



## *Beyond the Quagmire: New Interpretations of the Vietnam War*

ed. Geoffrey W. Jensen and Mathew M. Stith.

Denton: Univ. of North Texas Press, 2019. Pp. 432. ISBN 978-1-57441-758-6.

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The Vietnam War continues to fascinate historians and general readers alike. It has generated so much scholarship that one might be forgiven for thinking little is left to say at this point. That would be a mistake, as historians Geoffrey Jensen (Embry Riddle Aeronautical Univ.–Prescott) and Matthew Stith (Univ. of Texas at Tyler) demonstrate in their rich collection of thirteen new essays.

The book comprises three parts. The first, “The Politics of War,” begins with Geoffrey C. Stewart’s discussion of “Rural Development and Revolution in Ngo Dinh Diem’s Vietnam.” In his essay, Stewart grants Diem’s many shortcomings, but also considers the difficulties he faced “as a post-colonial leader in a Cold War world” (15). In a departure from previous studies, he credits Diem for efforts to ameliorate the problems of land reform in rural South Vietnam. Refusing to act as a “hanging judge” yields a nuanced treatment of the subject and calls on scholars to see South Vietnam as a “postcolonial entity in its own right” rather than a Cold War “anticommunist chess piece” (35).

In “Legacies of America’s Secret War in Laos,” Nenger N. Vang investigates what he calls the neglected “meaning, impact, and consequences” of the war in Laos (48). He sees the US-Hmong relations as “long and persistent, but ultimately contradictory”: the United States first used and then abandoned the Hmong, its “most loyal allies” in the secret war (72). The impact of the war on the Hmong typified the “convoluted and contradictory character of American foreign policy” (73).

In “A Geography of Nixon’s Vietnam War,” Martin G. Clemis argues that “geography was an overriding consideration that shaped and, in many ways, defined Nixon’s Vietnam War” (110). From negotiations over a ceasefire in place to the “retention or deposition of the Thieu and Ky regime,” geography and territory “were intrinsic to every major issue and policy decision made by the Nixon administration to end the war in Vietnam” (109).

Turning to the political geography of the United States itself, Jeffrey A. Turner’s “The War and Regional Identity” examines the student antiwar movement in the American South. Turner shows that the movement in the South was primed by civil rights activism. This suggests that antiwar activism was neither a “potential import nor a possible invasion” (118) on college campuses in the US South (118). Still, the movement’s effect on many campuses in the South “made southern student culture less *southern*” (139), thereby mitigating regional differences among universities in the region.

Part two of the book addresses “The Combatants and Their War.” Here, editor Jensen looks at “Project 100,000,” an attempt to improve the lot of disadvantaged African Americans while addressing the wartime military’s need for manpower. The program was meant to help underprivileged young men escape the cycle of poverty into which they had been born. Though it was

mostly dismissed as a total failure, Jensen considers it a well meant effort to address a serious injustice in American society that did in fact lead to some modest success.

Heather Marie Stur looks at “Women, Gender, and the War,” as they have shaped perceptions of the experience of the war. Looking through this lens, she “challenges the victim narrative” that has affected the study of US combat soldiers’ experiences, thus complicating attempts to curry “sympathy for American involvement in Vietnam” (202).

Xiaobing Li adds a well researched and insightful chapter on “China’s Intervention and the End of the Communist Alliance in Vietnam.” Li gauges “the level of Chinese communist involvement in the [Vietnam] conflict” (210) from the Chinese perspective. A central element of his story is the strain the war put on the international relations among the communist nations involved in the war.

Ron Milam contributes an essay on “The Role of a Military Advisor in Vietnam.” Himself a veteran military advisor to Montagnard forces, he detects “a direct correlation between how close one served to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and the degree of confidence in their performance”: advisors who served with ARVN units “have generally been more positive about their performance than Americans who served with American units” (262). Milam makes a strong case that the role of US advisors “should be recognized by anyone who seeks to understand what happened in Vietnam” (262).

Editor Stith’s essay on “The Natural Environment and the American Military Experience in Vietnam” casts Vietnam’s natural environment—terrain, weather, and wildlife—as a leading “character” in the drama of the war. It was a milieu where Americans were doubly foreign and their enemy could use it to their advantage: consequently, “the natural environment impacted the course and consequences of America’s war in Vietnam as much or more than in any other conflict in modern history” (268).

The volume’s last section—“Remembering Vietnam”—begins with an essay by Susan L. Eastman on the cultural significance of the comic book *The ‘Nam*. Created by Vietnam War veterans, it has an authenticity missing from other comics. Eastman demonstrates that the comic dealt seriously with significant issues raised by the war and generally “maintained its mission of historical accuracy” (323). It ceased publication in the early 1990s, when “the American public seemed to be more interested in World War II or in simply forgetting the Vietnam War altogether” (322–33).

Sarah Thelen follows with a chapter on “Patriotism and the Nixon White House.” It was a White House that portrayed opposition to the war as “inherently suspect and essentially un-American” (330), stressing the “incompatibility of dissent and patriotism” (331). Thelen’s assessment of the long-term impact of this type of politics points to the lingering transformation of “support for the president into an act of patriotism, rather than one of partisanship.” Political success for Nixon indeed “came with a high price” for the nation (349).

William A. Allison follows with an essay on “Vietnam Memorials and the Limits of Memory,” a perceptive treatment of an issue at the nexus of the war and the general public. In the end, Allison concludes, memorials “avoid discomfiting questions and conflicted emotions” (379). They concentrate on “veterans rather than the nation,” thus avoiding the question “why?” (384). Memorials are, instead, places where veterans promised each other and their fallen comrades they would “never be forgotten.”

Rounding out the collection, Doug Bradley contributes “Understanding the Vietnam War through the Music-Based Memories of Vietnam Veterans.” Drawing in part on interviews of veterans, Bradley concludes that music suffused the experiences of those who fought. A veteran of the

conflict himself, Bradley observes that, despite the exceptionally varied experiences of veterans, one frequently finds “a song at the heart of what they remember” (393).

All this said, historians may question the thesis of this anthology: the editors state in their introduction that the quagmire narrative has “overshadowed other aspects of the war and remains firmly entrenched” (1–2). This assertion is questionable. The history of the Vietnam War has inspired a rich and diverse body of scholarship in recent years. The narrative of the war-as-quagmire has waned in prominence. Exciting new avenues of research continue to be explored by historians, some of them included in this book. This observation aside, students of the Vietnam War will profit from reading this excellent collection of essays.