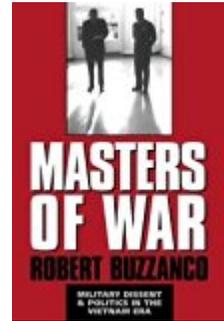


# H-Net Reviews

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**Robert Buzzanco.** *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xiv + 386 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-48046-8.

Reviewed by Robert D. Schulzinger (University of Colorado, Boulder)  
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## How to Win While Losing

In this wise, long, and richly detailed book, Robert Buzzanco covers twenty-eight years of U.S. military planning and decision making for the Vietnam war. He begins in 1950, with the Korean war, and ends in 1968 at the time of the Tet offensive. Along the way, he shows how the men at the top of the uniformed services approached the growing American involvement in Vietnam with a wary eye. During the 1950s they perceived a growing danger on the periphery of the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, and they were as committed as any Cold War liberal to expanding containment. But many of them always had their doubts about the potential for success in waging a guerrilla war on the mainland of Asia. Containment and anti-communism may have been the principal foreign policy goal of U.S. political leaders, but the military leaders Buzzanco discusses had narrower interests—the enhancement of the power, prestige, and influence of the armed forces in general and their own services in particular.

This is a complicated book, because Buzzanco analyzes both the decision making that went into the American involvement in Vietnam and the impact of those decisions, in turn, on civil-military relations. The complexity of his approach can be seen in some of the chapter titles: often long and insightful, sometimes self-referential and ambivalent; e.g., Chapter Four, “Pinning Down the President: J.F.K., the Military, and Political Maneuvering over Vietnam, January-October 1961,” Chapter Five, “The Best and Worst of Times: The U.S. War against Vietnam, October 1961-November 1963,” Chapter Seven, “Hope for the Best, Expect the Worst: U.S. Ground Troops Enter the

Vietnam War, January-July 1965,” and, most convoluted of all, Chapter Eight, “War on Three Fronts: U.S. Forces versus the Viet Cong, Westmoreland versus the Marines, and Military Leaders versus the White House, July 1965-December 1966.”

In the body of his narrative, Buzzanco directly contests the myth that political leaders, mostly but not exclusively in the Johnson administration, forced the military to fight with one hand tied behind its back. He convincingly demonstrates how muddled, confused and internally at war with itself the military was regarding what the United States could or should do in Vietnam. George Ball was not as isolated as he appeared to be when he warned against the dangers of escalation in 1965. There was one Ball, but there were also Army Generals Matthew B. Ridgway and James Gavin and Marine Commandant David Monroe Shoup, who, Buzzanco writes, “rejected outright the notion that the United States could play a constructive military role in Indochina and so opposed entry into Vietnam from within the defense establishment in the 1950s and then publicly criticized the war in the 1960s” (p. 9).

By the time the Johnson administration fully Americanized the war in 1965, these men were long out of power, and the scene shifted to commanders as concerned about the standing of their services as they were about prospects in the war. Indeed, the two were closely related. The longer the war dragged on inconclusively, the more the services would suffer—materially and in the public’s esteem. Marine General William Dupuy, usually

an optimist, found the failures of the South Vietnamese government intolerable. In October 1965 he complained that if the people of Vietnam “lose morale again, I’d hate to try to buy it back one more time. I suppose it could be done ... but each time it’s more difficult” (pp. 233-24). Even General William Westmoreland, the war’s greatest cheerleader within the military, acknowledged that his incessant requests for more troops, more materiel, and more autonomy were “cutting into the meat and vitals of the Army and therefore the seeds of resentment are bound to appear” (p. 233).

Buzzanco writes of military leaders who were able to see connections between the war, the needs of their own services, and the larger social implications of the war. One of the best sections of *Masters of War* is his account of the military’s growing understanding of the economic distortions caused by spending for the war. As early as 1965 Westmoreland and McNamara understood that the war had contributed to the growing drain on U.S. gold reserves. In the immediate aftermath of the Tet offensive of 1968 the gold crisis worsened, and military leaders understood that the Johnson administration had squandered whatever chance existed to meet Westmoreland’s request for another 206,000 troops by year’s end.

Buzzanco lays out in great detail all of the disputes among military leaders, their differences of opinion with the Johnson administration, and their growing, horrified realization that they, who had been so wary of the costs of involvement, would bear the most blame for defeat. He has a good eye for the telling quote, and his research in military archives is superb. No one has previously made such good use of the records in the Marine Corps Historical Center in Washington, D.C. and the Military History Institute at Carlisle Barracks, Penn. as he has.

Nevertheless, two problems in this work stand out. First, it is clear that Buzzanco himself is deeply ambivalent about the military’s role in the Vietnam catastrophe. On the one hand, he sees military leaders as often clear-headed about the potential costs of involvement in Vietnam. In that way, they, along with the many prescient analysts of the CIA, much more accurately foretold the costs of U.S. involvement in the war. This interpretation puts the onus of the war’s miscalculations squarely on the political leaders; in this sense the book is a 1990s version of David Halberstam’s angry indictment in *The Best and the Brightest*. On the other hand, Buzzanco often treats the military even more harshly than the political leaders, especially in the latter chapters of the book. These men may not have been masters of war, but they

were masters of bureaucratic intrigue. When the study of bureaucratic politics first captured writers’ fancy in the 1960s, one of its attractions was that it seemed to remove the study of international relations from the angry confrontations created by disputes over the Vietnam War. This seemed a valuable exercise to some people at a time when academic disputes were so hot that they threatened to consume anyone who became engaged in them. Yet now we want to see at least some of the politics involved in bureaucratic, or any other sort, of dispute.

In Buzzanco’s account, the military leaders, so concerned about the place of their own services in the public’s eye, often come off as far more narrow and selfish than the political leaders they (and Buzzanco) often condemned. In an unusual twist, these self-aggrandizing military leaders turn into the very caricatures Buzzanco’s deep research has made into living, breathing, thinking, and thoughtful policy makers. The civilian policy makers were often, even mostly, wrong. But in this account they at least acted in a way that was true to their public obligations, as they saw them. They were not primarily interested in self-preservation or the enhancement of their offices. In Buzzanco’s last chapters and his epilogue, which deals with the way in which the military applied the lessons of Vietnam from 1975 until 1994, the military by contrast appear to be exactly that sort of shameless, although successful, self-promoters.

A second problem is that in conception (but not in most of its execution), this is a radically present-minded work. There is nothing wrong with writing out of current concerns. It gives immediacy to what we say, and an emotional commitment to a subject can sustain us when the work drags. But customarily nothing fades more quickly than current events. Buzzanco’s last chapters are informed by deep concerns about U.S. Central American policy in the 1980s, the Gulf War of 1991, and the Clinton administration’s foreign policy problems in 1993 and 1994. These issues have now slipped from consciousness, and their connections to the study of the Vietnam war are not as apparent now as they were when Buzzanco did his research and wrote his book. While it is true that both military and political leaders spoke as if their actions during the conflict with Iraq in 1990-1991 came from lessons learned during the Vietnam war, their behavior belied those statements. It is hard to conceive of more different circumstances than the decades-long revolution in Vietnam and Iraq’s grab for Kuwait’s oil.

The body of *Masters of War*, in which Buzzanco carefully presents the military’s political role in the war, will

be an enduring masterpiece. His comments on current events, however, will probably not hold up as well. work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

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