

**America in Vietnam: The War that Couldn't Be Won.** By Herbert Y. Schandler. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009. 209 pages. \$39.95. **Reviewed by Dr. James H. Willbanks**, the General of the Armies George C. Marshall Chair of Military History/Director, Department of Military History, US Army Command and General Staff College, and author of *Abandoning Vietnam*.

In 1998 and 1999, Herbert Schandler, a retired Army colonel then serving as a professor at the National Defense University, accompanied a group of historians to Hanoi to participate in talks with former North Vietnamese leaders concerning the various perspectives of the two sides during the Vietnam War. These discussions resulted in the book *Argument without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (1999), by Robert McNamara and other contributors. Dr. Schandler contributed a chapter titled “U.S. Military Victory in Vietnam: A Dangerous Illusion?”

It was the reaction to his chapter in the earlier book, which Schandler says was criticized for not going beyond the Tet Offensive of 1968, that led him to expand earlier thoughts, resulting in the publication of this new book. With that starting point, the author set out to more fully develop his original thesis, covering the entire war from the earliest days of US involvement to its conclusion in 1975. Schandler analyzes the events and policy decisions of those years from the vantage point of his two combat tours in Vietnam and his wartime service in the Pentagon informed by what he gleaned from discussions with the Vietnamese in Hanoi.

The book's stated thesis is that nationalism, not communism, was the driving motivation on the part of the North Vietnamese. Therefore, the American fear of a “massive Communist international conspiracy” was erroneous, and from that misguided fear, a myriad of mistakes flowed that ultimately resulted in America's failure in Vietnam. In developing his argument, the author begins with the question, “Could the United States have won militarily in Vietnam at a reasonable cost in terms of human life, both Vietnamese and American, and without an unacceptable risk of extending the war to China and Russia?” His simple answer to this complex question is a resounding “No!” According to Schandler, the possibility of a military victory in Vietnam was a “chimera,” and American efforts to win the war were doomed from the beginning.

The book provides a fulsome critique of US policy and strategy, or lack thereof, in Vietnam. Schandler is unflinching in his criticism of both military leaders and civilian policymakers. He states that the fundamental underlying failure from which everything else flowed was the inability to translate understandable and limited political objectives into achievable military goals. In making this argument, Schandler takes on those who have maintained that constraints on the use of military force imposed by political leaders tied the hands of the military. On the contrary, he asserts, President Nixon tried everything that the military leaders had earlier advocated—invading Cambodia and Laos, bombing Hanoi, and mining Haiphong harbor—none of which altered the ultimate outcome of the conflict. Schandler concludes that “the preclusion of the unification of Vietnam could not have been accomplished by American military action and, indeed, that this unity, promised by the Geneva Accords, was made inevitable by the willingness of the North Vietnamese to sacrifice in order to achieve it.”

The author's assertions and conclusions are nothing new, and he acknowledges that most of them have been explored much further and in greater detail in earlier secondary works. Schandler's assessment, however, seeks to engender a broader view by drawing heavily on his conversations with the former North Vietnamese leaders in Hanoi to provide some insight into their wartime thinking, motivations, and objec-

tives. Herein lies both the strength and weakness of the book. On one hand, the reader is treated to observations and reflections from the other side that help put a face on our former enemy. The author suggests that these pronouncements can and should be taken as “original sources.” These reflections, however, are post-war ruminations by the ultimate victors that have the luxury of hindsight and border, in some cases, on propaganda. Some of their pronouncements made in 1998 and 1999 may be different from what they really felt at the time. For example, when those who met with the author intimate that they never saw themselves in any danger of being defeated militarily, the reader is left wondering what they thought following the monumental casualties sustained during Tet 1968, or after the failure to cause the collapse of the South Vietnamese army during the 1972 Easter Offensive, or even midway through the Christmas bombing of 1972. There have been sufficient revelations in recently released documents and published works from the other side to suggest that the North Vietnamese were not always so steadfastly confident of their eventual triumph. Therefore, the reader is well advised to view the quotes included in the book with a little more than the proverbial grain of salt.

That observation notwithstanding, even those who may disagree with Herbert Schandler’s assessment and conclusion that the war could not be won will agree he has produced a scholarly and well-written book that provides a unique perspective not only on America in Vietnam, but also on what the other side was thinking (or says they were thinking). For that reason, this book is highly recommended.