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Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009. Pp. xiii, 233. ISBN 978-0-19-280349-8.

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It is nearly forty years since the victorious Vietnamese watched helicopters ferrying the last American embassy personnel to navy vessels lying off the coast in April 1975. Although the military phase of what the Vietnamese called the “American War” had ended, the United States continued, and in some respects still continues, to wage war on Vietnam through both military and non-military means. Only twenty years after the war did the United States resume normal economic and diplomatic relations with Vietnam; it did not, however, make good on the reparations promised in a secret protocol of the 1973 treaty ending the war. It has contributed but a tiny fraction of the costs of cleaning up the still toxic Agent Orange with which it defoliated one-third of South Vietnam, nor has it helped the estimated one million Vietnamese sickened by the highly carcinogenic herbicide. Accidental detonations of unexploded cluster bombs and other ordnance kill hundreds of Vietnamese each year, while the United States does nothing to help eliminate this lethal war legacy. The war persists on an ideological level, too. POW/MIA flags still fly in the United States, even though congressional investigations dating from 1976 have found that the Vietnamese no longer hold any prisoners of war and that soldiers missing in action at the war’s close likely died on the battlefield, their bodies never recovered.¹

The American War continues, too, in memory and in written histories of Vietnam. In *Vietnam at War*,² historian Mark Philip Bradley (Univ. of Chicago) offers a particularly sharp reminder of this ongoing ideological war. He promises readers that the “overarching focus” of his book will be upon the “multiple perspectives” of the “Vietnamese themselves,” during the war years (5). This is a laudable objective, given the crying need for Americans to see the war through eyes other than their own. It would be enlightening, for example, to know what the Vietnamese were thinking when those last helicopters left Saigon. Unfortunately, Bradley does not deliver on his promise. Instead he offers another US-centered narrative of the war, only occasionally using Vietnamese voices to tell the American story. He takes at face value US rationales for the war, while making no serious effort to understand how it was possible for a poor peasant nation to thwart the successive schemes of the world’s mightiest power.

Bradley opens by characterizing the “many Vietnam wars,” including “an anti-colonial war with France, a cold war turned hot with the United States, a civil war between North and South Vietnam and among southern Vietnamese” (2), as well as a war over visions of Vietnam’s future. To be sure, Bradley’s Cold War/Civil War paradigm corresponds with entrenched American interpretations as well as those of a few Vietnamese. In the conventional view, the United States came to the aid of a South Vietnamese population being victimized from within by an aggressive communist minority and from without by the communist government of North Vietnam. But most Vietnamese, certainly those who led and fought the battles against France and the United States, see the war very differently. While historians may certainly take different positions from those of their principal subjects themselves, Bradley seriously misleads his readers by arguing his Cold War/Civil War thesis without ever fully articulating the Vietnamese position he is denying.

The National Liberation Front (NLF) and the leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), for example, believed they were fighting not a civil war but a protracted war for national liberation against successively the Japanese, French, and Americans. They believed an imperialist United States was pursuing global hegemony by crushing the surge of anti-colonial revolutions that erupted at the close of World War

1. US House of Representatives, *Americans Missing in Southeast Asia* (Washington: GPO, 1976) 238–39.

2. Reprinted in paperback in 2012.

II. As early as 1946, Vietnamese leader Truong Chinh argued that Vietnam's revolution alarmed the imperial powers because it "had breached the colonial system ... at one of its weakest links, starting a process of irretrievable disintegration of colonialism throughout the world.... The Vietnamese Revolution, like the Chinese and Indonesian Revolutions, is a strong impulse to the liberation movements of the Lao and Cambodian peoples and other colonial countries in South-East Asia."³ In other words, Vietnam posed a threat to the Western powers by offering an example to other economically dependent colonial peoples.⁴ Two decades later, a Vietnamese scholar, Vu Quy Vy, similarly argued that Vietnam "had been the first country to have shaken off the colonial yoke, in 1945. It was the first nation liberated from colonialism to choose socialism. For Washington, this was too much. This bad example should be nipped in the bud and enslaved peoples dissuaded from taking the dangerous path of national liberation...."⁵

Ignoring such opinions, Bradley promotes his own view of the American War as part of a civil war between North and South Vietnam, portraying the South Vietnamese government as a legitimate entity, not merely a puppet whose strings were pulled in Washington.⁶ He does, however, acknowledge that the Bao Dai government (1949–55) "had largely been a fiction through which France continued its rule of Vietnam" (79), calling it a French "puppet" (51, 62). This reproduces the contemporary US view of the French/Bao Dai regime. American policy makers rightly understood that the French could not defeat the Viet Minh⁷ so long as they openly acted as defenders of their own colonial empire. Hence, the United States persistently urged the French to continue their war of colonial re-conquest under the guise of standing beside an "independent" Vietnamese ally against the Viet Minh "communist" enemy. This fiction required the French to grant "independence" to their loyal Vietnamese servants.⁸

For Bradley, the advent of Ngo Dinh Diem's rule in South Vietnam marks the transition from a French-controlled colonial government to a "fledgling," or "embryonic Vietnamese state" (78–79). Bao Dai appointed Diem his prime minister, knowing he was a fanatic with "messianic" tendencies, but who nevertheless enjoyed the unreserved support of the United States, the new power in the wake of French failure (81). So, Diem was chosen not as a significant leader who stood for the aspirations of Vietnam's people, but because his American backing, according to Bradley, conferred legitimacy on the South Vietnamese government. "In the wake of the Geneva settlement," ending the unsuccessful French War, "Ngo Dinh Diem came to rule southern Vietnam" (78); true enough, but Bradley omits from the record the concerted US efforts to establish Diem's puppet regime and scuttle the Geneva Accord-mandated reunification elections for Vietnam.

Bradley need not have looked far to discover the truth about the Government of South Vietnam. Writing in the late 1960s, one of the men charged with secretly compiling and analyzing the US Defense Department's *Pentagon Papers* summarized the American role in founding South Vietnam:

Without U.S. support ... Diem almost certainly could not have consolidated his hold on the South during 1955 and 1956. Without the threat of U.S. intervention, South Vietnam could not have refused to even discuss the elections called for in 1956 under the Geneva settlement without being immediately overrun by the Vietminh

3. *The Resistance Will Win* [1960], in *Selected Writings* (Hanoi: Foreign Lang. Publ. House, 1977) 55.

4. Cf. the US government's "domino theory," of which Bradley makes no mention, even though it was long the chief rationale for US anti-communist foreign policy.

5. "American War Crimes in South Vietnam," *Vietnamese Studies* no. 17 (Hanoi: Foreign Lang. Publ. House, c. 1969) 54.

6. Bradley uses the term "puppet government" only three times in the book—of the government Vietnam set up in Cambodia after the defeat of Pol Pot's genocidal regime in 1979 (177) and (twice) of governments the Japanese established in Vietnam during World War II (37, 80).

7. I.e., Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi (League for the Independence of Vietnam).

8. The French, to be sure, understood Washington's game. General Henri Navarre, the last of a succession of failed French commanders in Indochina, wrote in his postwar book *Agonie de l'Indochine* (Paris: Plon, 1958) that "Little by little they push us out. They take our place, but in an almost invisible form which only the power of the dollar can afford. There is no governor, no resident, no high commissioner, but there is an ambassador of the USA, without whose permission nothing can be done. The peoples believe they are free because they are governed by politicians of their race, without seeing that those politicians, pitilessly held under the sway of money, are but American puppets"—quoted from Nguyen Khac Vien, "A Short History of Neo-Colonialism," *Vietnamese Studies* no. 26 (Hanoi: Foreign Lang. Publ. House, 1970) 43–44.

armies. Without U.S. aid in the years following, the Diem regime certainly, and an independent South Vietnam almost as certainly, could not have survived.... South Vietnam was essentially the creation of the United States.⁹

Yet Bradley places the Saigon government on the same plane as the DRV government: “This book examines the thought and actions of high policy makers in Hanoi and Saigon” (5–6). “High policy makers” in Saigon, indeed! As though that government had any genuinely independent voice. The United States cracked the whip and the Saigon government responded, whether more or less swiftly. When it became clear, for example, that Diem’s stubborn efforts to defeat the NLF had failed, the United States sanctioned the 1963 coup that removed him. The Saigon generals who plotted the overthrow, knowing the true relations and sources of power in South Vietnam, did not proceed until they knew they had America’s blessings for their endeavor.¹⁰

After a dozen reshufflings of the Saigon administration following Diem’s excision, US officials concluded that the Saigon generals’ rivalries were imperiling the war effort and Ambassador Maxwell Taylor scolded them like children, telling them they had broken enough dishes and must clean up the mess.¹¹ After defending their actions, the generals complied with Taylor’s demands and maintained a stable, if corrupt, government during the rest of the American War on Vietnam.

Bradley provides some biographical background on Ngo Dinh Diem, but very little on the main Saigon “high policy-makers” who followed him. (That would have exposed the anti-national character of the South Vietnamese Government.) These leaders included Duong Van “Big” Minh, who led the coup against Diem; Nguyen Khan, who in turn toppled Big Minh and initially had the strong backing of Ambassador/Proconsul Taylor, but later angered him and left Vietnam at his insistence; Nguyen Cao Ky, a flamboyant admirer of Hitler, who replaced Khan; and Nguyen Van Thieu, South Vietnam’s final president, who, like all his predecessors, had fought with the French colonialists against the Viet Minh.

Bradley makes his sympathies clear by attempting to discredit the DRV and the NLF whenever he can. For example, he portrays the Viet Minh and their leader, Ho Chi Minh, as stereotypical communist manipulators, even writing that the DRV “embarked on a two-pronged strategy, one that downplayed its communist origins and accelerated the turn during the Second World War to graduated rural reform and an inclusive nationalism” (43). But, in fact, even before the DRV existed or Ho Chi Minh had founded Vietnam’s communist party, patriots like Ho had sought freedom from French colonialism. Ho later came to believe that Vietnamese independence could best be achieved through the leadership of a communist party. In other words, communism in Vietnam originated in the nationalist movement, not the other way around. The Viet Minh did not “downplay” its communism in order to trick innocent Vietnamese into joining them; rather, they were from the start nationalists bent on rousing the entire nation against French colonialism. The Viet Minh and the NLF secured broad popular participation in the successive struggles against Japan, France, and the United States precisely because they were nationalist movements. That many Viet Minh, NLF, and DRV leaders were communists does not change the fact that the Vietnamese were engaged in a determined anti-colonial struggle for national liberation.

Even when Bradley must mention the brutality of the US war, he underplays it and shifts responsibility for it onto the Vietnamese. For example, he writes that the American military and South Vietnamese authorities “established ‘free-fire zones’ in which artillery and air power could be used indiscriminately to dislodge NLF forces.... Civilians in free-fire zones were often caught in deadly crossfire, and many villages were entirely destroyed” (118). The passive voice here conceals the fact that the American military destroyed villages and displaced millions of Vietnamese villagers *as a matter of policy* in order to separate the “fish” (revolutionary guerrillas) from the “sea” (rural southern Vietnamese population). In short, killing and uprooting Vietnamese peasants and leveling their villages were not unfortunate byproducts of the American War; they

9. Quoted in Fox Butterfield, “The Truman and Eisenhower Years: 1945–1960,” *Pentagon Papers* (NY: Bantam, 1971) 25.

10. See Hedrick Smith, “The Overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem: May–November, 1963,” *Pentagon Papers*, 158–233.

11. *Pentagon Papers*, 379–81.

were essential elements of US strategy and tactics, seen as the best way to defeat a national liberation movement. Indeed, given its immediate and long-term goals—crushing the liberation movement and making Vietnam a cautionary example for other peoples—the United States had no option but to terrorize and brutalize the Vietnamese population.¹² But, of course, Bradley can give us no sense of this reality since he refuses to acknowledge that Vietnam’s war was one of national liberation.

By any measure, Vietnam faced one of the most ferocious military machines in world history. That machine, possessing complete air superiority, rained down fiery napalm and white phosphorous death on Vietnamese villages, designating whole areas of the countryside free fire zones. It sprayed millions of gallons of carcinogenic chemicals across large portions of southern Vietnam, dropped tens of thousands of body-shredding cluster bombs, let loose football field clearing “daisy-cutter” bombs, saturated urban and rural areas with literally megatons of carpet bombings, and unleashed on defenseless villages millions of artillery rounds. It sent half a million troops to “search and destroy” in Vietnam’s hamlets and villages, and it measured its success with body counts, the operative rule being that any dead body—man, woman, child, or baby—was the enemy. Vietnam’s resistance to this onslaught must rank as one of the world’s greatest struggles for national liberation, a tribute to the spirit and resilience of human beings. But *Vietnam at War*, supposedly written to emphasize the perspective of Vietnam’s people, is a soulless book that makes no effort to describe, still less understand, this resistance.

12. Nick Turse, in *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2013) 6, correctly argues that the unrelenting US brutality cannot be ascribed to a few “bad apples”—“[m]urder torture, rape, abuse, forced displacement, home burnings, specious arrests ... were no aberration. Rather, they were the inevitable outcome of deliberate policies, dictated at the highest levels of the military.” We must not judge the reality of such policies solely through directives, memoranda, written field orders, etc., but also, and especially, through the actual conduct of war. Moreover, we are familiar with the principal strategic concept that drove military policy: the domino theory. The United States sought to prevent the “fall of South Vietnam,” in order to prevent the “fall” of the rest of Asia and the rest of the world. Robert McNaughton, chief aide to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, succinctly defined America’s overarching strategic objective as “to preserve our reputation as a guarantor, and thus to preserve our effectiveness in the rest of the world”—*Pentagon Papers*, 492.