
Review: Vietnam: In the Beginning

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VIETNAM: IN THE BEGINNING

Sandra C. Taylor

Lloyd C. Gardner. *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu.* New York: W. W. Norton, 1988. 440 pp. Sources, notes, appendix, and index. \$22.50.

The Vietnam War has emerged from two decades of scholarship a veritable institution in American history, an epoch with its experts, bibliography, questions of interpretation, schools of thought, and points of debate. As professors in succeeding decades take up the topic in their surveys of American history, American diplomacy, or World Civilization, the Vietnam era will stand apart, like the Civil War or the Revolution, as a separate time period. Already historiographical essays are being written bringing us up to date on the newest conceptual framework into which one might place the latest weighty tome.¹ Now that the agonies are over works by participants have largely been replaced by voices from within the academy: Neil Sheehan's *A Bright and Shining Lie* (1988) may well be the last of the journalistic histories so prominent in the waning years of the war.

Historiographers of the Vietnam War have noted that unlike in previous conflicts there was no "Establishment" version of the Vietnam War. From the outset revisionists attacked the rationale that the administrations of Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon put forth as explanations for American intervention. Basically they wrote participant accounts, the documentation of disillusioned journalists and government officials disparaging the official story. Writers might disagree over the reasons for bringing America into the war, with the New Left espousing economic causes and the liberals seeing instead the flaws of the "best and the brightest," but the result was the same: disaster for the United States and devastation for Vietnam.

It was also apparent that by the late 1970s the tone had changed, and the amnesia accompanying the fall of Saigon had given way to a renewed interest in America's longest war. A new wave of revisionists, led by Guenter Lewy and Colonel Harry Summers, looked at new documentary evidence and found the American attempt praiseworthy: the error was in its failure.² Again, there was no agreement on who was at fault for this, but General William

Westmoreland, President Johnson, the containment policy, and the liberal antiwar critics themselves all came in for their share of blame. But those years also brought us a model of moderate scholarship, George Herring's *America's Longest War* (1979, 1980) and, a few years later, the most outstanding radical critique of the war, Gabriel Kolko's *Anatomy of a War* (1985).

Robert Divine has characterized the writing since the heyday of the neo-revisionists as the age of postrevisionism, with scholarship marked by more dispassion and objectivity, a description that characterizes Lloyd Gardner's work well. But I find it equally notable that the disputations over this most contentious of wars still persist. Writers who are members of the Vietnam generation remain passionate on the subject and those who, like James William Gibson (*The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam*, 1986), were children then have grown into the emotionalism of their elders. It is safe to say that the war divides scholars and students now much as it did during its lifetime, and we are many years from that point when it can be viewed with total scholarly dispassion.

Regardless of one's point of view, there are still many unanswered questions about Vietnam, in part due to the vast quantity of paper the war churned out and the tendency of bureaucrats to classify and keep secret many of the war's dark crevices. Recent declassifications for the Foreign Relations series and access to pertinent British papers have made possible some further research. Lloyd Gardner has investigated the question of how and why the United States got in, not to the Johnson-Nixon big unit war, nor even into the advisory war of the Kennedy period, but that "first Vietnam War" that the United States waged diplomatically during World War II and the French struggle in Indochina.

Gardner's work is an excellent addition to the postrevisionist analysis of the Vietnam War. Almost completely devoid of the passion of his New Left origins, Gardner has written clearly and objectively about the way in which the United States became involved in the Vietnam War. Disavowing any claim to having told the final or the complete story, Gardner has sought to explicate American policy from 1941–1956. Vietnam is merely the setting, for this work is not about Vietnamese politics nor French colonial policy, but rather about their effect on the United States. American involvement, Gardner claims, stems from the interaction of some major themes that impacted upon foreign policy. First was the Cold War, which led to a preoccupation with "drawing the line" against communism in Southeast Asia. Next was Eisenhower's interest in freeing America from the taint of colonialism. Also important was the concern for "holding the center," restoring the prewar order so that liberal capitalism could flourish again. The combination of these themes was to lead the United States irrevocably to a war, which the author maintains was not

only a global error but a demonstration of the contradictions of the policy of seeking liberal empire.

The seeds of intervention were planted in the Roosevelt administration during the Second World War. The president disliked the French and hoped to eliminate them from Indochina. He failed, but his utopian goal did not die with him. It attained mythic power despite its foundering on the shoals of postwar realities. Even Roosevelt's objectives were limited; with all his Francophobia he never aided the radical Ho Chi Minh and remained ignorant of his revolution. The Vietnamese were, he informed Stalin, just a people "of small stature and not warlike." Mistake number one.

During the Truman administration China was Asia's biggest problem. Distracted, the president accepted the idea of Britain's occupying southern Vietnam and China the north, the latter as a sop to Chiang Kai-shek in lieu of Hong Kong. Ho's repeated requests for aid were ignored, although according to legend Americans had saved the Communist leader's life by providing him with sulfa and quinine during an attack of malaria. American policy turned toward France as diplomats feared that a trusteeship in Indochina would bring chaos to both the colony and the mother country. The outbreak of war between the Vietnamese and the French affected European and Japanese economic recovery, and hence the United States indirectly. As American's anti-Communist foreign policy hardened toward the People's Republic of China it became more receptive toward the French puppet, Bao Dai, especially when Mao Tse-tung recognized Ho Chi Minh's regime.

Gardner realizes the significance of the Korean War for both European and Asian policy. The failure to reunite Korea and the stalemate with communism made it possible for the U.S. to accept defeat in Indochina, for now a phenomenon called "international communism" by John Foster Dulles was the enemy, not just the Soviet Union or China. Meanwhile, the Indochinese Communist party became the Vietnamese Worker's party (the Lao Dong), and the Vietnamese abandoned Popular Front tactics as the struggle became one against world capitalism. (Here Gardner seems to have discounted the amount of non-Communist nationalist sentiment that still remained within the Viet Minh.)

After Korea the Indochina War took on a global character, but in Indochina it was still an anticolonial conflict. Despite this Eisenhower was determined to take over the war itself, in order to prevent the French from selling out to communism. The president saw this as a primary goal of his Asian policy, while Secretary of State Dulles was so convinced of the global nature of communism that he believed the end of the Korean War had simply freed troops to be used in Indochina. Ike sent increasing amounts of aid, which quickly surpassed that given by the Soviets and Chinese to the North, but it was

misused, and the war dragged on, wearing down the French in the process.

Dien Bien Phu was the critical battle. The Americans were encouraged that the French plan to defend the fortress seemed actually to promise victory, but their continual talk at the contentious Bermuda conference (December 1953) about negotiations was dismaying. Ike absolutely ruled out committing American combat forces to defend the fortress, but other possibilities were explored. Plans for Operation VULTURE did discuss the use of tactical nuclear devices, but the Pentagon thought the political cost would be too high. Even the fact that the Americans were testing the H-bomb frightened the allies. The French believed the Americans had promised critical air support to save the beleaguered fortress, but they were wrong. Eisenhower became convinced that the onset of the rainy season would save the French, if they could hold out that long. But as the battle continued the U.S. realized that only separating their effort from that of the colonials would work, even if that meant letting the fortress fall. The Americans and the French failed to agree on a plan for concerted action.

Gardner brings in useful information about the degree to which the Americans were already involved in the war. Task Force 70 was maneuvering off the French coast, about which even the British were ignorant; meanwhile, the U.S. was ferrying French troops to Vietnam, and the Central Intelligence Agency was flying relief into Dien Bien Phu. Reconnaissance flights were taking place over Vietnam and South China, and carriers were moving from Manila toward the South China coast. Intervention was indeed very close.

The Geneva Conference opened before Dien Bien Phu fell, and its final agony played to an international house. As the noose tightened Dulles and Eisenhower refused final pleas for assistance unless the British joined them (thus internationalizing the war, a key American aim). The British, however, doubted the gravity of the situation or the effects of Dien Bien Phu's possible collapse, since the French still had 100,000 troops in the delta. Why, anyway, should they help save the French empire when they had just lost their own?

Dulles feared at the outset the Geneva Conference was a set-up, at which both the French and the British were shopping for deals. The Secretary of State favored continuing the war and helping the anti-Viet Minh forces regroup, but he did not like permanent partition of the country. The fall of Dien Bien Phu exacerbated the situation, for the collapse caused the French to demand exit. The Americans then came to see partition as the only way to get the French out and to create a genuine anti-Communist nationalist movement in the South. The Geneva Conference participants struggled for a solution to the problem, as the Americans decided not to sign the final accords because of their displeasure over the treatment of Laos and Cambodia. The situation in Geneva improved with the election of Pierre Mendes-France as Prime Min-

ister, who was a Socialist and (according to Gardner, pp. 317–18) had greater flexibility to negotiate with the Chinese and the Soviets than his predecessor. Meanwhile the Americans had already placed Ngo Dinh Diem in power in the South (Gardner alludes to the mysteries of this event, which he lacks evidence to explain). With the arrival of Colonel Edward Lansdale and a military advisory group American influence began to supplant that of the French.

After Geneva, the United States and Great Britain devised the Potomac Charter as a long-term strategy, which Gardner sees as key to understanding the future American policy. This document outlined Anglo-American agreement on elections and the Indochina states. The charter enabled the U.S. to accept partition while setting forth its conditions for the postwar situation in Southeast Asia (in lieu of signing the Accords).

The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization was the next step in creating the new nation of South Vietnam and devising a legal framework for American intervention against what was perceived as the menace of international communism. At this point Ike released a letter he had sent Diem pledging continued aid contingent on South Vietnam's ability to carry out needed reforms, the second technicality on which to pin intervention. Gardner stresses that the administration knew that American aid would not be sufficient unless the Diem government was as useful to the population "as Ho's appeal in the North" (p. 331). The French disparaged America's efforts to build a nation around the elusive Diem, but the wily mandarin opposed elections in 1956 and was fervently anti-Communist, and that was enough to the obsessed Americans.

Gardner sketches in the rest of the dismal story. American policymakers began to believe that since they were responsible for Diem's successes, they could indeed replace him if the welfare of the state demanded it. America's role in the coup against him is likewise unclear, according to documents available to Gardner. The 1956 election was cancelled, as Gardner explains it, because the Americans believed if communism were to triumph in a free election it would be much worse for their interests than if it won on the battlefield. Hostilities resumed in 1957, with the Americans replacing the French. The renewed war was blamed by Dulles on China, and America justified its response by SEATO and the letter to Diem. With the overthrow of Diem all the pretexts were gone and the contradictions of liberal empire were apparent. And quickly this small region, on the periphery of America's real worldwide interests, held the American nation hostage.

Although *Approaching Vietnam* fills a real gap in the historiography of the Vietnam War, there are still holes in Gardner's account. The roles of the Central Intelligence Agency and of the military are scarcely mentioned, and the absence of the Vietnamese is especially regrettable. For the perspective of

Saigon, Hanoi, or Beijing one must look elsewhere. References to Vietnamese history are brief, generally technically correct, but not informative. This is traditional diplomatic history, told from the perspective of Washington. Nonetheless Gardner has constructed a well-written book, amply documented, especially with hitherto little-used British sources. The tone is almost dispassionate, and the author's distaste for the war comes through clearly only in the conclusion. This is a landmark of postrevisionist scholarship on the Vietnam War.

Sandra C. Taylor, Department of History, University of Utah, is the author of Advocate of Understanding: Sidney L. Gulick and the Search for Peace with Japan (1984), and is presently working on a study of the secret war in Laos.

1. The most recent, and outstanding example of this, is Robert A. Divine, "Vietnam Reconsidered" *Diplomatic History* 12 (Winter 1988): 79-94. See also the review essay by George Herring, "Vietnam Remembered," *Journal of American History* 73 (June 1986): 152-64; and Edward Moise, "Recent Accounts of the Vietnam War—A Review Article," *Journal of Asian Studies* 44 (February 1985): 343-48. I commented on journalistic histories in these pages, "Reporting History: Journalists and the Vietnam War," *RAH* 13 (September 1985): 451-61.

2. Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (1978). See also Col. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: the Vietnam War in Context* (1981).