"Vietnam Revised," 9 *Armed Forces and Society* 167-73 (Fall 1982)

Book Review

Vietnam Revised

Gelb, Leslie H. with Betts, Richard K.
The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked
Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1979, 387 pp.

Goodman, Allan E.
The Lost Peace: America's Search for a
Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War
Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute, 1978, 298 pp.

Lewy, Guenter
America in Vietnam
New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, 540 pp.

Now that the war in Vietnam is far enough behind us to have become an event in history rather than a contemporary trauma, books have emerged that assess and interpret the dismal happenings there with broader perspective and more complete information.

The predominant tone of the most noticeable literature on Vietnam has been shrill and accusing: U.S. participation in the war was a moral outrage, an evil deception, an unconscionable blunder. Leadership failed, democracy was bypassed or subverted, the strategists continually miscalculated and lied, the people and Congress were artfully manipulated.

These three books make up what might be seen as a vanguard for a kind of "revisionist" literature on Vietnam. All three direct themselves, at least in part, toward debunking what they would see as the facile certainties of traditional or popular interpretations of the war. Thus, Guenter Lewy attacks what he calls "the war crimes industry" and argues that the U.S. record in Vietnam was not "a systematic and willful violation of existing agreements for standards of human decency in time of war" (p. 268); he finds there were not "an unusually and unacceptably high number of noncombatants being killed" (p. 304); and he argues that the "bombing of North Vietnam conformed to international law, and

the application of American air power was probably the most restrained in modern warfare" (p. 416).

It is Allan Goodman's argument that, while many war critics feel the United States missed opportunities for peaceful settlement of the war, in fact, from Hanoi's standpoint, "there was basically nothing to negotiate about" (p. 6); furthermore, most of those seeming "opportunities" for peace were due to Hanoi's "whipsaw" or "leapfrogging" tactics—appearing flexible in public and before third parties while remaining rigid in secret direct negotiations (pp. 19, 32-3, 36, 38, 44, 114).

Gelb and Betts argue that American entry into the war was the result neither of rosy-eyed miscalculation nor of devious deception by the administration. Rather, the decision-making apparatus did what it was supposed to do—it produced a policy responsive to the will of the majority and an appropriate means to carry the policy out (p. 354). In fact, they say, "the decision-making system . . . *did achieve its stated purpose* of preventing a Communist victory in Vietnam until the domestic balance of opinion shifted" (p. 24; emphasis in original).

This is not to suggest that any of the books seeks to whitewash the war. Lewy sees the war as a tragedy; while U.S. tactics were not crimes under international law, they were often terribly misguided—unnecessarily destructive, ineffective, and self-defeating (p. 306). Goodman refers to the "mutually reinforcing intransigence of Washington and Hanoi" (p. 56). And Gelb and Betts argue that, while "the system worked," the "policy failed." Their gloomy conclusion is that precisely because "the system worked" in Vietnam, it is not possible to reform the system to improve its functioning: Improvements, they say, "would not have appreciably altered the thrust of the war" (p. 355).

The contribution of these three provocative books, then, is not to excuse or glorify the war, but to add depth to our understanding of this profoundly unsettling military and diplomatic event.

Lewy, in his stormy and trenchant *America in Vietnam*, is particularly interested in assessing the military aspects of the war—strategy and tactics, the byplay of force and persuasion on the battlefield, the theoretical rules of engagement and the actual practice of warfare. The first 220 pages discuss the history of American participation in the war from the assistance to the colonial French that began in 1950 and ended with the debacle of 1975. The last 220 pages deal in detail with the legality and morality of the war, with terrorism and atrocities and war crimes, with the efficacy of the bombing of North Vietnam, and with the impact of Vietnam on American policy.

Lewy is extremely critical of the American strategy that sought to win the war quickly and by attrition (ill-blending requirements), and he argues that a slower, far more careful policy of pacification and Vietnamization would have been much more likely to be successful. He is equally critical of those who gloss over Communist atrocities and brutalities in Vietnam (never recorded on television) while exaggerating the extent of U.S. atrocities.

The discussion of law and morality as it relates to the war in Vietnam is extensive. Until the exposé of the My Lai massacre, after which things improved enormously, he finds American procedures were characterized by "impeccable" rules of engagement that were often sloppily and very inadequately implemented and communicated to the fighting men. Nonetheless, it seems difficult to find evidence of systematic legal violations by the United States and even more difficult meaningfully to apply the law of war to a conflict in which the enemy, as a matter of fundamental strategy, seeks to find cover by blending among the civilian population.

Goodman's *The Lost Peace* assesses the negotiating history of America's war in Vietnam from the tentative gestures of 1962-1965, through the jockeying for position of 1965-1968 and the rambling negotiations of 1969-1972, to the final "settlement" of 1973. The book is rather brief (180 pages of text) and is based largely on not-for-direct attribution interviews with U.S. negotiators (the Communists declined to discuss the subject).

Without direct evidence, Goodman is obviously unable fully to explicate Communist thinking on the negotiations, but there are aspects of the American negotiating activities that could have been detailed in more depth—particularly the shifting patterns of 1968 and of late 1972. And his assumption of the effectiveness of the bombing (with airy assertions about how it could sever the Communists' need for "long, secure supply lines") is partly undercut by Lewy's much more penetrating analysis.

The Gelb-Betts *The Irony of Vietnam* focuses on decision making in Washington on the war. In particular it incisively assesses the process of thinking that led to the American decision to escalate in 1965 and traces these processes as they evolved between 1965 and 1968.

The book concludes that "the core consensual goal of postwar foreign policy (containment of Communism) was pursued consistently," differences of opinion "were accommodated by compromise," and—a central criterion of good decision making—"virtually all views and recom-

mendations were considered and virtually all important decisions were made without illusions about the odds for success" (p. 2).

In short, we knew what we were doing when we got into Vietnam and the entry and escalation enjoyed broad public and elite support. It would be interesting, in fact, to compare U.S. decision making in 1964-1965 with that of 1940-1941. It might well be concluded that entry into the war in Vietnam was more carefully and thoughtfully evaluated than entry into the war with Japan.

Gelb and Betts detail in considerable depth the origins and extent of the consensus of 1965—the consensus that extended the containment doctrine and concluded Vietnam was vital to American interests.[1] As they show, this consensus, soon to break down, was then composed of virtually the entire political spectrum and was broadly supported by congressional, academic, journalistic, and bureaucratic opinion.

The authors strain a bit to make some of their points. In arguing that the prevailing mood about success was "essentially pessimistic" (p. 318), they tend to downplay the White House atmosphere of 1965, with its postelection "can do" euphoria.[2] As part of this they also make a slippery distinction between "genuine optimism" and "wishful thinking" (p. 341). There was little "genuine optimism," they argue, because predictions of success were always carefully ringed with hedging, even undercutting, qualifications. But this is a common procedure with predictions, hardly unique to the war in Vietnam. Furthermore, as they note, the strategy of attrition in the war was based on the assumption that there was some level of punishment at which the North Vietnamese "breaking point" would be reached. While no one could sensibly predict exactly where this "break" would occur, the assumption itself was based on reasonable historical experience more than mere "wishful thinking." In fact, the Communists in Vietnam seem to have accepted, as a percentage of population, staggering losses that are virtually unique in the history of international warfare over the last 160 years. It was the dawning realization of this startling fact that led, in part, to the shifts in policy in 1968. Also, it is difficult to know how to classify the 1965 predictions of defense officials Robert McNamara and John McNaughton, who suggested there was a 50-50 chance the war would be won by 1968.[3] Even in retrospect this seems an intelligent estimation—it can be seen as neither unduly optimistic nor pessimistic, and certainly not "wishful."

The "Devitalization" of Vietnam

Gelb and Betts argue that the containment doctrine was "unassailable from 1947 to 1968" but then became "suddenly vulnerable" and was placed "on the defensive" (p. 181). The change seems to be attributed to the rising, and seemingly endless, costs of the war. However important Vietnam may have been to the United States, it had simply become too costly. As Goodman also puts it, many became convinced that "a non-Communist government in South Vietnam would never be worth the price in American lives that the United States had already paid" (p. 62).[4]

But there were really two changes between 1965 and 1968. South Vietnam, which seemed so vital to American security in 1964 and 1965, was *using the same standards*, far less vital in 1968. By 1965 there had already been some redirecting of the containment strategy. As early as 1963 Soviet foreign policy had begun to mellow, to appear less threatening to the United States, and an era of cooperation, later to be codified under the term "detente," had begun. China, however, seemed as great an enemy as ever. The containment of China—the thwarting of its seemingly hegemonic desire for expansion and universal revolutionary instability—seemed essential to American policymakers in 1965.

This concern was heightened by developments in Indonesia, a country with an enormous and influential Communist party. Under the radical leadership of Sukarno, the country had withdrawn from the United Nations in early 1965 and had entered into a kind of alliance with China.

In 1965, then, South Vietnam seemed to be positioned midway between these two large and threatening Communist or near-Communist countries. If it was allowed to become Communist, it was easy to visualize how this might damage the anti-Communist position generally in Southeast Asia—leading quite possibly to further erosion in South Asia and in Japan and Korea. Others saw this danger too, and, as Lewy observes, the leaders of the "dominoes" of 1965—Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, and even India—urged the United States to stand firm in the area (pp. 421-22).

But then things changed—and rather quickly. Toward the end of 1965 and into 1966 a violent upheaval occurred in Indonesia, leading to the near-extermination of the Indonesian Communist Party and the

utter extinguishment of Chinese influence in the country. Then, recoiling from this foreign policy catastrophe, China itself, though still verbally belligerent, turned inward and embarked on its bizarre ritual of self-purification, the radically romantic Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. But by then, of course, the United States had become thoroughly committed to—thoroughly enmeshed in—the war in Vietnam.

Thus, while the United States watched, the threat of Chinese Communist hegemony in the area dwindled rapidly—and, accordingly, so did the strategic importance of the war for South Vietnam.[5] In late 1967 Clark Clifford, before assuming the office of Secretary of Defense, visited the leaders of the "dominoes" of 1965—the same ones who had urged U.S. involvement in Vietnam two years earlier. "It was strikingly apparent to me," he wrote, "that the other troop-contributing countries *no longer* shared our degree of concern about the war. . . . Was it possible that our assessment of the danger to the stability of Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific was exaggerated? . . . Was it possible that we were continuing to be guided by judgments that might once have had validity but were now obsolete?"[6]

Essentially what had happened was that Vietnam had *ceased* being "vital" to American security and to Southeast Asian stability. As McGeorge Bundy recently observed, although Vietnam seemed "vital" in 1964 and early 1965, "at least from the time of the anti-Communist revolution in Indonesia, late in 1965, that adjective was excessive, and so also was our effort."[7]

The trend toward the "devitalization" of Vietnam accelerated after 1968 as detente with the Soviets broadened and as Sino-American relations improved. According to Goodman, Henry Kissinger was soon arguing that the war in Vietnam was a conflict "in which the United States had become involved for reasons that were *no longer* as compelling as the need to improve relations with the Soviet Union and China" (p. 84; emphasis added).

Gelb and Betts argue that "the Vietnam War brought an end to the consensus on containment" (p. 368). But it seems rather that the premises of containment were undercut more by the mellowing of relations with the Soviets and the Chinese. If the Communist nations no longer are (or no longer seem) aggressive, an expensive and dangerous policy designed to contain that aggression no longer makes as much sense.

In the grand scheme of American foreign policy, the war in Vietnam started to become an anachronism shortly after the United States had become thoroughly committed there. It *became* a mistake, a mistake from which it took this nation long, costly years to extricate itself.

John E. Mueller
University of Rochester

Notes

1. Referred to, but not quoted, is war critic David Halberstam's assessment: "Vietnam . . . is perhaps one of only five or six nations that is truly vital to U.S. interests." *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 315.

2. Such as Bill Moyers' assertion: "There was a confidence—it was never bragged about, it was just there— . . . that when the chips were really down, the other people would fold." In Robert Manning and Michael Janeway, eds., *Who We Are* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), p. 262.

3. *Pentagon Papers* (Boston: Beacon, 1971), Vol. 3, p. 484; vol. 4, p. 624.

4. Defense Department systems analyst Alain Enthoven put it, "I fell off the boat when the troop level reached 170,000." Following Herbert Schandler's fine account, Gelb and Betts suggest Lyndon Johnson "fell off the boat" when it became necessary to mobilize the reserves in order to keep the escalators happy (pp. 149, 177).

5. Lewy's argument that American policymakers in 1964-1965 "exaggerated the geopolitical importance of Vietnam and Southeast Asia" also fails really to consider this change (p. 424).

6. "A Viet Nam Reappraisal," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1969, pp. 606-7 (emphasis added).

7. "The Americans and the World," in Stephen R. Graubard, ed., *A New America?* (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 293.