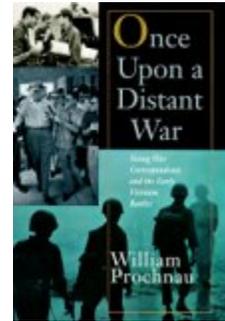


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William Prochnau. *Once upon a Distant War: Young War Correspondents in the Early Vietnam Battles*. New York: Random House, 1995. xii + 546 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8129-2633-0.

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Young Reporters in Vietnam—The Innocent Days

“Vietnam is a graveyard of lost hopes, destroyed vanity, glib promises, and good intentions,” wrote Charles Mohr in 1963, but in 1961 there was little to suggest the national angst that was to come. In 1961, reported U.S. intelligence agencies, the National Liberation Front had about 16,000 soldiers armed with captured French and American weapons. But in a war where aircraft carriers in the middle of the Saigon River were officially mirage-like UFOs—a basic ingredient was secrecy—secrecy that was aimed more at fooling the American public than at fooling the enemy.

Once upon a Distant War is the compelling story of the early years of Vietnam and the reporters, young and old, who, with swagger and zeal, sent the news home. William Prochnau ends his tale with the events most of us remember as the beginning, the death of Ngo Dinh Diem. He notes that although the relatively small group of correspondents assigned to Vietnam at the time (a handful compared to the over 5,000 who were to come) effectively won their game—they exposed the government’s lies and ineptitude—they did not ask the larger questions. These reporters were children of their time, children of the Cold War. Said Neil Sheehan, “We missed the big one.” The big one in 1961 probably should have been do “all of those well-meaning, can-do, we’ve-got-the-answer Americans have any business at all” in this far-off land.

Prochnau tells a highly dramatic story of an almost forgotten time and he does so with powerfully drawn characters. David Halberstam, the mythic antiwar reporter, who said “The war was a given. We covered

the war. The debate was about the deceptions and lies.” Neil Sheehan, who found himself in Tokyo when Diem was assassinated and was the last of the group to win the Pulitzer Prize. Malcolm Browne, who photographed the flaming death of a Buddhist’s monk, leading Madame Nhu to wish that David Halberstam would be next. And Charley Mohr, the first correspondent to be wounded in Vietnam, who received a Bronze Star from the U.S. Marines. There were women in Vietnam, too. Among them was Marguerite Higgins, who like her grandfather before her died of a tropical fever, and was one of the first journalistic casualties of Vietnam. (Unlike her male counterparts, Higgins had covered the Korean war and would remain supportive of U.S. policy throughout the war.)

In 1961, Vietnam had not become “the living room war.” And though television would soon surpass the newspapers as America’s primary information source, in this first year of John Kennedy’s tenure, a small group of journalists, some of them seasoned Asian hands, but mostly Young Turks, found this little war exciting, a crusade, almost.

Prochnau, former national correspondent for *The Washington Post*, made two reporting tours to Vietnam. *Once upon a Distant War* is not only great storytelling; it is also painstakingly researched, a masterful historical document that refreshes our memory about a time most wish to forget.

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