that in 1975, after Nixon had resigned his office, the blame is on Congress for not approving the financial aid that the RVN needed to survive the continuing aggression. “In the end, Vietnam was lost on the political front in the United States, Nixon wrote later, not on the battlefield in Southeast Asia.”²³ In concert with the revisionist historians, Nixon and Kissinger advanced a win thesis that the United States could have prevailed.

Other analysts view these claims of success differently. The intense secrecy of the Nixon White House makes it difficult for historians to know what Nixon and Kissinger really thought would be the outcome in Vietnam after America’s departure, but it is clear that they began even as the treaty was being signed to try to avoid any appearance of American humiliation. They set out immediately “to make an American failure look like a success,” in the words of Arnold Isaacs, “and thus preserve America’s reputation elsewhere in the world.”²⁴ More than a

22. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 1470.

23. Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 15.

24. Arnold Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 498.

month before the signing of the January 1973 agreement, Nixon ordered his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, to begin an aggressive public relations campaign to portray the president as a peacemaker and the approaching diplomatic settlement as a success. In some tangible ways, the revisionist school of Vietnam war historiography was born in the Nixon White House.²⁵

Despite the president's and his adviser's claims that they had a strategy for victory in Vietnam, there is considerable evidence that, as early as the fall of 1969, the administration had an explicit decent interval strategy. After almost a year in office, Nixon and Kissinger were finding that they were getting no closer to a diplomatic and military victory than had Johnson and his aides and that the cost of the war in American lives and treasure continued to mount. They rejected out of hand the option of a unilateral U.S. withdrawal, which Kissinger said left two alternatives—escalation or Vietnamization. Planning began for dramatic increase of U.S. bombing and other military pressure on the DRV coupled with a virtual ultimatum to Hanoi in an operation code named Duck Hook. The administration gave up this escalation choice, however, because it understood that public and political opinion in the United States demanded smaller not greater American effort in Vietnam. In June it had begun withdrawing U.S. troops from South Vietnam. It also knew that Saigon was not ready to assume its own defense and might never be. Nixon's policy had become, in Isaacs's words, "a sort of slow-motion defeat."²⁶

On November 3, 1969, Nixon gave a major address, often referred to as his Silent Majority speech for its assertion that most Americans supported his policies, in which he heralded Vietnamization and did not issue a public threat and ultimatum to the DRV. Jeffrey Kimball has argued that this speech began the decent interval strategy that defined American success in Vietnam as leaving a South Vietnamese government strong enough to defend itself. The U.S. objective no longer was to force Hanoi to recognize the southern regime and to cease its aggression against the RVN. Kissinger's notes in preparation for his 1971 secret meetings with Chinese leaders reveal that he would inform them: "If the Vietnamese people themselves decide to change the present government, we shall accept it."²⁷ Larry Berman agrees that Nixon backed away from escalation in 1969 and touted Vietnamization for domestic political reasons, but he believes that Nixon would have reverted to escalation after the 1973 accords. Pierre Asselin finds that the Paris agreement served immediate political and strategic needs for both sides but that it was bound to fail and all the negotiators knew it.²⁸ Although Kimball, Berman, and Asselin present differing scenarios, all continue the liberal-realist thesis that there was no good solution for the United States in Vietnam. They reject

Kissinger, *White House Years*, 288.

27. Jeffrey Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 24-28, 106, and 187.

28. Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 57 and 204; Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 178-80.

25. Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 368.

26. Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 491-92. See also

Nixon's claim of peace with honor and his insistence that his policies would have been successful.

Despite evidence presented by Kimball and Berman that Nixon and Kissinger had little faith that Vietnamization was working and that the White House considered the concept a rhetorical device to justify to the American public continuing assistance to Saigon, Nixon and his successor Gerald Ford insisted that Vietnamization was producing a viable regime in South Vietnam. Asselin finds that Vietnamization was strengthening Saigon's forces but not fast enough to accomplish its purposes. Nixon and Kissinger both blamed Congress for a lack of will to sustain Saigon financially after 1973 and for thereby contributing to the collapse of the RVN in 1975. Nixon's secretary of defense, Melvin Laird, an advocate of Vietnamization within the administration, reasserted the Congress-was-to-blame thesis in a 2005 article in *Foreign Affairs* that admonished the Bush administration to "stay the course" in Iraq and not lose the political will to continue. There is a preponderance of evidence, however, that South Vietnam had a corrupt and poorly led government, rampant inflation, and a war-weary population in 1975, and that U.S. support was all that had been giving the RVN life. Chris Jespersen has described the Nixon and Ford administrations as having a "deliberate policy of denial" of the real conditions.²⁹

29. T. Christopher Jespersen, "Kissinger, Ford, and Congress: The Very Bitter End in Vietnam," *Pacific Historical Review* 71 (August 2002): 439. See also Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of War* (Boston: Twayne, 1990), 136-38; Marc Jason Gilbert, "The Cost of Losing the 'Other War' in Vietnam," in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, 187-88; Melvin Laird, "Iraq: Learning the Lessons of Vietnam," *Foreign Affairs* (Novem-

ber/December 2005); and Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, 120, 169.

As has long been the case, however, the revisionist rebuttal remains present, and not only in the memoirs of retired officials like Laird. Respected military historian Lewis Sorley has argued in his much-read book, *A Better War*, that the American leaders in Vietnam after 1968—General Creighton Abrams, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, and pacification director William Colby—made Vietnamization effective. They were approaching the Nixon goal of enabling the South Vietnamese to defend themselves, he contends, until the American political will to maintain the task in Vietnam finally ran out. Another equally reputable military historian, James Willbanks, has reviewed many of the same sources, however, and concluded that Vietnamization came too late and that the incredibly ineffective Thieu government in Saigon had no chance for victory and was able to survive only long enough to provide the decent interval that Washington had sought. Thus the scholarly debate continues.³⁰

If this dialogue were only some ivory-tower exchange among professors or confined to college seminar rooms it would be interesting, but, in fact, it shaped national security policy in the real world in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The revisionist interpretations of the Vietnam War that lack of American success came from

ber/December 2005); and Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, 120, 169.

30. Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1999); James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004). For comments by historians such as David Elliott and William Turley, who are critical of the Sorley thesis, see Matt Steinglass, "Vietnam and Victory," *Boston Globe*, December 18, 2005.

failed methods and not mistaken objectives characterized the thinking of many U.S. leaders in the administration of George W. Bush. The president said that he had supported the containment rationale for U.S. policy and that “the essential lessons to be learned from the Vietnam War” were that “we had politicians making military decisions” and that presidents should set the goals and “allow the military to come up with the plans to achieve the objective.”³¹ Two of Bush’s key advisers, Vice President Richard Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, had been officials in the Nixon-Ford administrations. There is evidence from their careers in the three decades after the Vietnam War that the American defeat in Vietnam led them to a preoccupation with reestablishing and maintaining U.S. military power.³² Faced with a global threat to U.S. security in the form of radical Islamic terrorism that recalled the Cold War-era threat from an armed and radical foe, these leaders led the United States again into a military intervention in a regional political conflict to deter this global danger and defend American ideals.

Most historians, however, remain persuaded by the orthodox argument that American power failed in Vietnam because American purposes and interests were not accurately aligned with the his-

torical conditions in Southeast Asia after World War II. As historian Lloyd Gardner has written, in the Vietnam War the “victims were primarily the Vietnamese, and its victors were the Vietnamese. . . . The reality of Vietnam was as elusive to American policymakers as the enemy forces were to the men they sent to this hall of mirrors.”³³ The logic of the liberal-realist view of the American war in Vietnam is that it could have and should have been avoided. Long before the American war in Iraq began, Herring reflected on the Vietnam War as an example of how intervention in the “poisonous tangle of local politics” can be complicated, costly, and not easily resolved. The policy history of the American experience in Vietnam offers no easy lessons but is a graphic caution. It stands, in Herring’s view, “as an enduring testament to the pitfalls of interventionism and the limits of power.”³⁴ Vietnam presented an instructive example of the tragic result when strategists fail to define the specific interests at stake, the real cost involved, and thus the reasonable form of any intervention in a violent regional conflict. There should be no more Vietnam. 

31. Quoted in David L. Anderson, “One Vietnam War Should Be Enough and Other Reflections on Diplomatic History and the Making of Foreign Policy,” *Diplomatic History* 30 (January 2006): 8.

32. James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush’s War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004), 52; Marilyn B. Young, “Still Stuck in the Big Muddy,” in *Cold War Triumphalism: The Misuse of History after the Fall of Communism*, ed. Ellen Schrecker (New York: The New Press, 2004), 262-73.

33. Lloyd Gardner, “Hall of Mirrors,” in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, 240. See also David L. Anderson, *The Vietnam War* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 123-28.

34. Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 4th ed., 358.