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Vietnam: Historians at War

Mark Moyar

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By the early 1990s, when I began studying the Vietnam War, the American public had largely lost interest in the history of that conflict. The Civil War and World War II were the wars that historians were advised to cover if they wanted to reach the public. Among government officials, military officers, and political scientists, Vietnam was considered irrelevant, because the United States would never get caught in protracted counterinsurgency warfare again. Iraq changed all that. Ever since the outbreak of insurgency in the former empire of Saddam Hussein, people of all persuasions have been mining the history of Vietnam for information that will support their preferred Iraq policies. Hundreds of thousands of American troops sent to Iraq and Afghanistan have received more instruction on Vietnam than on any other historical subject.

Although more than thirty years have passed since the end of the Vietnam War, historians today are as divided on what happened as the American people were during the war itself. During the 1960s and 1970s, huge numbers of antiwar Americans entered academia and the media, while few Vietnam veterans and other supporters of the war obtained jobs in those professions, in many cases because veteran status or pro-war sentiments were considered unacceptable. As a result, most academic and journalistic accounts of the war written during and shortly afterwards depicted Vietnam as a bad war that the United States should not have fought. Antiwar history of the Vietnam War thus acquired the label of “orthodox” history.

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A small group of veterans and academic historians who rejected the fundamental tenets of the antiwar movement were, from the beginning, producing works that became known as “revisionist.” Over time, the number of revisionists would increase, but the movement has never made major inroads into academia. Some academics have attempted to explain that fact by arguing that revisionists are irrational or dimwitted. David L. Anderson, the president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations and an orthodox historian of the Vietnam War, stated in his 2005 presidential address that revisionists interpret the war based on an “uncritical acceptance” of American cold war policy rather than analysis of the facts, whereas orthodox historians rely exclusively on “reasoned analysis” in reaching their conclusions.¹ Some orthodox scholars have maintained that the revisionists’ primary ambition is not to find the truth but to twist the facts of the Vietnam War to justify contemporary wars or other policies. University of Iowa history professor Colin Gordon, for example, said with respect to revisionists and those who based foreign policy decisions on their interpretations, “History is temporarily useful to those who willfully misinterpret it, but genuinely useful only to those who make an effort to understand it. The historical memory of recent American foreign policy is shallow, cynical and selective. It shapes the past for present purposes, retrieving only those historical fragments which reinforce present assumptions.”²

While such comments may hold some truth with respect to a few individuals, they most definitely do not apply to the most prominent of the revisionists. Why, then, do historians keep making them? A leading possibility is the ideological imbalance among today’s academic history departments. History faculty tirelessly profess commitment to “diversity,” but within their own ranks one finds near uniformity of political sentiment. For example, at the University of Iowa history department, of which Professor Gordon is the chair, Democrats outnumber Republicans 27 to 0.³ As analysts

¹David L. Anderson, “One Vietnam War Should Be Enough and Other Reflections on Diplomatic History and the Making of Foreign Policy” (address, annual meeting of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, College Park, MD, June 24, 2005); reprinted in *Diplomatic History*, 30, no. 1 (2006): 1–21. See also Robert Buzzanco, “Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock: How I Learned to Quit Worrying and Love Vietnam and Iraq,” *Counterpunch*, 16–17 April 2005.

²Colin Gordon, “The Cloak of Power,” *New Internationalist* (September 1993), <http://www.newint.org/issue247/cloak.htm>.

³Mark Bauerlein, “History Department at U of I Flunks Test of Political Diversity,” *Des Moines Register*, 10 October 2007.

of group-think have observed, people in such environments are led toward the conclusion that every reasonable person shares their views, and hence any outsider who disagrees is not reasonable. Historians who oppose the orthodoxy on Vietnam, or on other politically-charged subjects like Soviet espionage in America or feminism are likely to be received by these departments as if they were crank propagandists or foolish eccentrics.

Another problem that impedes the study of Vietnam is a politically correct contraction of allowable inquiry. Within history departments, there is a generally recognized spectrum of subject matter respectability. At its left end, denoting maximum political correctness, lies the history of race, class, and gender. Between that end and the center lie such fields as cultural history, immigration history, and environmental history. At the other end of the spectrum political history stands at moderate incorrectness, diplomatic history at serious incorrectness, and military history at maximum incorrectness. As a result, military history has suffered more than any other field at the hands of the radicals, with military history jobs disappearing from most history departments as soon as their elderly military historians retire.

Political correctness has also banished certain crucial ideas from the academic discussion of Vietnam. When a revisionist contends that the Vietnamese had an authoritarian political culture that allowed strong men like Ho Chi Minh to thrive and made democracy unfeasible, orthodox professors often hurl accusations ranging from insensitivity to racism. The only instance in which authoritarian cultures may be discussed is Iraq—the existence of an authoritarian culture in Iraq can be used to highlight the foolishness of George Bush's invasion of that country.

Another weakness of the contemporary university that affects the study of the Vietnam War is excessive compartmentalization. When it became fashionable several decades ago for historians to focus on niche topics, proponents argued that this research would shed new light on big historical questions. That may have been true in certain cases, but the overall effect has been to reduce interest in the big questions and drive historians into compartments that bear little relation to each other except for their political ideology.

The diplomatic historians who study the Vietnam War often gravitate toward niche topics, such as the role of American universities in Vietnam, Vietnamese and American ideas of nation building, or the operations of the

National Security Council.⁴ Those who address the broad policies of the United States or other great powers usually give only cursory treatment to events in Vietnam or the rest of Southeast Asia.⁵ Yet one often cannot pass sound judgment on decisions in Washington without knowing the details in Southeast Asia. Historians of Vietnam who cover the war tend to focus on narrow issues of culture and politics and avoid strategy or warfare.⁶ Knowing what is most important in culture and politics in wartime is impossible without knowing the strategic and military context. Studies of the American media in Vietnam generally devote little attention to South Vietnamese culture and politics.⁷ Yet it is wrong to judge the American press or American press policies without understanding South Vietnamese politics and culture.

Some compartmentalized historians would respond to the foregoing by contending that they can get the necessary contextual information from the many wider histories that have already been written about Vietnam. When I began working on a broad history of Vietnam, I was told more than once by publishers and other scholars that there was no need for another broad history because people like David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, and Stanley Karnow had already written everything that needed to be written about the political and military events.

Therein lies one of the worst problems concerning the study of the Vietnam War—the uncritical acceptance of the “big picture” presented in

⁴John Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998); Edward Miller, “Grand Designs: Vision, Power and Nation Building in America’s Alliance with Ngo Dinh Diem, 1954–1960” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2004); Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). This note and most of the other notes contain only a representative sample of sources, for the great volume of Vietnam books renders a comprehensive listing impractical in an article of this size.

⁵Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); David E. Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁶Kim N. B. Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Shawn Frederick McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).

⁷William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962–1968* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988); William Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War: David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Peter Arnett—Young War Correspondents and Their Early Vietnam Battles* (New York: Times Books, 1995).

dated and dubious writings. Most of what today is considered the conventional wisdom originated with the triumvirate of Halberstam, Sheehan, and Karnow, journalists who reported on the war as it was happening and afterwards wrote best-selling books. Halberstam began writing books well before the others, publishing *The Making of a Quagmire* in 1964, *Ho* in 1971, and *The Best and the Brightest*, which sold more than a million copies, in 1972.⁸ Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History*, published in 1983, also sold over one million copies and was accompanied by a multivolume PBS documentary that attracted Ken Burns-size audiences.⁹ Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie* arrived in 1988 and promptly won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.¹⁰ All three of these journalists were entertaining writers, and awful historians.

The narrative that emerged from their books is relatively straightforward. The United States was wrong to fight the war, the story goes, for American policymakers mistook Ho Chi Minh for a member of an international Communist conspiracy when in reality he was merely a proud nationalist who disdained his Chinese Communist neighbors. American leaders were completely ignorant of South Vietnam and mindlessly optimistic about progress in the war. America's South Vietnamese allies were corrupt and cowardly, in contrast to the patriotic and dedicated North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. The only real American heroes of the war were the reporters and the few servicemen who recognized that the enterprise was doomed from the start.

Some prominent journalists criticized Halberstam, Sheehan, and Karnow from the early stages of the war. In a September 1963 article, Joseph Alsop likened the American correspondents in Saigon to the American journalists of the 1940s who had denigrated Chiang Kai-Shek and praised Mao Tse-Tung as a "great and humane man," as well as to Herbert Matthews, the reporter who had idealized Fidel Castro during the Cuban revolution. Alsop accused these reporters of portraying the situation in unduly negative terms, asserting that "it is easy enough to paint a dark, indignant picture, without departing from the facts, if you ignore the majority of Americans who admire

⁸David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: An Uncomplimentary Account of Our Precarious Commitment in South Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1965); *Ho* (New York: Random House, 1971); *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972).

⁹Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983).

¹⁰Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988).

the Vietnamese as fighters and seek out the one U.S. officer in ten who inevitably thinks all foreigners fight badly.”¹¹

Marguerite Higgins, who had become the first female war correspondent to win the Pulitzer Prize for her reporting on the Korean War, found that Halberstam’s articles contained many glaring inaccuracies, most of which were intended to tarnish the image of South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem. After Higgins authored a string of *New York Herald Tribune* stories eviscerating various claims Halberstam had made in the *New York Times*, an editor at the *Times* went so far as to send Halberstam a letter stating: “Some of what she has been writing would tend to balance the material we have been getting from Saigon recently....I am sure that you will take care of this aspect of the Vietnamese story as soon as you can.” The letter prompted Halberstam to shoot back, “If you send me one more cable referring to that woman’s copy you will have my resignation forthwith by return cable and I mean it repeat mean it.”¹² Higgins went on to write a terrific book entitled *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, which was published in 1965.

Unfortunately, Higgins’s book did not achieve the popularity of the books by Halberstam, Sheehan, and Karnow, and within a few years it faded into obscurity. One reason is that she contracted black fever and died shortly after the book was published. Another is that the turn of the American intelligentsia against the war in the late 1960s made Higgins’s views into the most dangerous sort of heresy.

The orthodox historians of the late 1970s and 1980s largely adhered to the narrative passed down by Halberstam, Sheehan, and Karnow. Histories covering John F. Kennedy’s presidency echoed the journalists in depicting South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem as a hopeless reactionary whose tyranny deprived the South Vietnamese government of legitimacy and whose discrimination against Buddhists brought his government to a much-deserved ruin.¹³ Those covering Lyndon Johnson’s presidency repeated the view that America’s vital interests were not at stake in Vietnam and that the war could not have been won by any means and hence Johnson should not have

¹¹Joseph Alsop, “The Crusaders,” *Washington Post*, 23 September 1963.

¹²Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War*, 397–98.

¹³George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (New York: Wiley, 1979); William J. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam* (New York: Scribner, 1985); William C. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships*, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

intervened in 1965.¹⁴ Some of the histories modified the image of Johnson and other top figures as documentary evidence made clear that the media's portrayal of these figures were gross caricatures, but these changes did not alter the main features of the narrative. Rather, they augmented it and were incorporated into the books by Karnow and Sheehan.¹⁵

Historians who addressed American military performance accused the U.S. military of fighting unlawfully and unsuccessfully against a wily adversary that regularly outwitted it, and they alleged that the war inflicted long-term psychological damage on huge numbers of American veterans.¹⁶ These claims made the war appear even more reprehensible, which also made draft dodging appear more sensible. Nothing was said about the psychological impact on the enemy, enhancing the impression that the North Vietnamese did no wrong in sending hundreds of thousands of young men to die in countless military defeats in South Vietnam.

A small but strong group of revisionist books emerged during this same period. Although a substantial proportion of their authors had doctorates, few had permanent academic appointments, and the only one of those who worked in a history department was employed in Britain, which has not been as badly afflicted by faculty politicization as the United States. Robert F. Turner, a Vietnam veteran and Hoover Institution fellow who later obtained a non-tenured position at the University of Virginia Law School, disputed the portrayal of the Vietnamese Communists as devoted nationalists in his book *Vietnamese Communism: Its Origins and Development*.¹⁷ In an international history of the war, distinguished British professor Ralph Smith argued that Vietnamese Communism posed a serious threat to the United States and hence the United States was right in trying to hold the line in South Vietnam.¹⁸ Norman Podhoretz, the American pundit, made the same

¹⁴William Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Short Political and Military History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986); Herring, *America's Longest War*.

¹⁵Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982); George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

¹⁶Loren Baritz, *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (New York: William Morrow, 1985); James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).

¹⁷Robert Turner, *Vietnamese Communism: Its Origins and Development* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1975).

¹⁸Ralph B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, vol. 2 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

argument in a work geared more for the public than academia.¹⁹ The works of Ellen Hammer and William Colby, an American scholar living in France and a former CIA director, respectively, charged that South Vietnam was viable under Ngo Dinh Diem and that the United States erred catastrophically in encouraging his overthrow.²⁰ Reiterating points made during the war by senior U.S. military officers, veterans like Harry Summers and former politicians like Richard Nixon argued that the war could have been won had the United States taken more aggressive military actions, such as severing the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos and bombing North Vietnam massively from the start instead of escalating the bombing gradually.²¹ A different group, led by a military officer with a Ph.D. named Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., concluded that the war could have been won had the United States been more delicate, rather than more forceful. According to the Krepinevich school, the United States focused on fighting a conventional war in the hinterlands because the U.S. military had been designed to fight such a war, when in fact much greater attention should have been given to securing the populous areas.²²

The most influential of the early revisionist books was Guenter Lewy's *America and Vietnam*, the only work of its vintage that remains highly important to historians today.²³ Of Lewy's many contributions, his greatest was the refutation of antiwar arguments about the immorality, inhumanity, and illegality of American military actions in Vietnam. A political science professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Lewy never received the open acclaim from academia or the media that he deserved, but he effected great changes to the war's history in quiet ways. After the appearance of his book, countless fashionable antiwar arguments stopped

¹⁹Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).

²⁰Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987); William Colby with James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989).

²¹Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982); Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985); Norman B. Hannah, *The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1987); Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam At War: The History, 1945–1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988).

²²Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

²³Guenter Lewy, *America and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

appearing in the articles and books written by those who continued to adhere to the antiwar orthodoxy.

Since 1990, the quality of scholarship, both orthodox and revisionist, has improved as more documentation has become available and scholars have been able to make use of previous discoveries. The orthodox history, however, has not ventured very far from the Halberstam-Sheehan-Karnow narrative. Much of that narrative has continued to evade serious questioning from orthodox historians, who have preferred to remain focused on a fairly narrow set of questions. Orthodox scholars have continued to assert that Vietnam was not strategically important without examining most of the relevant information that has become available. In one of the most celebrated of recent orthodox histories, Cornell University history professor Fredrik Logevall announced that most scholars, himself included, consider it “axiomatic” that the United States erred in deciding to intervene in Vietnam.²⁴ The United States did not need to fight Ho Chi Minh, proponents of the orthodoxy still maintain, because he would have become an Asian Tito had the Americans not pestered him.²⁵ Hanoi’s dedication to conquering the South, they add, ensured that no American strategy would have succeeded.²⁶ For orthodox scholars, Ngo Dinh Diem remains a poor leader who senselessly antagonized his people.²⁷ The portrayal of American veterans as perpetrators of horrible actions during the war and psychological wrecks after the war has continued.²⁸

The areas that have received the greatest attention recently from orthodox historians possess considerable historical significance but relatively minor import in the orthodox-revisionist debate. Amongst prominent orthodox

²⁴Logevall, *Choosing War*, xiii.

²⁵James R. Arnold, *The First Domino: Eisenhower, the Military, and America’s Intervention in Vietnam* (New York: Morrow, 1991); Arnold R. Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion: America’s Descent into Vietnam* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

²⁶Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Schulzinger, *A Time for War*; Jeffrey Record, *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998).

²⁷David L. Anderson, *Trapped By Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); 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); Howard Jones, *The Death of A Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²⁸Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Jonathan Shays, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Atheneum, 1994).

historians there is an ongoing debate over whether Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam had he not been assassinated.²⁹ They also disagree about why Johnson intervened.³⁰ Their biases and lack of knowledge on other aspects of the war, however, have allowed revisionists to overtake them on these topics. The most lasting orthodox contributions since 1990, therefore, are books of even narrower scope. Although largely wrong about the big picture, these books provide some valuable small pictures. Clemson history professor Edwin Moïse unearthed a large amount of new information on the Tonkin Gulf incidents,³¹ and George Herring, who recently retired from the University of Kentucky history department, did the same for Lyndon Johnson's relations with the U.S. military.³² Harold P. Ford, a former CIA officer, incorporated into his history documents that are not normally available to researchers.³³ In a relatively favorable history of Ngo Dinh Diem's nation-building enterprises, Professor Philip Catton of Stephen F. Austin State University went the farthest in challenging conventional views without chopping down the overarching tenets of the orthodox school.³⁴

Some other valuable books have provided new insights into smaller matters while largely steering clear of the big points of disagreement between orthodox and revisionist historians. Of these, several of the best have incorporated important evidence from Soviet and Chinese archives to illuminate the roles of

²⁹Recent histories alleging that Kennedy was planning to withdraw from Vietnam include John M. Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York: Warner Books, 1992); Jones, *Death of a Generation*; Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Opponents of the withdrawal thesis include Larry Berman, "NSAM 263 and NSAM 273: Manipulating History," in Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gittinger, eds., *Vietnam: The Early Decisions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 177–203; Noam Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot: JFK, the Vietnam War, and US Political Culture* (Boston: South End Press, 1993); Logevall, *Choosing War*.

³⁰Compare, for example, Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995); Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961–1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Logevall, *Choosing War*; Kaiser, *American Tragedy*.

³¹Edwin Moïse, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

³²George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

³³Harold P. Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962–1968* (Langley, VA: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998).

³⁴Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

the Soviet Union and China.³⁵ Studies of other countries and regions have enhanced understanding of the international dimensions of the war.³⁶ As Vietnamese and French sources have become more accessible, new publications on Vietnamese Communism have appeared.³⁷ Recent biographies of American leaders have brought new discoveries on strategic decision-making.³⁸

The recent revisionist histories, in contrast to some earlier revisionist works, have generally been backed by voluminous research, captured in numerous footnotes. Although not all of their authors are excellent scholars, they are generally more rigorous in their analysis than their orthodox counterparts, because they are so often challenged that they have become adept at anticipating and countering contrary assertions. Because experience has given revisionists a better understanding of the importance of wrestling with differently minded people, they have also been much more willing than orthodox historians to invite the opposing side to conferences they organize.

The lengthiest contribution of recent revisionism, coming in at over eleven hundred pages, is Arthur Dommen's *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam*. Dommen had worked as a journalist in Vietnam and Laos during the war, but, as the length of his book indicates, he was closer to a scholar than a journalist by temperament, and after the war obtained a Ph.D. in agricultural economics. Having spent many years gathering information, including a considerable amount on the Vietnamese side, Dommen shot some sizeable holes in the Halberstam-Sheehan-Karnow account. He highlighted nefarious aspects of Vietnamese Communism that orthodox historians had

³⁵Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Ilya V. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954–1963* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

³⁶Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted. Gittinger, eds., *International Perspectives on Vietnam* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999); Ronald Bruce Frankum, *The United States and Australia in Vietnam, 1954–1968: Silent Partners* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001); Christopher Goscha and Maurice Vaïsse, *La guerre du Vietnam et l'Europe, 1963–1973* (Bruxelles: Bruylant, 2003); Thomas Alan Schwartz, *LBJ and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

³⁷William J. Duiker, *The Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994); Ang Cheng Guan, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years, 1919–1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

³⁸Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); Anne Blair, *Lodge in Vietnam: A Patriot Abroad* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Lewis Sorley, *Honorable Warrior: General Harold K. Johnson and the Ethics of Command* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

missed or ignored, and concluded that Vietnamese nationalists like Ngo Dinh Diem offered a viable alternative to Communism. He was also among the first to note that the Buddhist protesters, whose charges of religious oppression crippled the South Vietnamese government from 1963 to 1965, had fabricated evidence of oppression and were more concerned with gaining political power than religious freedom.³⁹

Col. H.R. McMaster, a highly distinguished U.S. Army officer who holds a Ph.D. in history, attracted much attention with his 1997 book *Dereliction of Duty*, in which he showed that Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara disregarded and abused the Joint Chiefs of Staff at a time when they had much sounder ideas on American strategy than the civilian leadership did.⁴⁰ In the late 1990s, Francis X. Winters, a professor emeritus at the Georgetown University Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, and Geoffrey Shaw, a Canadian with a Ph.D. who has been unable to land a tenure-track position, further advanced the interpretations of Ellen Hammer and William Colby on the Diem government and the 1963 coup.⁴¹ Think tank fellow Michael Lind of the New America Foundation and political scientist C. Dale Walton of the University of Reading offered strong challenges to the conventional wisdom, although they did less historical research than other revisionists because they were policy analysts by background rather than historians. Lind's book was particularly strong on the domino theory, demonstrating that there really was an international Communist conspiracy to take Vietnam and then other countries in succession.⁴² Walton concluded that the United States would have done much better had it chosen different strategic options.⁴³

As with orthodox historians, revisionists have tended to focus on select aspects of the conflict rather than covering the war holistically. In designing my recent book, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965*, I sought

³⁹Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

⁴⁰H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

⁴¹Francis X. Winters, *The Year of the Hare: America in Vietnam, January 25, 1963–February 15, 1964* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997); Geoffrey Shaw, "Ambassador Frederick Nolting's Role in American Diplomatic and Military Policy toward the Government of South Vietnam" (Ph.D. diss., University of Manitoba, 1999).

⁴²Michael Lind, *Vietnam, The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

⁴³C. Dale Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable U.S. Defeat in Vietnam* (London: Frank Cass, 2002).

to fill the gap by analyzing every significant facet of the war, from military to diplomatic to political to social, and every country that had a significant influence on the war, of which there were many. Because too few reliable histories had been written previously, I relied almost entirely on primary sources for information, which required much more time than the research for the average general history but also yielded many more discoveries than I would otherwise have found. Some of my research produced solid evidence for assertions that other revisionists had made previously but without supporting facts, for instance the commitment of Ho Chi Minh to global Communist revolution or the feasibility of severing the North Vietnamese supply routes through Laos, the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail. Other parts revealed new facts that have forced alteration of central interpretations, such as the remarkable success of South Vietnam's counterinsurgency initiatives in 1962 and 1963, or the strong support for American intervention in Vietnam among the other nations of Asia and Oceania.⁴⁴

Some of the most important discoveries involved the behavior of Halberstam, Sheehan, and Karnow during the war and its impact on what they later wrote in their best-selling books. In 1963, unlike later, the American journalists in Vietnam generally favored U.S. involvement in Vietnam, but believed that South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem had to be replaced because he was not liberal enough in handling the press and non-Communist oppositionists, especially Buddhist protesters who were calling for huge concessions from the government. They disbelieved Diem's assertion that the Communists had infiltrated the Buddhists, an assertion that the Communists, much later, admitted to be true.

In the fall of 1963, Halberstam, Sheehan, and Karnow publicly derided the Diem government and suggested that South Vietnam would be better off if Diem were removed from power. Both South Vietnamese and American officials, they claimed, desired the ousting of Diem. Their reporting relied heavily upon biased and dishonest sources, including two who, unbeknownst to the reporters, were Vietnamese Communist agents. Translated rapidly into Vietnamese, their anti-Diem stories were read by the Vietnamese elites, who mistakenly thought they were expressions of official U.S. policy. These articles did much to convince both South Vietnamese generals and U.S. ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge that Diem had to go, and that replacing

⁴⁴Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Diem would lead to major improvements in the war effort. Those generals, with Lodge's blessing, overthrew and murdered Diem on November 2, 1963.

Instead of improving the war effort, however, the coup resulted in a dramatic downturn, for the new leaders were weak and purged huge numbers of good officers for their past loyalty to Diem. Halberstam, Sheehan, and Karnow now faced accusations that they had helped wreck the South Vietnamese government. They cunningly devised a defense that deflected the criticism and profoundly influenced everything they, and many others, wrote thereafter. They asserted that the South Vietnamese war effort had been ruined before Diem's death, something they had not claimed before the coup, and therefore their support for overthrowing Diem made little difference. Later, they would use this point to argue that the war was hopeless from the beginning, for in the latter stages of the war they backed away from their earlier support of American intervention and, in Halberstam's case, denied that they had ever supported it. By sifting through masses of American and North Vietnamese documents as well as American press reports, I determined that South Vietnam was actually winning the war until Diem's death, and began losing as soon as he was gone.

The books by Halberstam, Sheehan, Karnow and nearly every other orthodox author concentrated on the period from the division of Vietnam in 1954 to the Tet Offensive of 1968, providing minimal coverage of the years 1969 to 1975. Revisionists began fixing that problem in the late 1990s with histories arguing that the South Vietnamese government grew much stronger during this period and that by the early 1970s it had, with the help of the United States, wiped out the Viet Cong insurgents. In my first book, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, I examined how South Vietnamese and American forces destroyed the insurgency at the village level, and showed that the counterinsurgency programs supported by the United States were not the exercises in indiscriminate murder of antiwar legend.⁴⁵ Lewis Sorley, a veteran of the U.S. Army and the CIA who also has a Ph.D. but no academic affiliation, addressed both the regular and irregular elements of the war during its latter years in his book *A Better War*. As American forces gradually withdrew, Sorley showed, South Vietnamese forces improved to such a degree that they were able to defeat a massive offensive by fourteen North

⁴⁵Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: The CIA's Secret Campaign to Destroy the Viet Cong* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997); Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam*, new ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

Vietnamese divisions in the spring of 1972—an event that orthodox historians have almost completely ignored.⁴⁶ These revelations have bolstered the interpretation of some earlier revisionists that South Vietnam was a viable country and could have survived had the United States not cut aid to the South Vietnamese government in the war's final years.

B.G. Burkett, a Vietnam veteran and a stockbroker by profession, demolished most of the mythology surrounding Vietnam veterans in one fell swoop. Burkett's book, *Stolen Valor*, extraordinary for both its detailed research and its nationwide popularity, revealed that several hundred supposed Vietnam veterans in the public spotlight were frauds. Many of these false veterans had appeared on TV and in books to recount stories of atrocities and psychological injuries, providing the evidence desired by antiwar historians. In addition, Burkett used statistics and detective work to disprove long-held generalizations of orthodox historians about Vietnam veterans, such as that these veterans had much higher rates of unemployment, homelessness, and suicide than non-veterans.⁴⁷

Slowly but surely, the revisionist view is gaining ground. The official reading lists of the U.S. armed forces are peppered with books by revisionists. In recent speeches, President Bush has invoked some revisionist arguments. Substantial elements of the American media have espoused or provided a forum for revisionism. Only among college faculties are there large blocs of people who still refuse to give serious consideration to revisionists and try to prevent others from hearing what the revisionists have to say. Of course, these faculties have not yet caught up with the rest of humanity in fully accepting the ramifications of Soviet Communism's collapse, so one should expect that a good deal more time must pass before the truth will permeate their corridors.

⁴⁶Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999).

⁴⁷B.G. Burkett, *Stolen Valor* (Dallas: Verity Press, 1998).