IN SEARCH OF LESSONS:

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A VIETNAM HISTORIOGRAPHY

by

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No event in American history has inspired so many didactic pages as has the Vietnam War. Contributors include an array of journalists, academics, politicos, participants, moralists, philosophers, and protesters from every part of the political spectrum. From the first, a quest for "the lessons of Vietnam" dominated the literature. Most will agree that time and distance are prerequisites for dispassionate, definitive assessments; but the nation, caught up in one of its most divisive experiences, could not afford to wait 20 or 30 years before confronting the meaning, the lessons, and the implications of the Indochina entanglement. The history and meaning of Vietnam evolved in stages as events unfolded. Looking back, we can define these stages, focus upon the debates and prevailing issues of each period, and trace the evolution of the Vietnam historiography. Vietnam literature suffered from all the ills of "presentism" and "instant history," and much of the work was of marginal or transient value, but a portion will stand the test of time. Today, as we enter an era of serious scholarly reflection on the Vietnam experience, it appears instructive to survey the development of the Vietnam historiography with its emphasis upon meanings and lessons.

Until the early 1960's, few Americans had heard of Vietnam. Only the most politically aware knew of the French Indochina War or of America's increasing involvement with the Diem regime. Dr. Thomas Dooley's *Deliver Us From Evil: The Story of Vietnam's Flight to Freedom* (1956) was a bestseller, but readers related more to the courage and humanity of the young doctor, his emphatic anti-communism, and the plight of the poor and "backward" peoples of the world than to the political dynamics of the area.

English language scholarship on Vietnam was limited. The exhaustive bibliography of Austrian Joseph Buttinger's *The Smaller Dragon* (1958), a survey of Vietnam's history to the 20th century, contained 600 titles, including 490 in French and less than 100 in English. American students of Vietnam were rare. Few existed other than Ellen B. Hammer and French expatriate Bernard B. Fall, authors of excellent books on the French Indochina War, and Wesley Fishel and Roy Jumper, participants in the Michigan State University team of advisors to the Diem government.

As American involvement in the war increased in the early 60's, the literature grew proportionally. Many of the early books on US participation came from the first generation of American war correspondents in Saigon. Journalists Malcolm Browne, David Halberstam, and Robert Shaplen, and former diplomats John Mecklin, Robert Scigliano, and Victor Bator were critical of the Diem regime, internal Vietnamese politics, and American optimism in the face of increasing political turmoil. An Australian journalist of the left, Wilfred G. Burchett, began a series of tracts on American "neo-colonialism" in Vietnam which unswervingly echoed the Hanoi line. On the other side of the coin, conservative journalists Marguerite Higgins, Anthony T. Bouscaren, and

Australian Denis Warner staunchly supported Diem and advocated greater American commitment.

Bernard Fall emerged as the foremost American scholar on Vietnam. Although he became increasingly disenchanted with American policy, he did not lose his concern for the fighting men in the field. Just as he had gone into combat with the French legionnaires in the early 1950's, Fall often went on operations with American troops. In February 1967, on a mission with the Marines in the Central Highlands, he was killed by a land mine. Fall's death was tragic, for his perspective, reason, and moderation were unfortunately rare. His several books remain the best studies available on Vietnamese society and politics in the 50's and early 60's.

As American participation in the war escalated in 1965, the literature became more polemical. A new generation of "radical revisionist" historians and social scientists, dedicated to the use of scholarship for political purposes, were gaining stature in academia. To these new activist scholars—the New Left, as they came to be called—history should be employed for present purposes. Doyen of the New Left scholars, William Appleman Williams, asserted that history's great value was to help "formulate relevant and reasoned alternatives." Staughton Lynd averred that "the past is ransacked not for its own sake, but as a source of alternative models of what the future might become." Howard Zinn wanted "neither the gibberish of total recall nor the nostalgia of fond memories; we would like the past to speak wisely to our present needs."[1]

More traditional scholars warned of the dangers inherent in this approach. Otis Graham complained that often "a scholar is so influenced by contemporary political pressures . . . that he distorts the past for present purposes," and he reflected that "too many scholars go to the past as a Hanging Judge . . . and flawed history is almost invariably the result." Adam Ulam noted that many who call themselves historians might be moralists or publicists, but because they fail the test of objectivity they are not really historians in the truest sense. Political scientist Hans Morganthau proclaimed, "I cannot escape the impression that historians tend to read more meaning into history than the historic events will support."[2]

The New Left read much meaning into history and produced a large volume of literature on Vietnam. Although full of sound and fury, little of this writing will stand the test of time. The radical analysis suffered from hasty conclusions and superficial evidence. Leading New Left spokesmen such as Tom Hayden, Staughton Lynd, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Mary McCarthy, David Horowitz, and Daniel Berrigan considered American involvement a product of the racist, imperialist, chauvinist tendencies of a capitalist power struggling to suppress leftist ascendancy and maintain global hegemony. While they vilified Johnson, Nixon, and other political leaders, the radicals believed that Vietnam represented far more than the errors and caprices of policymakers: Vietnams were endemic to the American political economy itself. Less extreme views existed on the left as well. Sandy Vogelgesang's *The Long Dark Night of the Soul: The Intellectual Left and the Vietnam War* (1974) categorizes the various groups and portrays the evolution of their protests.

Liberal antiwar critics were as vociferous as the radicals and nearly as caustic. Liberals offered the major challenge to American Vietnam policy. Although there was no consensus among them, liberals tended to view the war simply as a mistake—the product of incorrect premises, wrong decisions, errors, misperceptions, a weak policy process, poor leadership, or bungling. Many originally supported the war. Some, such as Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. in *The Bitter Heritage* (1966), argued that the US stumbled into the morass. Others, such as Daniel Ellsberg in *Papers on the War* (1972), found American actions more purposeful and calculated, if erroneous. Early major liberal critiques included Theodore Draper's *Abuse of Power* (1966), William Fulbright's *The Arrogance of Power* (1966), Harrison Salisbury's *Behind the Lines—Hanoi* (1967), Ward Just's *To What End* (1968), Ernest

Gruening and Herbert Beaser's *Vietnam Folly* (1968), Henry Brandon's *Anatomy of Error* (1969), Townsend Hoopes' *The Limits of Intervention* (1969), and Robert Shaplen's *The Lost Revolution* (1965) and *The Road From War* (1970).

The first two "texts" on the Vietnam War pursued the liberal "mistake" thesis. *The United States in Vietnam* (1967) by George M. Kahin and John W. Lewis chronicled the corruption, authoritarianism, and ineptitude of the South Vietnamese Government, and the myths, misperceptions, and failures of American policy. Joseph Buttinger's two-volume *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled* (1967), which brought his Vietnam history forward from *The Smaller Dragon*, did the same. In 1968, Buttinger condensed the three volumes into *Vietnam: A Political History*, a useful 500-page survey.

Studies on the origins of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement and hence the roots of the conflict, by scholars such as Paul Mus, John T. McAlister, Jean Lacouture, Dennis Duncanson, Alexander Woodside, Jean Sainteny, David G. Marr, William J. Duiker, and Robert L. Sansom, cannot be fitted neatly into categories; but they all challenged Johnson's and Nixon's explanations of the war as simplistic, pointing up American misunderstanding of the underlying forces in Vietnam.

Jonathan Schell's *Village of Ben Suc* (1967) and *The Military Half* (1968), Harvey Meyerson's *Vinh Long* (1970), Jeffrey Race's *War Comes to Long An* (1972), and F. J. West's *The Village* (1972) are tales of mistaken policy, failure, and tragic consequences. Susan Sheehan's *Ten Vietnamese* (1967), Don Luce and John Sommer's *Vietnam: The Unheard Voices* (1969), and Daniel Lang's *Casualties of War* (1969) are emotional and often moving accounts of the war's painful impact upon the Vietnamese. Donald Zagoria's *Vietnam Triangle* (1967) explores Hanoi's relations with her Soviet and Chinese allies.

The theme of the war's lessons is also prominent in the more specialized accounts of the era. Joseph C. Goulden's *Truth is the First Casualty: The Gulf of Tonkin Affair—Illusion and Reality* (1969), Gordon Winchey's *Tonkin Gulf* (1971), and Anthony Austin's *The President's War: The Story of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and How the Nation was Trapped in Vietnam* (1971) raise questions about whether the Tonkin affair was exploited to deepen the American commitment. David Krasłow and Stuart Loory trace the several *sub rosa* peace attempts in *The Secret Search for Peace in Vietnam* (1968); Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff in *The Air War in Indochina* (1972) assemble a group of essays challenging the validity of the bombing policy; Don Oberdorfer's *Tet!* (1971) is a first-rate journalistic treatment of the 1968 communist offensive; and Richard Boyle's *The Flower of the Dragon* (1972) is one of the better examples of a large literature on the impairment of the American military in the post-Tet period.

The My Lai massacre, which occurred during Tet 1968, raised more questions, anguish, and debate, thus evoking more lessons of the war, than any other single event. Seymour Hersh's *My Lai Four* (1970) and *Cover-Up* (1971); Richard Hammer's *One Morning in the War* (1970); the *Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigation into the My Lai Incident* (1970), known as the Peers Report; and *The My Lai Massacre and Cover-Up*

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(1976) edited by Joseph Goldstein et al., tell the story. Retired Lieutenant General W. R. Peers' *The My Lai Inquiry* (1979) is now the definitive account of that tragic episode. Telford Taylor's *Nuremburg and Vietnam* (1970); *Crimes of War* (1971) edited by Richard A. Falk, Gabriel Kolko, and Robert Jay Lifton; Falk's four-volume *The Vietnam War and International Law* (1967-76); John N. Moore's *Law and the Indo-China War* (1972); and the postwar collection edited by Peter D. Trooboff, *Law and Responsibility in Warfare: The Vietnam Experience* (1975), discuss war crimes in larger context.

Among the hundreds of books of this era, two stand out as Vietnam classics. Each was somewhat premature and each has flaws, but each develops a sophisticated interpretation of America's entanglement and addresses the lessons of the experience. David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* (1972) explains America's descent into the Vietnam quagmire as the legacy of a cold-war mentality shared by a cadre of policy elites who, like the Presidents they served, suffered from idealism, machismo, hubris, and an excessively optimistic "can do" attitude. These intellectual, driving, success-oriented managers, "the best and the brightest" that the nation had to offer, believed unflaggingly that commitment and will would bring success. American policy, according to Halberstam, was neither sinister nor self-seeking; rather it was mechanistic, incremental, and sanguine. The rationale was that of always pursuing "the next logical step." Interwoven among the author's biographical glimpses of policy elites and his fascinating vignettes, which make the book one of the most readable on Vietnam, Halberstam's lessons are clear. The book is an indictment of the cold-war warrior manifestations of postwar liberalism and a petition for a more open, democratic, pragmatic policy process. Concentrating on men and decisions rather than on larger social and economic forces, it is the ultimate liberal manifesto.

While Halberstam focuses upon the American side, Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake* (1972), winner of the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the Bancroft Prize in History, concentrates on Vietnamese culture and society. Fitzgerald, a journalist with two Vietnam tours to her credit, was steeped in the literature of Chinese and Vietnamese society and deeply influenced by her mentor Paul Mus, the leading student of Vietnamese religion and culture; she contends that America misunderstood the revolutionary process in Vietnam. The National Liberation Front operated in accord with Vietnamese social structure and the Confucian *tao*, while the US and the westernized government of Vietnam destroyed traditionalism and broke the bonds of society. In effect, according to Fitzgerald, the US attempted to transform a traditional Asian society to fit the American mold. Lyndon Johnson could not understand why Asians did not think and respond as Americans would; the results were tragic. Fitzgerald writes with balance and restraint; if her thought-provoking argument is correct, the lessons are numerous. While not the definitive word, *Fire in the Lake* will remain one of the classic studies.

The war also had its defenders, particularly among policymakers and military leaders. Much of Lyndon Johnson's *The Vantage Point* (1971) defended his Vietnam policies. Unfortunately, the bland and superficial book is among the worst Presidential memoirs in print. General William Westmoreland and Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp's *Report of the War in Vietnam* (1969), and the memoirs of Maxwell Taylor, Edward Lansdale, and civilian policymakers Walt Rostow and Robert Komer defended American efforts and proclaimed lessons quite different from those of the war critics. Frank Trager's *Why Vietnam?*, one of the few defenses of the war by an academic, is not a strong work. Chester Cooper's *The Lost Crusade* (1970), one of the best books written on Vietnam during this era, criticized many Vietnam War policies, but the book is primarily a sympathetic chronicle of America's long and frustrating search for a negotiated peace. Foreign service and CIA officer Douglas Pike's *Viet Cong* (1966), *War, Peace, and The Viet Cong* (1969), and

The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror (1970) challenged many of the romantic myths about the Vietnamese communists. Howard R. Penniman's *Elections in South Vietnam* (1972) did the same.

Predictably, the end of the war triggered a new round of scholarship. Alexander Kendrick's *The Wound Within* (1974), focussing on the internal impact of the war on America, was the first such survey through the 1973 Paris accords. Weldon A. Brown's *Prelude to Disaster* (1975) and sequel *The Last Chopper* (1976) together complete the story of the Vietnam experience through "the final days." Brown's lessons of the Vietnam experience are presented in themes of feeble and vacillating leadership, lack of national resolve and will, and moral opprobrium for a nation gone soft. Anthony T. Bouscaren's anthology *All Quiet on the Eastern Front* (1976) and Louis A. Fanning's *Betrayal in Vietnam* (1976) are bitterly condemnatory of America's withdrawal. William Corson's work, *The Consequences of Failure* (1974), is an impassioned, critical, but thoughtful examination of the adverse effects of US capitulation.

More useful appraisals include Anthony Lake's collection of post-mortems, *The Legacy of Vietnam* (1976); Allan R. Millett's collected end-of-the-war commentaries in *The Washington Post* in 1973 and 1975, entitled *A Short History of the Vietnam War* (1978); Peter A. Poole's slim text, *Eight Presidents and Indochina* (1978); and George C. Herring's *The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (forthcoming in 1980). Dave Richard Palmer admits that his military history, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam in Perspective* (1978), is far from definitive, but it is an interesting attempt to address the military lessons of the conflict. Palmer notes that he strove to write as a historian, but the viewpoint of the book is that of a soldier. In the soldier's perspective, the military bore the onus for poor policies and lack of direction from the civilian policy sector.

Cliché has it that no nation can develop its full military potential until it has lost a war. Long before the denouement, the military was preoccupied with the lessons of the Vietnam experience. In the late 1960's, following the precedents of World War II and the Korean War, each service initiated extensive historical programs on all phases of the involvement. A number of volumes were published by the Government Printing Office before the war ended. Topics included the role of field artillery, financial management of the war, medical support, base development, logistics, military intelligence, and riverine operations. Ambitious postwar projects already in print include the first volumes of multi-volume histories published by the Navy, the Marines, and the Coast Guard. The first in the Army's 21-volume series will appear sometime after 1980.

Traditionally, the lessons of war figure prominently in the accounts of its leaders. General William C. Westmoreland's *A Soldier Reports* (1976) and Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp's *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (1978) emphasize the political restraints and impediments which hindered the military in Vietnam. Westmoreland is candid but philosophical; Sharp is more outspoken and bitter. Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Herbert's *Soldier* (1973) is bitter for different reasons. Herbert, the most decorated enlisted man of the Korean War, became a critic of the Vietnam conflict; his protests of alleged war atrocities led to his involuntary retirement.

On a more analytic plane is the effort of retired Brigadier General Douglas Kinnard, veteran of two Vietnam tours, who mailed questionnaires to the 173 US Army general officers who held commands in Vietnam between 1965 and 1972. From the 64 percent who responded, some rough generalizations emerged. Kinnard's *The War Managers* (1977) found the generals satisfied with the professionalism of Army personnel and with theater-level military performance, but dissatisfied with Washington's managerial control of the war and with the overall combat effectiveness of the armed services. The generals were notably pessimistic about the quality of the forces and leadership of the

Army of the Republic of Vietnam; they had little confidence that the ARVN could defend the country. Also, Kinnard found a consensus among the generals that media coverage of the war was irresponsible and disruptive.

At about the time of Kinnard's survey, the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy sponsored a symposium on "The Military Lessons of the Vietnamese War." Participants included academic scholars and such military and civilian policymakers as William Westmoreland, Edward Lansdale, Paul Nitze, Robert Komer, Barry Zorthian, Elmo Zumwalt, George Keegan, and Sir Robert Thompson. W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell collected many of the papers and excerpts from the discussions in a book entitled *The Lessons of Vietnam* (1977), which, like Kinnard's study, addresses fundamental issues and provides candid assessments of errors and failures. Both books, compiled in the interim between the US troop withdrawal in 1973 and the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, are significant early assessments of the war experience.

Also a product of this interim period, Robert Gallucci's *Neither War Nor Peace: The Politics of American Military Policy in Vietnam* (1975) is a sophisticated study of the problems, pitfalls, limitations, and conflicts of the policymaking process. Beginning with the premise that the Vietnam entanglement represented unwise policy, Gallucci focuses upon the decisionmaking process, how the involvement in Vietnam continued, and why policy decisions did not accomplish their aims. The implications of this excellent study of bureaucratic politics go far beyond Indochina.

The war literature by ordinary participants is increasing. Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973), Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), Charles R. Anderson's *The Grunts* (1976), Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), and iconoclastic journalist Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977) are recent examples. C. D. B. Bryan's *Friendly Fire* (1976), the story of an Iowa farm family's search for the truth about how their son died in Vietnam, reveals a basic truth: the dearth of information about their son's death resulted from neither a conspiracy nor a cover-up; it was merely the product of the red-tape, bureaucracy, and inertia which plagued the larger war effort.

The postwar memoirs of Nguyen Cao Ky, Saigon politician Tran Van Don, veteran Australian Saigon journalist Denis Warner, and victorious North Vietnamese Generals Vo Nguyen Giap and Van Tien Dung, differ in lessons and meanings of the Vietnam experience. *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (1978) turns from Watergate long enough to defend Vietnam policies. William Colby's *Honorable Men* (1978), both memoir and apologia for the CIA, concentrates on the several years that the former Director of Central Intelligence spent in Vietnam. *White House Years* (1979) by Henry Kissinger, a massive memoir of 1552 pages, addresses the critical period from 1969 to 1973. The forthcoming memoir by Peter Arnett, a prize-winning Associated Press reporter who was in and out of Vietnam from 1962 through 1975, should also be instructive, while Stephen T. Hosmer's *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese Military and Civilian Leaders* (1978) is a useful compendium of proposed lessons.

A host of more specialized works also address lessons. These include Shingo Shibata's *Lessons of the Vietnam War: Philosophical Considerations on the Vietnam Revolution* (1973); Allan E. Goodman's *Politics in War* (1973); Abram Chayes et al., *Vietnam Settlement: Why 1973, Not 1969?* (1973); Charles A. Joiner's *The Politics of Massacre* (1974); Jeffrey S. Milstein's quantitative study on the interrelationship of policy, public opinion, costs, and military strategy, *Dynamics of the Vietnam War* (1974); Gareth D. Porter's anti-Vietnamese-Government account of the Paris accords and aftermath, *A Peace Denied* (1975); Robert Warren Steven's *Vain Hopes, Grim Realities: The Economic Consequences of the War* (1976); Benjamin F. Schemmer's examination of the heroic but abortive attempt to rescue the American POWs at Son

Tay, *The Raid* (1976); Herbert Y. Schandler's *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (1977); Gloria Emerson's Bancroft Prize-winning, *Winners and Losers* (1977); Douglas Blaufarb's *The Counter-Insurgency Era* (1977); Stephen A. Garrett's *Ideals and Reality: An Analysis of the Debate Over Vietnam* (1978); Gregory Palmer's *The McNamara Strategy and the Vietnam War* (1978); and Jaya K. Baral's *The Pentagon and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy: A Case Study of Vietnam, 1960-1968* (1978).

The number of memoirs by former prisoners of war continues to grow, with the quality varying greatly. John Hubbell's *POW: A Definitive History of the American Prisoner of War Experience in Vietnam, 1964-1973* (1977) is less monumental than the overblown title would suggest, but at present it is the most thorough work. The Center for POW Studies of the Naval Health Research Center is conducting interviews with former prisoners of war which should expand our knowledge. Navy Captain Douglas L. Clarke's *The Missing Man* (1979) discusses the too-often overlooked men listed as missing in action.

The literature on the Vietnam-era draft is also extensive but mostly of minimal value. Lawrence M. Baskir and William A. Strauss' *Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, The War and The Vietnam Generation* (1978) attempts a comprehensive overview. The saga of inequities, chaos, discrimination, and ineptitude of the system details lessons that may increase in importance if the draft is resurrected. Studies of the Vietnam veteran include Robert J. Lifton's *Home from the War—Vietnam Veterans* (1973); John Helmer's *Bringing the War Home* (1974); Paul Starr et al., *The Discarded Army* (1974); Jan Barry and W. D. Ehrhart's *Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After Vietnam* (1976); and Charles R. Figley, editor, *Stress Disorders Among Vietnam Veterans* (1978).

The spring of 1975, when America finally came to "the end of the tunnel," was a time for reflection and introspection. Perspectives on the final days before the fall and life in communist Vietnam differed greatly; the plight of the boat people and their accounts of present life in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam have continued the controversy. Eyewitness accounts of the fall and aftermath include John Pilger's pictorial *The Last Day* (1975), Tiziano Terzani's *Giai Phong: The Fall and Liberation of Saigon* (1976), Alan Dawson's *55 Days: The Fall of Vietnam* (1977), Wilfred Burchett's *Grasshoppers and Elephants: Why Vietnam Fell* (1977), and Earl S. Martin's *Reaching the Other Side: The Journal of an American Who Stayed to Witness Vietnam's Postwar Transition* (1978). Bernard and Marvin Kalb, Paul Steube, and Karl Jackson are all working on books dealing with the days before and after the fall of South Vietnam. Darell Montero and Marsha I. Weber's *Vietnamese Americans* (1978) and Gail P. Kelley's *From Vietnam to America* (1978) deal with the settlement of refugees in the US.

Robert F. Turner's *Vietnamese Communism* (1975) and Douglas Pike's brief *History of the Vietnamese Communist Party* (1978) are important updates of the earlier studies by Pike, Bernard Fall, P. J. Honey, Jean Lacouture, George Tanham, Joseph J. Zasloff, and Dennis Duncanson. Further work is progressing on communist strategic thinking, the Vietnamese Communist Party and its grass-roots ties in the south, the People's Army of Vietnam, the history of the National Liberation Front, Vietnamese communist leadership, Marxist doctrine in Vietnam in the 1950's, and Vietnamese peasant organizations.[3]

The most important book on the final days now in print is former CIA analyst Frank Snepp's controversial *Decent Interval* (1978). Among the last to leave beleaguered Saigon, Snepp witnessed the chaos and travesty of the final weeks and days. After the evacuation, Snepp sought permission to compile an after-action report, an account of the lessons of the experience. When his request was repeatedly denied, Snepp, in violation of his CIA oath of secrecy, wrote and published the book without authorization. Snepp argues that Ambassador Graham Martin and CIA Station Chief Thomas Polgar bear grave responsibility for the delayed and bungled

evacuation because they misread the crisis and exercised poor leadership. While all Americans were safely evacuated, thousands of loyal Vietnamese employees were left behind, while sensitive files—including lists of Vietnamese with American intelligence affiliations—were abandoned intact. Without endorsing Snepp's actions, it can be acknowledged that this is a story which needed to be told. The book presents little threat to national security, but it is a devastating expose of individuals and agencies.

The final days of Cambodia soon followed those of Vietnam. John Barron and Anthony Paul's *Murder of a Gentle Land* (1977) and Francois Ponchaud's *Cambodia: Year Zero* (1978)—originally published in French in 1976—reveal the brutal genocide conducted by the conquering Khmer Rouge. While the Khmer Rouge bear total responsibility for their barbarism, British journalist William Shawcross' *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* (1979) contends that US actions accelerated the communist takeover. The book is a slashing attack on Nixon and Kissinger's handling of Cambodian policy, particularly with regard to the Cambodian incursion of 1970. For Shawcross, "Cambodia was not a mistake; it was a crime"; it was a capsule repetition of the arrogance and errors of Vietnam which demonstrated that leaders had learned little from the earlier experience. The fall of Cambodia did not result from the cutoff of US aid in August 1973, according to Shawcross; it was set in motion three years earlier with the US incursion. The book touched some sensitive nerves—Henry Kissinger revised his memoir chapters on Cambodia to refute Shawcross' charges. Finally, Roy Rowan's *Four Days of the Mayaguez* (1975) and Richard G. Head's *Crises Resolution* (1978), a case study in crisis management, treat the *Mayaguez* incident.

After a decade of virtual consensus against the war and the institutionalization of many antiwar cliches, a mild revisionism is emerging which accepts the goals but questions the means. Some of the most entrenched stereotypes are being reexamined and new lessons posited. The most important book of this new genre, Peter Braestrup's *Big Story* (1977), may become one of the classics of Vietnam literature. Braestrup, a Korean War veteran who was the Saigon Station Chief for *The Washington Post* in 1968, addresses the question of why the Tet offensive was misinterpreted by the American press. Students now agree that the 1968 offensive resulted in the worst military defeat suffered by the communists during the war. Lyndon Johnson and the military claimed this at the time. Yet the American people received a much different picture, for the press portrayed the offensive as a decisive communist victory and a disaster for American and ARVN forces. This erroneous coverage contributed to the downfall of Johnson and complicated the entire American extrication process.

Braestrup pulls no punches in his outspoken account. He acknowledges that the awesome power of the press was not always employed responsibly in Vietnam; but considering the problems involved, he believes that the overall record was good. Most correspondents in Vietnam were not qualified for their positions as war reporters. They lacked military experience and did not comprehend the complexity of warfare. Although Vietnam appeared to be inundated with correspondents and journalists, individual bureaus were too understaffed to handle the constant demand for dramatic reportage. The trend toward news as entertainment exacerbated the situation. These demands and expectations led to hasty reports and overblown analyses. Compelled to pose as authorities "dominating what they described," television commentators were often speculative in their analyses, proclaiming more than they really knew or could know. Preoccupied with impact, television relied on short filmed vignettes as microcosms of the larger war, a technique that inevitably introduced distortion. Attempts by military information sources to orchestrate news flow further contributed to

superficial assessments. Finally, Braestrup faults senior editors for their lack of leadership and guidance in moderating the natural overzealousness of the younger reporters caught up in the maelstrom of the war.

Even though the handling of Tet was an aberration, it could happen again, Braestrup warns; thus he considers it imperative to record the lessons of the experience. The book belongs in American journalism curriculums and has much to contribute to the larger understanding of Vietnam and its lessons. Lawrence Lichty's forthcoming history of television coverage of the war may prove a valuable companion piece.

The Irony of Vietnam (1979) by Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts ranks with *Big Story* as another of the most significant books on Vietnam of recent years. The authors challenge the liberal "quagmire" thesis that the US stumbled into Vietnam through miscalculation, inadequate policy process, and limited policy options. On the contrary, the authors argue that the decision process functioned well, providing varied options and assessments of the costs, probabilities for success, and the implications of the various alternatives. The problem did not come from the process but from the choices pursued by presidents and other policymakers. Kennedy and Johnson knowingly opted for limited-objective alternatives calculated as the minimal steps necessary not to lose. With the passage of time and gradual escalation, presidents, Congress, the press, and the public "both reinforced the stakes against losing and introduced constraints against winning." Washington attempted to wear down the enemy at least cost. This strategy led to the rejection of the more decisive recommendations of senior military advisors and the adoption of incremental escalation. Such an approach played into the enemy's hands, for their protracted war strategy was to drag out the conflict and make it increasingly costly to the US. Hanoi's total resolve and complete commitment to ultimate victory was never fully appreciated. The authors conclude that the basic lesson of Vietnam is the need for pragmatism rather than doctrines, formulas, ideologies, or structural changes in the decision process.

In its careful analysis of the peace process, Allan E. Goodman's *The Lost Peace* (1978) reiterates the themes of Gelb and Betts. Contrary to critics' claims, Johnson and Nixon were fully committed to a negotiated settlement, one that preserved the status quo antebellum; but, Goodman claims, this minimal goal was never a real option. Committed to nothing less than total victory, Hanoi never compromised their objective. Washington sought the fruits of military victory without actually having to achieve one. North Vietnam realized that negotiating while fighting was in their interest and that the US would not penalize them for this tactic. Indeed, the longer the war dragged on, the greater were American concessions in each peace proposal. Hanoi skillfully manipulated the negotiating process, hinting at concessions in public while rejecting them in private. This tactic further eroded American public acceptance of the war and garnered new concessions, which in turn widened the breach between Saigon and Washington. The result was a peace treaty amounting to nothing more than a face-saving device for US extrication; only the most optimistic could hold any hope for the success of South Vietnam. The lessons of Goodman's study are clear.

The most controversial of the new revisionist accounts, Guenter Lewy's *America in Vietnam* (1978), has caused a storm among liberal reviewers. One responds: "Every war is fought twice—first militarily and then, especially among the losers, politically and intellectually. Guenter Lewy's book is the first salvo in the refighting of the Vietnam War."[4] Others have branded the work a whitewash, an apology for the war, and a selling of the war. Lewy, a respected political scientist and author of several highly acclaimed works primarily in political philosophy, is the first scholar to receive "historian's access" to the voluminous military records of the war. From his extensive work in these unclassified and declassified records, he concludes that

American policy in Vietnam was unwise and inept—the conventional military approach to a revolutionary situation was a hopeless failure—but in contradiction to the claims of many antiwar critics, American actions were neither illegal under international law nor immoral. The author's extensive data and statistics well illustrate his thesis and refute the cherished stereotypes of leftist commentators.

Lewy is critical of academics who forsook their obligation to engage in dispassionate and rational scholarship to become ideologues and propagandists. He accuses many of his colleagues of exaggeration, reliance upon dubious sources of information, and commitment to prejudices and *a priori* assumptions rather than objective analysis of the evidence. Lewy's critics counter with the same charges against him. Lewy's book breaks new ground, provides new evidence, and has helped to revive the Vietnam debate. Along with the other postwar revisionist studies, it makes major contributions to the continuing search for the lessons of Vietnam.

Finally, as with most wars, Vietnam has inspired a large body of fictional literature, including some first-rate novels and short stories. *Free Fire Zone: Short Stories by Vietnam Veterans* (1973), edited by Wayne Karlin et al., and *Writing Under Fire: Stories of the Vietnam War* (1978), edited by Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer, are interesting collections.[5] Hollywood was originally wary, the subject being considered box office anathema. But the passing of time has turned the pain and anguish into nostalgia, and a new generation which does not remember the trauma of the war is becoming increasingly interested in the subject. Several Vietnam movies in the last year have enjoyed critical acclaim and financial success, including the winner of the Academy Award for best picture of 1978, *The Deer Hunter*; runner-up, *Coming Home*; and the current extravaganza, *Apocalypse Now*. Other Vietnam movie productions are in progress. Julian Smith's book *Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam* (1975), attempts unsuccessfully to argue that war movies after World War II created a climate conducive to the American involvement in Vietnam.

In an oft-quoted maxim, George Santayana reminded us that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Some would argue that Gaddis Smith's rejoinder is more applicable: "One of the most somber aspects of the study of history is that it suggests no obvious ways by which mankind could have avoided folly."[6] In either case, the search for knowledge, meaning, and the lessons of Vietnam will continue.

NOTES

1. William A. Williams, "History as a Way of Learning," in *The Contours of American History* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1966), p. 19; Staughton Lynd, "A Profession of History," *The New Journal*, 12 November 1970, 12; Howard Zinn, "Introduction," in *New Deal Thought*, ed. Howard Zinn (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p. xv.

2. Otis L. Graham Jr., "New Deal Historiography: Retrospect and Prospect," in *The New Deal: The Critical Issues*, ed. Otis L. Graham Jr. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), pp. 171-72; Adam Ulam, "On Modern History: Re-reading the Cold War," *Interplay*, 2 (March 1969), p. 51; Hans J. Morganthau, "Rejoinder," in *The Origins of the Cold War*, by Lloyd C. Gardner, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and Hans J. Morganthau (Waltham, Mass.: Ginn-Blaisdell, 1970), p. 119.

3. The references to forthcoming books noted at various points in the article are drawn from Peter Braestrup, "Vietnam as History," *The Wilson Quarterly*, 2 (Spring 1978), 178-87, and Douglas Pike's letter to the editor in response, *The Wilson Quarterly*, 2 (Summer 1978), 191-92.

4. Michael Walzer, rev. of *America in Vietnam*, by Guenter Lewy, in *The New Republic*, 11 November 1978, pp. 31-34.

5. For a bibliography of novels and short fiction, see Philip D. Beidler, "The Vietnam Novel: An Overview, with a Brief Checklist of Vietnam War Narrative," *Southern Humanities Review*, 12 (Winter 1978), 45-55.

6. Gaddis Smith, *American Diplomacy During the Second World War: 1941-1945* (New York: Wiley, 1965), p. 177.

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