

Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War

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In 1990, immediately after UN Security Council Resolution 678 provided authorisation for the use of force to expel the Iraqi military from Kuwait President George H. W. Bush said in a news conference:

In our country, I know that there are fears about another Vietnam. Let me assure you, should military action be required, this will not be another Vietnam. This will not be a protracted, drawn out war....if there must be war, we will not permit our troops to have their hands tied behind their backs. And I pledge to you: There will not be another murky ending. If one American soldier has to go into battle, that soldier will have enough force behind him to win and then get out as soon as possible....I will never – ever – agree to a halfway effort.[\(1\)](#)

Bush's implication that the American defeat in Vietnam was somehow self-inflicted – that in the absence of the artificial constraints with which the United States had saddled itself in Vietnam the war would have been 'winnable' – is curious because it conforms less to the academic wisdom on the war then prevailing – that of the 'orthodox school' – than to that of a much smaller body of commentators who held a rather different view: the 'revisionist school'. Gary Hess's new book is a survey of the scholarship on the Vietnam War which pits this revisionist historiography (the so-called 'winnable' war tradition) against the more numerous orthodox historiography (the 'unwinnable' war tradition).

The outcome of the 1991 Gulf War restored the American belief in the efficacy of military force as a tool of foreign policy that had been shaken by the Vietnam War and set the stage for a rematch with Saddam

Hussein in 2003, the consequences of which are still with us. Those parallels which are – rightly or wrongly – drawn between the current counter-insurgency campaign in Iraq and the earlier conflict in Southeast Asia highlight the fact that, as Hess says, ‘the lessons of Vietnam continue to inform discourse on foreign policy questions’ (p. x).

While there are limitations imposed by the format of Hess’s book it is, on balance, an enormously stimulating volume which usefully organises the literature on thematic lines and clarifies the battle lines between the orthodox and revisionist schools. Hess finds that the historiography of the Vietnam War departs from the ‘traditional model’ of historical appreciation of the United States’ wars. Normally, as in say the Spanish-American War or the First World War, an orthodox interpretation has emerged which rationalises American involvement in the conflict. This is followed by a revisionist critique which suggests that American involvement is somehow illegitimate. There has then emerged a post-revisionist synthesis which has ‘most often’ reaffirmed the justification for the war, but has extended the scope of the analysis ‘by incorporation of the most compelling revisionist arguments’ (p. 207).

In the case of Vietnam, however, the roles are reversed. Far from supporting American involvement in Vietnam the orthodox interpretation asserts that this involvement was a mistake and doomed to failure (the unwinnable war tradition), while the revisionists find merit in the American cause and believe that success was a possibility.

Hess is clear that his own work lies within the orthodox tradition of Vietnam historiography, but he expresses sympathy towards what he sees as an understandable revisionist effort to rationalise American sacrifice. Many revisionists will reject the implication that this is what they are trying to do – along with the accusation that they are no less wrong for it – as condescending. Similarly, those who, since the war, have argued that it was winnable, and was not won because of the irresolution of politicians and the evaporation of support fostered by the media, will find equally condescending Hess’s view that, ‘This rewriting of the Vietnam War which argues for the plausibility of a retrospective “victory” is reminiscent of the way that other peoples [like the South after the American Civil or Germany after the First World War] have reconciled themselves to military defeat’ (p. 13-4). However, Hess does see merit in aspects of the revisionist case beyond mere sympathy.

In chapter one Hess sets out the broad shape of the revisionist and orthodox schools, and in the ensuing chapters he examines their contrasting perspectives on seven key issues. On the fundamental issue of whether Vietnam was a necessary or mistaken war Hess gives almost equal honours to the two sides of the debate with the orthodox school just squeaking by on points. Hess finds the orthodox view that containment policy had become globalised to the point where the United States was unable to shed ‘peripheral’ interests like Vietnam more appreciative of the realities on the ground in Southeast Asia, the limits of American power worldwide, and the dangers of a policy based on ‘credibility’, than the ideas put forward by revisionists. He finds the revisionist view that the war was necessary because there was an international communist conspiracy which, if not resisted in Vietnam, would have negative consequences that would extend far beyond Southeast Asia, as wrong in retrospect as it seemed to the doves at the time. However, he agrees with the revisionists that the abandonment of South Vietnam to communism ‘remains difficult to imagine, within the context of domestic and international politics in the early 1960s’ (p. 46). Thus for Hess the revisionist view that the war was necessary is wrong in international terms, but more realistic in domestic terms than the orthodox view that it was wholly unnecessary. Furthermore, the revisionist perspective on the necessity of the war is at least an accurate reflection of what the international situation seemed to be for the principal protagonists at the time and we can, therefore, at least have some sympathy with how they arrived at their view.

Again on the Vietnam decisions of Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson between 1961 and 1965 Hess shows that there is, at least to some extent, a meeting of minds between revisionists and orthodox scholars because both believe that Vietnam should not have been an American war. Orthodox scholars argue that American intervention could have, and should have, been avoided by a timely decision to withdraw – indeed some of them believe that Kennedy had actually taken such a decision before his death, though there

seems scant hard evidence for this – or to negotiate with the communists, which they see as a reasonable policy alternative for the United States.

Revisionists, of course, reject the view that South Vietnam could be abandoned by the United States, but they also disagree with the decision to Americanize the war. Their case hangs on the assertion that South Vietnam was actually winning the war in 1961, but the United States failed to appreciate its success and build on it, thus snatching defeat from the jaws of victory – for the revisionists the first of a number of such American ‘lost victories’ in Vietnam. Instead, say the revisionists, the United States chose to interfere in South Vietnamese politics in such a way as to make Americanization inevitable.

As Hess points out counter-factual, or as he puts it ‘if-only’ history, is a feature of historical writing on Vietnam and he suggests it is most prominent with regard to the period, 1961–1965. The revisionists are arguing that if certain variables like US recognition of South Vietnamese progress are changed the war could have been won, but of course we do not know for sure that it would have been won because things simply did not turn out like that – this is the dilemma of counter-factual history, and as Hess points out if we posit one change then all variables are equally subject to the possibility of change. The orthodox school, of course, has an advantage here because its fundamental argument is that Vietnam was unwinnable, and of course it was lost; no variables need to be changed to achieve the historical result. Thus, it might be said that the orthodox school avoids the counter-factual dilemma by not indulging in the practice, but while they may be less culpable in this respect, even orthodox scholars sometimes engage in their own what-ifs, for example: ‘if only’ Kennedy had withdrawn and ‘if only’ Kennedy had negotiated.

Chapters four and five deal with the period of United States escalation in Vietnam between 1965 and 1968. Revisionists are critical of the manner in which the war was fought, but they do not necessarily agree on the appropriate prescription for victory. On the one hand, some of them argue that the United States war effort was hampered by adherence to ill-founded concepts of limited war such that it violated certain fundamental military principles. If a more conventional ‘Clausewitzian’ strategy had been adopted, they say, the prospects for an American victory would have been much better. Other revisionists, like Andrew Krepinevich in *The Army and Vietnam* (1986) argue the reverse: that US military commanders refused to accept the war for what it was: an insurgency, and adopted the ‘big unit’ attritional strategy that they found psychologically attractive rather than a low-intensity counter-insurgency strategy which would have been more appropriate both to the circumstances in which the United States found itself in Vietnam and the practical limitations of American power.

To both strands of the military revisionist argument orthodox scholars counter that the kind of strategy adopted by the United States is irrelevant because whatever it was it would be in support of a regime that was fundamentally unsound and thus doomed to fail. Revisionists would respond that a) the South Vietnamese government was not as weak as the orthodox scholars would have it – or at least not always that weak – and b) that in any case security must come before political reform.

In chapter six Hess deals with the revisionist argument that the media undercut popular support for the war. Here he argues that the balance of scholarship shows that the media was not biased against the United States, indeed it was generally supportive, and that the war weariness that eventually sapped the American effort in Vietnam would probably have happened anyway, with or without the new medium of television. Consequently, the revisionist view that the media was biased towards the doves merely makes ‘the Media a “scapegoat” for the shortcomings of the policies of the nation’s civilian and military leaders’ (p. 152).

The evidence that the media was broadly supportive of the United States cause is compelling, and it did not – with some notable exceptions like the shooting of a Viet Cong prisoner by South Vietnamese Police Chief Nguyen Loc Loan during the Tet Offensive – show the graphic images of popular memory to the American public. However, it is perhaps also possible to speculate that an integrated American war effort that included the conscious use of the media as a propaganda tool on the home front might have limited the disenchantment of the American public enabling the United States to sustain its war effort in Vietnam for longer. Certainly, as a result of its perceived view of the media in Vietnam the United States government and

armed forces pursued a much more manipulative policy towards the media in the 1991 and 2003 Gulf Wars than the extraordinarily permissive one they operated in the Vietnam era. Of course, whether the ability to sustain the American war effort longer would have been desirable is another matter.

Few would now question that the Tet offensive was a communist defeat in battlefield terms, but a communist victory in political terms. Revisionists believe that it represents another lost victory because the magnitude of the defeat suffered by the communists was such that it could – if suitably exploited – have provided a springboard for a successful conclusion of the United States campaign in Vietnam. For Hess, however, this is an overestimate of the magnitude of the US/South Vietnamese success at Tet, which cannot, in the view of Ronald H. Spector in *After Tet: The Bloodiest year in Vietnam* (1993) compensate for the ‘chronic problems’ that beset the South Vietnamese Army and government.

President Richard Nixon was elected ostensibly as an anti-war candidate. Nixon reasoned that this would inevitably require the withdrawal of American troops and negotiation with the communists, but this did not necessarily add up to American defeat. He set about a final effort to win the war, or at least achieve a position of strength from which to negotiate. Capitalising on the permissive post-Tet pacification environment Nixon and his advisers put in place a series of initiatives which, according to the revisionists, resulted in yet another lost victory, because Congress was no longer prepared to continue its support for South Vietnam. According to Hess, the revisionists are on to something here when they point to the progress made by the United States and South Vietnam in this period, but it remains hard to see how this could have been translated into anything that genuinely constituted victory, and if that is the case it remains reasonable to question whether ‘the final bargain to end US warfare was worth four years of continued sacrifice of American and Vietnamese lives’ (p. 204), especially when one considers that the agreement settled on in 1973 probably could have been achieved back in 1969. However, while it seems true that Nixon and Kissinger engaged in special pleading about their own roles in the ending of the Vietnam War, their comments do at least raise questions about alternative definitions of victory that may not yet have been adequately explored by those who subscribe to the unwinnable war tradition.

Perhaps one of the weaknesses of Hess’s book is that such a literature survey is obliged to report on the quantitative occurrence of this or that interpretation of events and there is little scope for detailed analysis of the texts surveyed. This has the effect of appearing to suggest that the revisionists must be wrong because they are in the minority. For example, in chapter four Hess says that the argument that the war was a conventional one hinges on the extent to which the war was directed from North Vietnam and he reports that the majority of orthodox scholarship maintains that it was indigenous to South Vietnam, at least at the start. This indeed is the preponderant interpretation, but this reviewer finds a different interpretation of exactly the same evidence rather more persuasive. In this view, while the majority of the Viet Cong may have been southerners, while the National Liberation Front (NLF) was a southern organisation, while senior communists in the South may have, from time to time, developed views that ran contrary to the those of the Politburo in Hanoi, the war was in fact directed from the north and the communists in the south were always part of the Viet Minh structure, which, after 1954, was based in the north. From this reading of the evidence the southern insurgency was neither autonomous, nor indigenous. This might suggest that the Vietnam War was, as the United States always argued, a war between sovereign states, and not a civil war, but this rather misses the point that there should never have been two Vietnamese states in the first place. Nevertheless, however illegitimate was the birth of the South Vietnamese state, it does not follow – and does not seem to have been the case in practice – that the majority of the southern population supported the communists (though the extent to which they were enthusiastic about the Saigon government is of course debatable). This suggests that there were in reality, by the late 1950s, two Vietnamese states, both with a reasonable claim to sovereignty over their own citizens, but not necessarily over those of the other. They became locked in a struggle with each other, and the insurgency in the southern state, was directed from the north. The point here is that the validity of the either perspective relies on the quality of the argument and its supporting evidence, not the mean average of the accounts to date. No doubt Hess does not hold such a simplistic view of history, but he obviously does not have the space here to develop the qualitative superiority of the orthodox arguments – if qualitatively superior they are. Of course this is clearly beyond the scope of the

series to which Hess is contributing, but it is worth noting the effects of the constraints under which Hess is working.

Hess's book forms part of Blackwell's *Contesting the Past* series which aims to look at 'contradictory conceptions' of the past in the belief that their study '... can be fruitful: that the jettisoning of one thesis or presentation leaves behind something of value' (p. x). Hess cannot yet find much evidence of the emergence of a post-revisionist consensus; he postulates that such a synthesis may emerge probably later rather than sooner in the next 25 years, 'but the revisionist influence likely will be reflected on the fringes of a restated orthodox interpretation' (p. 210). Here he is too modest about his own achievements within the limited scope of this volume. 'Something of value' is emerging from Hess's book in the shape of his qualification of the orthodox view on Vietnam by the suggestion that on a number of issues – like the necessity of the war, the decisions by Kennedy and Johnson to escalate the United States role and the progress of pacification after the Tet Offensive – the revisionists are right in parts, and where they are wrong they are perhaps understandably so. This represents the first glimmerings of an as yet indistinct synthesis of the orthodox and revisionist perspectives and Hess's book provides a launching pad for further research into areas – like the relative weakness of the South Vietnamese government, the effect of the media, alternative definitions of victory and the relative autonomy of the NLF – where the orthodox and revisionist views might be further reconciled.

Notes

1. Rachel Martin Harlow, 'Agency and agent in George Bush's Gulf War rhetoric', in *The Rhetorical Presidency of George H. W. Bush*, ed. Martin J. Medhurst (Texas, 2006), p. 68. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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