

## Takes on Intelligence and the Vietnam War

*Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975*, by John Prados. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 665 pp.

*Why Vietnam Matters: An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned*, by Rufus Phillips. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 398 pp.

*This Time We Win: Revisiting the Tet Offensive*, by James S. Robbins. (New York: Encounter Books, 2010), 364 pp.

### Reviewed by Clayton Laurie

---

On hearing different and opposing assessments regarding US progress in Vietnam by two members of the same fact-finding team in the fall of 1963, President John F. Kennedy quipped, “The two of you did visit the same country, didn’t you?” Readers of these three books seeking a better understanding of the CIA’s role in Southeast Asia and the lessons of that conflict for today may well ask a similar question. Nearly 40 years after the end of the US involvement, after the publication of a score of histories describing CIA activities during that time, and after the declassification of thousands of documents, opinions regarding Agency failures and accomplishments remain far apart, as do the authors’ interpretations of how the experiences of Vietnam apply to the conflicts of today.

Independent historian and self-described “engaged leftist intellectual” John Prados needs little introduction to scholars of intelligence history or of the Vietnam War, as he has written some 17 books on these subjects.<sup>1</sup> His latest work, published by the University Press of Kansas, will undoubtedly have a wide readership and garner acclaim from those who share his interpretations of the war and of the CIA. A large study, with a comprehensive bibli-

ographic essay citing a wide range of archival and published sources, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War* is a recipient of the Henry Adams Prize from the Society for Historians in the Federal Government and has received numerous accolades from academic reviewers. The history, intended as a broad overview of the conflict, deals extensively with high politics and the antiwar movement, but it also frequently refers to the CIA’s role at home and abroad.

Prados tends to view the CIA as an organization whose activities in Southeast Asia and at home generally contributed more to the problems of the day than to their solutions. Such critical assessments emerge throughout this work when the CIA is mentioned, starting with the Saigon Military Mission (SMM) in 1954 and extending through passing treatments of covert operations, the order-of-battle controversy, Agency activities in Laos, the Phoenix program and rural pacification, and involvement with South Vietnamese leaders. From this work, however, a reader new to CIA history would get the erroneous impression that the Agency engaged in all manner of nefarious activities in Vietnam, failed in most every Southeast Asia-related mission, and spent the

---

<sup>1</sup> Prados is affiliated with the George Washington University’s National Security Archive, and he frequently blogs about the CIA on the archive website, [www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/).

---

*All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in this article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.*

---

better part of its resources on illegal surveillance and collection activities against those involved in the antiwar movement at home—the latter a rare and relatively brief deviation from the Agency’s traditional foreign intelligence mission, which did score numerous Cold War successes in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

Prados has chosen to give little or no attention to publicly available CIA-commissioned histories of the period, and unfortunately his book went to press before the release in 2009 of several in-depth, formerly classified, CIA-sponsored histories written by Thomas L. Ahern, and before the release of documents on the Agency’s proprietary airline, Air America.<sup>2</sup> Other available works, such as the National Intelligence Council’s published collection of estimates produced during the Vietnam War, Ahern’s published history on the CIA and rural pacification, and Harold Ford’s *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers* are cited but not extensively used in this volume.<sup>3</sup>

Unused and uncited are a number of well-documented and rich treatments of Agency programs that give fuller and more positive perspectives—although not without criticism—on its efforts during the period, and at the same time more accurately reflect the environment in which the Agency operated at home and abroad. For example, MHCHAOS, mentioned in passing by Prados, gets full treatment in *Richard Helms as Director of Central Intelligence*, declassified in 2006.<sup>4</sup> *Studies in Intelligence* also has published many now-declassified articles dealing with Southeast Asia, especially technical collection and reconnaissance programs. Other pertinent publications, such as the CIA chief historian David

Robarge’s monograph on the A-12 Archangel supersonic aircraft would have provided more on that technological feat.<sup>5</sup> Sadly, the portrayal of the CIA in Prados’s work tends to reflect the antiwar, anti-Establishment view so often heard since the 1970s, when the Agency first faced lurid and media-sensationalized allegations of wrongdoing and intense congressional hearings.

In recent years, a new generation of Vietnam War scholars, many born after the conflict and whose perspectives come from scholarly research rather than direct participation in the war’s events at home or in Southeast Asia, have challenged many accepted interpretations touched on in Prados’s work, such as his discussion of the Phoenix program, and suggest that revisions in his thinking might be in order. But Prados dismisses those other scholars and the debate they have initiated. He writes, “this is not revisionism, it is neo-orthodoxy.” (328) One would conclude from such statements that the author made up his mind about US and CIA involvement in Southeast Asia long ago and that no amount of new material will change his views. As he writes, “Ultimately I side with those who consider Vietnam an unwinnable war. I came to that view early, but extensive research and deep analysis confirm that impression.” (xv) For the intelligence officer, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War* does more to reveal the author’s perception of the CIA than its role in the war. For the latter, Agency-released histories provide the fullest picture.

*Why Vietnam Matters: An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned*, by Rufus Phillips, certainly ranks as an account that all intelligence officers should read and consider.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Air America material and Ahern’s six studies, with one exception lightly redacted, are available in CIA’s Freedom of Information Act Reading Room in its special collections section: [http://www.foia.cia.gov/special\\_collections.asp](http://www.foia.cia.gov/special_collections.asp). Ahern’s volume on rural pacification was published as *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009)

<sup>3</sup> Harold Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes 1962–1968* (Washington, DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998). This publication is available online at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/cia-and-the-vietnam-policymakers-three-episodes-1962-1968/index.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Hathaway and Russell Jack Smith, *Richard Helms as Director of Central Intelligence* (Washington, DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1993). A scanned copy of this publication is available online at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/helms.asp>.

<sup>5</sup> David Robarge, *Archangel: CIA’s Supersonic A-12 Reconnaissance Aircraft* (Washington, DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1997). This publication is available online at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/a-12/index.html>.

Phillips's detailed memoir, which describes his service with the CIA and USAID in Vietnam and Laos between 1954 and 1968, draws on archival research, interviews, official volumes from the Department of State and CIA—including Ahern's pacification volume—plus many other pertinent scholarly publications to form a very readable account. The book makes use of many of the same sources as Prados's work, but it differs greatly in tone and in its views of the CIA's efforts, although it is still critical at times. The discursive endnotes and biographical sketches bring the reader up to date on the people who played key roles many decades ago, and an extensive bibliographical essay suggests further reading.

A US Army officer on detached service with the CIA, Phillips arrived in Southeast Asia as a member of the Agency's small SMM in July 1954. Established after a request by President Dwight Eisenhower to DCI Allen Dulles to advise and stabilize the Emperor Bao Dai's government under Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem, the SMM undertook what must have seemed a Herculean task. The legendary Edward G. Lansdale, a US Air Force officer assigned to the CIA and fresh from the successful repression of the Huk rebellion in the Philippines, directed the effort. In the fall of 1954, he set out to do in South Vietnam what he had done in the Philippines—stabilize, boost, and strengthen the government, while removing communist-inspired threats to the new regime.

Phillips points out early on, and frequently reiterates, that Lansdale and those small numbers concerned with the "other war" (defined as rural development and winning the support of the largely peasant southern population) worked outside the US diplomatic, military, economic, and intelligence bureaucracy in cooperation with their South Vietnamese counterparts in a relationship based on common knowledge, mutual respect, and shared goals. The SMM assisted these local efforts and never sought to dominate what was a job the Vietnamese had to do for themselves—as President Kennedy would say in an interview with correspondent Walter Cronkite in the fall of 1963. SMM personnel, in Phillips's view, from Lansdale on down, were sincere and selfless

American patriots who possessed great knowledge of Asian cultures and history, superlative interpersonal skills, and a clear ability to work with, and not around, the South Vietnamese in a common fight against communism.

Perhaps most important, Phillips, like Lansdale—and unlike most American military and political leaders—recognized that the war against Ho Chi Minh represented first and foremost a political and ideological war and not a contest of arms. Victory or defeat hinged on gaining or losing adherents to the cause in both Southeast Asia and the United States. Bullets, bombs, and troops could not triumph alone, in any amount or over any length of time. Only by providing peasants with rural security, lifting them from poverty, and educating them on the merits of democracy and the evils of communism, could South Vietnam survive and the US obtain its goals. While Lansdale worked with the new regime on higher-level state stabilization matters in Saigon, Phillips worked with the peasants in the Mekong Delta, central coast, and central highlands. Phillips found the peasants amenable and loyal to Diem's government once rural development projects began and the peasants realized alternatives to the communists existed—the only other presence in the countryside prior to 1954 was the despised French. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), in Phillips's view, also exerted a positive influence once its units moved into the villages. Contrary to most traditional accounts, Phillips notes that the people came over to support the government, ARVN troops integrated well into the villages, and peace and stability came to the countryside.

It is here though that Phillips saw the first indications of things going seriously wrong. The SMM closed in November 1956, its mission accomplished. US efforts then went big, years before US efforts went even bigger during 1964–65. As Phillips writes, bureaucracy took over. The CIA established a station as part of a larger, ever growing State Department Country Team. The US Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG)—like its 1962 successor, the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam—removed the ARVN from the villages and reconstructed the force as a conven-

tional Western-style army to counter an expected North Vietnamese invasion. The ultimate US–South Vietnamese defeat, Phillips claims, really occurred then, although he still held out hope as late as 1972 that the overall situation could be saved. Yet the cooperative connection to the South Vietnamese, both within their government and among the peasantry, was lost, never to return.

Following this early service, Phillips worked in similar programs for the CIA in Laos before returning to Agency Headquarters in Washington. Fed up with bureaucracy, especially after experiencing the independence of field work, he resigned from the Agency. When he returned to Vietnam with USAID in the early 1960s and became involved in the Strategic Hamlet Program, he noted with growing alarm the strained and distant relationship between most Americans assigned to rural areas and the South Vietnamese. Efforts to shift focus back to the classic counterinsurgency, to reintroduce Lansdale, and to influence President Kennedy's policies all failed, even though Phillips made direct appeals to Kennedy in the fall of 1963. These White House meetings were contentious, as military and civilian advisers, including Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, took issue with Phillips's assessments and showed early signs of favoring a US military commitment.

Although Phillips stayed involved for several more years, the Americanization of the war after 1965 pushed rural development into the background with dire results. Phillips writes favorably of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program, which began in 1967 and increased in intensity after the communist Tet offensive of 1968. To him, CORDS represented the embodiment of what he had worked towards since the mid-1950s. With rural pacification and security, nation building, and anti-Viet Cong activities all under one program, progress came swiftly. "By 1972," Phillips writes, "most of South Vietnam, particularly in the Delta area, was not only pacified but peaceful. So was most of central Vietnam." Phillips continues, "the North Vietnamese would later admit they suffered a severe reversal in the South Vietnam-

ese countryside in the years after 1968, acknowledging that many of their bases had been wiped out in South Vietnam and that numbers of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops had been compelled to retreat to sanctuaries in Cambodia." (301) These firsthand observations confirm much of what newer Vietnam scholarship now shows, although improvements came too little and too late to affect the outcome of a war the American public had abandoned.

As a thoughtful participant in the events described, Phillips offers some practical lessons for those involved in today's counterinsurgencies. Foremost, Phillips stresses that Americans must know who they are as a people, and leaders must know (and be realistic) about what they are trying to attain abroad. US leaders must also know their allies and adversaries.

More important, however, Phillips maintains that if our nation is to be involved in such conflicts, we must know the "x factor"—the political and psychological nature of the struggle for hearts and minds—and the feelings of the people for whom we are fighting. We need to communicate with them on a human level, understand what motivates them, and view the conflict through their history, society, and culture. We need to know our enemies, their capabilities and motivations, as well as the level of their willingness to continue their resistance and up to what level of cost. Decisionmakers must be able to explain and connect policies and events abroad to the American public. Finally, Phillips repeatedly emphasizes that we must know whether we are fighting a conventional war or a political/ideological war—or a combination of both—so that we can bring the most suitable weapons to bear. These would include, of course, knowledgeable intelligence officers and military personnel willing to work long, hard years at the grassroots level.

James S. Robbins's *This Time We Win: Revisiting the Tet Offensive* clearly fits into the revisionist school of Vietnam War history that Prados dismisses. *This Time We Win* is not a history of the CIA in Southeast Asia, although the "Intelligence Failure" chapter accurately

speaks of the Agency, its analysis of the war in 1967, and the warning it provided before the 1968 Tet offensive. Robbins positively portrays CIA activities in a way not usually seen in most published histories.

The main value of this book for intelligence officers lies in its descriptions of how public perceptions—for better or worse—affect a nation's foreign policy and the course of its military conflicts. Focusing on public, political, and media perceptions of the Tet Offensive during its initial phase in January and February 1968, Robbins claims that most Americans saw the event negatively and today remember Tet for all the wrong reasons. The perception of loss, he argues, became a self-fulfilling prophecy, even though history shows that what happened in the offensive was a military defeat for the North. In short, the US lost in Vietnam not because of any military defeats but because US leaders, in effect, chose to lose and repeatedly avoided opportunities for victory.

Historians have long accepted that the communists suffered a major military defeat during the short but ferocious Tet offensive in 1968. At the same time, historians accept that the communists scored a major political and psychological victory as American public opinion turned against the war their leaders had consistently said they were winning. Using a wide variety of government records, published histories, interviews, and television and print news accounts, Robbins shows that Tet may have shocked the public, but it came as no surprise to US intelligence officials, soldiers, or politicians in the Johnson administration. All had anticipated a last-ditch offensive in South Vietnam months in advance, prepared for it militarily, and rapidly defeated it once it occurred, inflicting a clear military defeat on the communists, who failed to achieve any of their goals.

Robbins goes on to describe a US administration that essentially snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. President Johnson failed to explain what had happened; what the administration knew and what it had been doing beforehand; and how Tet affected or did not affect long-term US goals. This lackluster response, reinforced by media reports focusing

on the spectacular, gave Tet the appearance of a major setback and served as proof that US policies had failed. The idea that Tet constituted an American catastrophe settled in the public's mind and never went away. Robbins concludes that "Tet was less a case of intelligence failure than a public relations fiasco." (123)

This all matters today, Robbins maintains, "because the Vietnam War is remembered by a large segment of the political class as pointless, immoral, and illegitimate, [and the] mere mention of Vietnam tends to delegitimize any conflict to which it is compared." (9) Because Vietnam has been so widely seen as an unwinnable war, comparisons of that conflict to the current battles in Afghanistan and Iraq are not intended to lend clarity, "but rather to couch the discussion in terms of inevitable defeat." (9)

Robbins warns that US adversaries today have drawn inspiration from the Tet offensive and hope to score similar victories. They see "America's national will as an Achilles heel" that negates its policies and power. Tet proved that a small, weak force could defeat the most powerful nation in human history by creating a big splash and the perception of power where none existed. This provided an immediate political victory that set up the North's future military triumph. Robbins concludes that the United States could just as easily lose today's conflicts if its people convince themselves that they cannot succeed.

All three books are excellent for their treatment of the history of the Vietnam War and the CIA's role in the conflict. They are less effective in their pointed analogies and comparisons of that war to the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. History is rarely so neat as to provide direct and applicable comparisons—as if times, actors, policies, and circumstances do not change. In the authors' attempts to connect what happened in Vietnam to what is happening now, one is led to wonder if writing history was their goal or if they merely intended to harness history to reinforce, or undermine, present-day policies and political agendas.

❖ ❖ ❖