

Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945–1975

Max Hastings (Harper, 2018), 896 pp., glossary, maps, bibliography, notes, index.

Reviewed by Leslie C.

My graduate school professor, who served in Vietnam as an advisor to a South Vietnamese riverine patrol unit, liked to say that the history of the Vietnam War could not be written until the participants on both sides were dead. By this half-jest he meant that distance permits perspective. While the participants have not all passed from the scene, the gap grows; I was startled, when reading Mark Bowden's book on the Tet Offensive, to realize that 2018 marked the 50th anniversary of that seminal event.^a In *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945–1975*, Max Hastings shows that there is perspective enough—plus bibliography not available to his predecessors—to achieve a balance between traditional narratives of doomed Western hubris and revisionists who believe that America could have prevailed and South Vietnam survived. The lessons Hastings derives should be of interest to intelligence professionals. While hindsight makes such criticism seem easy, events subsequent to 1975 in Southwest Asia and elsewhere suggest it remains relevant.

It would be difficult to do justice to the breadth of the canvas Hastings has sketched in a brief essay. Let's dispense with what this book is not: an academic history based on interpretation derived from new archival research. Rather, it is synthesis for a general audience marked by Hastings's observations which, despite the familiarity of the material, are fresh because the author is an equal opportunity judge. None is spared: hawks, doves, communists, politicians, soldiers, anti-war activists—all fall under Hastings's scrutiny. And this is no screed of the sort the history of these events has too often generated; his criticisms are fair. Hastings fluently weaves together the experiences of ordinary people and those of decision-makers at the highest levels, also a hallmark of his writing on the last year of World War II in *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany, 1944–1945* (Knopf, 2004) and *Retri-*

bution: The Battle for Japan, 1944–1945 (Knopf, 2008). Complexity and controversy are bound to this subject, and while *Vietnam* unfolds as a standard chronological narrative, what impresses most are the clarity of the author's assessments and the facility of his presentation.

A slew of inflection points emerges between 1945, when Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam independent with US acquiescence, and the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, when Congress gave President Lyndon Johnson authority to wage war in Southeast Asia. The decision to back France's fight against Vietnamese nationalism; the debate surrounding the 1954 Dienbienphu debacle; the installation of Ngo Dinh Diem as president of the Republic of Vietnam; the gradual accretion of US advisors—Hastings dismisses as fantasy revisionist claims that President Kennedy intended to withdraw from Washington's commitment to Saigon; the disaster at Ap Bac, which exposed Saigon's military limitations; disaffection with Diem, culminating in his assassination during a coup; Kennedy's own assassination; and the elevation of Johnson—a tragic figure whose goals ran afoul of his inability to cope with an intractable conflict and rising domestic dissent.

One irony under which Johnson labored was containment of communism in Asia following the “loss” of China, when, as Hastings shows, both the USSR and China had scant interest in Vietnam. Their support—expressed in weapons, advisors, and propaganda—developed only gradually, and even then they were never enthusiastic backers of Hanoi's ambitions. The other was that the scale of the American effort, which marginalized the Saigon government and rendered South Vietnamese “outsiders in the struggle for their country” (210), legitimized Vietnamese communism.

The year 1964 was pivotal. Even with the “blank check” of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, Johnson's landslide victory in that year's election was probably the last time he could have extricated the United States. After 1964, the war became increasingly destructive as opposition

a. Bowden's book, *Hue 1968: A Turning Point in the American War in Vietnam* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017) was reviewed by Thomas G. Coffey in the March 2018 issue of *Studies in Intelligence* (*Studies in Intelligence* 62, no. 1: 83–85).

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mounted. The 16,000 advisors in 1963 became by 1968 more than 500,000 combat troops. Desultory bombing of North Vietnam initiated under Johnson to pressure Hanoi culminated in the 1972 “Linebacker” strikes under President Nixon to force Hanoi to make concessions at peace talks in Paris. None deterred—or likely ever could have deterred—the North Vietnamese politburo from its goal of unifying Vietnam by whatever means necessary. When the American effort peaked, Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap—though they remained beloved figures in the Vietnamese revolution—had been marginalized by harder men.

Hastings makes clear the utter Stalinist ruthlessness of Le Duan, to which the Tet Offensive of 1968 and its aftermath is a testament: by launching a doctrinaire attempt to foment an uprising, Le Duan exposed a heretofore elusive Southern insurgency to open battle and superior firepower. It never recovered, and the war developed a North Vietnamese face. Americans regard 1968 as the nadir, when in fact only America’s effort began winding down as political will sagged, with the American military suffering a “relentless decline” due to racial tension, drug use, and near-mutinous lack of motivation. (532) The war was more conventionally violent from then until its end in April 1975, with only one side committed to its preferred outcome.

America’s Vietnam nightmare had many components and Hastings offers insights on these. He dismisses the notion that vacillating politicians hamstrung the military, suggesting instead that its commanders “displayed naivete in failing to recognize that in all countries at all times, frustration with political leaders is the default posture of professional warriors, who are themselves almost invariably blessed with less wisdom than they suppose.” (207–8) Similarly, generals like General William Westmoreland were ill-equipped for anything other than a World War II-style straight ahead fight: “Soldiers observe wryly that the unique selling point of their profession is that they kill people. It is too much to ask of most, that they should resolve political and social challenges beyond their intellect, experience, conditioning, and resources.” (210) *Plus ça change . . .*

Politically, the root problem was deceit, and the serial decisions of policymakers to mislead the American people on what was done in their name and why. While this was evident early to those observing the antagonistic rela-

tionship between officialdom in Saigon and the US press corps, it was confirmed extensively with the subsequent leak of the Pentagon Papers. But self-lionizing journalists do not get a pass either, as Hastings shows that critics of the US effort, in the press and elsewhere, were willfully blind about the true nature of the Hanoi regime, feeding its built-in propaganda advantage. Hastings’s conclusion is apt: “The maxim obtains for all those who hold positions of authority, in war as in peace: lie to others if you must, but never to yourselves.” (165)

There is, for Hastings, a bottom line for the tragedy of Vietnam, and it is worth quoting at length because the principle is as valid now as it was then, and awareness of this calculation is useful for anyone engaged in the work of national security.

The fatal error of the United States was to make an almost unlimited commitment to South Vietnam, where its real strategic interest was miniscule, when North Vietnam—the enemy—was content to stake all and faced no requirement to secure or renew popular consent. . . . The basis for a historical indictment of Lyndon Johnson’s decision is that he made his choices with a view to his own interests and those of his country, rather than those of the Vietnamese people. He showed himself blind to proportionality.” (266)

Better still, Hastings’s acute observation on the antiwar movement also applies to the US effort in its entirety: “Americans will forgive almost anything but failure. The struggle tried beyond endurance the patience of the world’s greatest democracy. Many of its citizens turned sour not because their cause appeared morally wrong but instead because it seemed doomed. (386)

Hastings is British, which is notable only because Americans have written most of the standard histories, and he presents multiple perspectives—American, Vietnamese (North and South, military and civilian, guerrilla and regular), Australian, and of great interest, testimony from Chinese and Soviet advisors who served in North Vietnam and not infrequently under American bombs.

Hastings does not treat intelligence as a separate subject, though he does include accounts of practitioners, including Edward Lansdale, Lucien Conein, and William Colby, among others. He does not accept the cliché that Tet 1968 was an intelligence failure, noting that a CIA analyst in Saigon Station anticipated both the event and

its outcome based on abundant indicators, and he is more measured than most on the Phoenix Program, which usually gets one-dimensional treatment. His theme, rather, is that individual failures are beside the point when the whole enterprise was fatally flawed because it was built on a foundation of deceit and lacked any realistic appreciation of proportionality based on American strategic interests.

While not everyone will agree with Hastings's judgments, this root conclusion is difficult to deny. As the author styles the work an epic, some examination of the conflict's legacy—both culturally and in the “real” world—would have been welcome. The notion that America saw the ghost of Vietnam off in 1991 is facile, and if Hastings has accomplished anything with this book, it is to show that there is no survival value in self-deception.



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