



2009.07.02

Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008. Pp. viii, 214. ISBN 978-0-19-531465-6.

Review by Gregory A. Daddis, U.S. Army (gregory.daddis@usma.edu)

Lieutenant Colonel Gregory A. Daddis (Ph.D. North Carolina) is an Academy Professor of History at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point. He is currently serving in Baghdad as the Multi-National Corps-Iraq Command Historian. — Ed.

This succinct introductory survey of the Vietnam War is a useful reminder that, while the United States played a central role in Indochina throughout much of the late twentieth century, global competitors in both Europe and Asia helped shape the course and outcome of fighting in Vietnam. In less than two hundred pages of clear, crisp prose, Mark Atwood Lawrence, a University of Texas professor of history,¹ succeeds in “examining the American role within a broadly international context” (4).

In a chronological treatment of events from the era of French colonization through the end of the “Second Indochina War,” Lawrence addresses four key thematic questions that have incited historical debate over the past few decades. First, he assesses the motives of Vietnamese revolutionaries as a fascinating backdrop to, secondly, evaluating why international powers devoted so much time and resources to Vietnam after the Second World War. His third line of inquiry—explaining U.S. defeat—sheds light more broadly on how foreign actors affected American political and military strategies. Finally, *The Vietnam War* briefly examines the question of the conflict’s legacies not only in the United States and in Vietnam but in Cambodia and Laos as well.

Lawrence establishes his international approach with a pithy review of early Vietnamese independence struggles against Chinese domination before turning to nineteenth-century French imperialism, in both cases, supporting his central argument that “Vietnam’s political development owed much to ... shift[s] in the larger geopolitical environment” (9). French colonization, understood in the context of the industrial revolution, particularly transformed life inside Vietnam. Not only did the French presence restructure Vietnam’s social order, the growing manipulation of the Vietnamese economy helped create a forceful nationalist movement that influenced national politics well into the next century.

For Lawrence, this budding nationalist movement flowered under Ho Chi Minh. Although this is not new material, he offers a vivid and compelling picture of Ho as a consummate political actor who “showed a remarkable ideological flexibility to succeed where earlier nationalists has failed” (17) and attracted people from elites to peasants by merging international communist ideas on social revolution with local designs for Vietnamese independence. The Second World War provided Ho with further opportunities on the international stage. With French power and prestige weakened in the aftermath of Germany’s 1940 invasion, the League for the Independence of Vietnam, or Viet Minh, expanded its political influence throughout the countryside and, as Lawrence skillfully demonstrates, made the exploitation of openings created by foreign powers a centerpiece of Vietnamese politics and military strategy in the post-war era.

Tensions generated by the Cold War, while providing opportunities to astute Vietnamese leaders like Ho Chi Minh, also pushed Indochina toward full-scale war. Lawrence describes the anxieties of the Chinese, Soviets, and Americans as Vietnam became “a vital front in the global confrontation between democratic capitalism and international communism” (28). Within these lines of inquiry, *The Vietnam War* is most compelling. Lawrence portrays anxious U.S. leaders seeking dependable anti-communist allies as the Chinese civil war unfolded in the late 1940s. Concerned about alienating France and undercutting their containment policies in Europe, Washington was hesitant to challenge French designs to reconquer Indochina.

¹ And author of *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 2005).

Thus, while the French army waged a war with the Viet Minh that drained its nation's financial and military resources, the United States spent roughly \$3 billion to prop up its European ally. Lawrence demonstrates, however, that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was equally successful in obtaining foreign assistance between 1947 and 1950, noting that "at this critical point, the war in Vietnam assumed a dual character that would persist for years to come: it was simultaneously a colonial struggle and a Cold War confrontation" (36).

Lawrence's depiction of the French-Indochina War builds upon his internationally focused narrative. Though the United States bore the lion's share of the war's costs, the French could not break the deadlock against the Viet Minh revolutionaries. Further, Chinese military assistance allowed Hanoi to build a modern army from its guerrilla forces as the Soviet Union paid greater attention to Southeast Asia. The Geneva Settlement of 1954, following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, further illustrated the power of other nations to manipulate events with Vietnam. Both China and the Soviet Union agreed to partition Vietnam temporarily into communist and non-communist halves—Beijing because it was interested in domestic affairs after participating in an exhausting Korean War, Moscow because of internal troubles in the aftermath of Stalin's death. The interplay over Vietnam among the great powers in the early 1950s is absorbing; the only disappointment here is that reasons of space prohibited Lawrence from delving deeper into the motivations for foreign policy decisions made in Washington, Beijing, and Moscow.

Lawrence gives a concise overview of how Hanoi and Saigon consolidated power in the aftermath of the Geneva Settlement. By early 1961, the newly founded National Liberation Front (NLF) had "laid the political and military groundwork for a new war" (65). The ensuing sensible description of the war will raise the hackles of some revisionist Vietnam historians.² As Lawrence convincingly argues, by 1961 the conflict had "acquired one of the most distinct features it would have over the years to come: it was simultaneously a civil war among Southerners and a cross-border effort by Hanoi to reunify the country on its own terms, a complexity that would often elude American policymakers prone to see the conflict simply as a result of Northern aggression against the South" (65).

The American decision in the early 1960s to expend greater resources and ultimately blood in Vietnam necessarily brings the United States closer to the center of the narrative. Though Lawrence keeps his focus primarily on strategic and operational matters during the American war (appropriately, given the book's brevity), he never loses sight of the international context. He demonstrates that Presidents Kennedy and Johnson expanded U.S. commitment to South Vietnam not out of confidence but out of fear that governments across the globe would question American commitments if South Vietnam were allowed to fall to the communists without a fight. This "political pressure to make a stand in Vietnam" (71) sprang from both domestic and international sources. Additionally, as Hanoi readied for a prolonged international confrontation, it petitioned both China and the Soviet Union for increased aid. In an intriguing passage, Lawrence shows that Leonid Brezhnev stepped up support for Hanoi, fearing that "failure to do so would cede Southeast Asia to Chinese domination and weaken Soviet claims to leadership throughout the Third World" (95). The United States, interestingly, met with limited success in persuading its main allies to help in Southeast Asia.

Lawrence's synopsis of the American phase of the Vietnam War (1965–72) is fairly conventional and scholars will find little that challenges standard interpretations. The author argues that from the start "the Joint Chiefs pursued a strategy of attrition" (102), though new research disputes this version of the United States' approach to unconventional warfare in Southeast Asia.³ What Lawrence does substantiate, however, is that American uniformed and civilian officials failed to identify and implement effective methods for challenging the NLF's claims to legitimacy in what many Vietnamese deemed to be a national war for independence. The chapter on Tet, for example, reinforces Lawrence's contention that U.S. leaders were unable

² On revisionist interpretations of the war see Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009) 14–16.

³ See, e.g., Andrew J. Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Military History* 72 (2008) 1213–47.

to break the war's stalemate because the Saigon government failed to compete for a broad base of loyalty among South Vietnam's increasingly war weary population.

The ending of the American war brought few strategic changes, despite the election of a new American president and the opening of peace negotiations. Lawrence argues cogently that the "new administration ran up against old problems. Though badly damaged, communist forces refused to buckle. Though apparently stable, the South Vietnamese government failed to gain support among its people. Though relieved by declining U.S. casualties, the American public and Congress continue to sour on the war" (137). Like his predecessors, Richard Nixon fretted that a hasty American withdrawal from the war would damage the stature of the United States around the globe. The new president's reading of the international framework ensured that other foreign powers would continue to influence the course and conduct of the war in Southeast Asia.

Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, aimed to "isolate North Vietnam diplomatically" (139), first by courting the Soviet Union and then by improving Sino-American relations. Lawrence weaves together this foreign diplomatic wrangling with the fighting in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Any new American approach, however, seemed to address only the symptoms, not the causes, of Vietnamese political discord. Nixon's policy of Vietnamization, aimed at increasing the quality of the South Vietnamese forces while U.S. troops withdrew from Southeast Asia, foundered on pervasive government corruption and a lack of inspired leadership. Pacification programs, intended to secure and support the population, tended only to alienate peasants from the Saigon government. Land reform measures proved largely ineffective. If Lawrence equivocates somewhat on the reasons for U.S. failure in Vietnam, his narrative still makes clear that American policymakers and military officers failed to understand the root causes behind both the internal civil war and external cross-border aggression.

The final chapter of *The Vietnam War* considers the legacies of a war that hardly ended after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords (January 1973). Lawrence contends that a "sense of inconclusiveness" prevailed among the South Vietnamese and Americans, noting the frustrations of one young captain who lamented, "We didn't win a war. There's nothing clear-cut. Nobody surrendered" (161). While the speed of Saigon's fall in 1975 surprised even the North Vietnamese and fighting in Cambodia and Laos defined wartime brutality, Lawrence observes that the "United States suffered remarkably few geopolitical setbacks" (170). Indochina did not succumb to Chinese dominance, and American alliances around the globe survived largely intact. Inside Vietnam, the war's legacies included economic depression and an isolation that forced Hanoi to find other international partners after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The fears of American policymakers did not come to pass.

The information Lawrence packs into such a short volume is most impressive: his "introductory study" is both comprehensive and economical. But because he relies so heavily on secondary works, serious scholars will not find much to alter their views of the war. For an undergraduate course on the Vietnam War, however, this excellent work usefully offers a number of perspectives on warfare in the modern age. Moreover, Lawrence achieves his principal objective of reminding us that the geopolitical environment decisively shaped the Vietnam experience in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.