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Jeffrey P. Kimball. “Out of Primordial Cultural Ooze: Inventing Political and Policy Legacies about the U.S. Exit from Vietnam.” *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (June 2010): 577-588. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00871.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00871.x>.

Mark Atwood Lawrence. “Too Late or Too Soon? Debating the Withdrawal from Vietnam in the Age of Iraq.” *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (June 2010): 589-600. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00872.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00872.x>.

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Review by **David Kaiser**, Naval War College

Mark Atwood Lawrence has written a fine survey of evolving views of why the United States lost Vietnam, both in the realm of historical scholarship and in American politics. His discussion includes numerous military critiques of the war, from Ulysses Grant Sharp and William Westmoreland to Lewis Sorley and Mark Moyar, but it leaves out one enduring argument that has been pushed for 35 years by no less a figure than Henry Kissinger: that the United States and South Vietnam had actually won the war by 1974, but that Congress threw the victory away by reducing aid. (Neoconservatives such as David Horowitz sometimes state the Congress “cut off aid,” which is not true—the Congress reduced, but did not eliminate the requested appropriation for fiscal 1975, and one Pentagon study actually questioned whether the cuts had made any difference by the time of the South Vietnamese collapse.) Lawrence could, to be sure, have broadened out his historical context a bit: the debate over the loss of Vietnam is quite parallel to an earlier and far more bitter debate over the loss of China, which also reflected the view, held by many conservative Americans, that only liberal American stupidity or treachery could have defeated America’s friends in a faraway land. Lawrence is most effective when he takes up the use to which acolytes of the George W. Bush Administration put the Vietnam analogy, when they argued, in effect, that a quick, surgical use of American power to remove an unfriendly regime would automatically result in a liberal democracy. For some reason, however, Lawrence totally avoids the

word “neoconservative,” even though this idea seems to me to be a foundation of neoconservative ideology and an important reason for the decision to invade Iraq.

There is however something postmodern about Lawrence’s piece which I find rather sad: while he delineates opposing arguments concisely and well, he makes little effort to get to the truth of these various matters himself. No one can read this article without realizing that debates about Vietnam will last at least as long as the Boomer generation, but we should not therefore give up the task of trying to figure out exactly what did go wrong, and what in particular distinguished Vietnam from other settings for American intervention. Both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, he notes, have found it expedient to use the Vietnam analogy to justify surges in both Iraq and Afghanistan—Bush, ironically, because he wanted to argue that Iraq might turn out like Vietnam if we left too soon, and Obama because he wanted to suggest that failure in Vietnam did not portend failure in Afghanistan. In my opinion, however, both were dodging the most critical question: whether the necessary indigenous political base exists either in Iraq or Afghanistan to achieve our stated goals. (Of course, I am one of the historians who believes that we failed in Vietnam mainly because it did not.)

Jeffrey Kimball begins his essay with exactly the kind of broader historical overview Lawrence did without, linking the post-Vietnam controversy to similar arguments over the Confederacy’s “Lost Cause,” the German defeat in the First World War, Munich, Yalta, and the fall of China to Communism. Then, however, he zeroes in on one particular issue dear to his heart: the specific role of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger not only in terminating the Vietnam War in circumstances that made South Vietnamese survival very doubtful, but also planting the seeds of the “stab in the back” legend while they were doing so. The drama of the last three months of 1972 was one of the more extraordinary in American diplomatic history. Kimball does not mention—although I suspect he might agree—that Henry Kissinger and the North Vietnamese actually trapped Nixon, in the final analysis, into making peace, first by reaching an October agreement that conceded key military and political demands to the enemy, and then by Hanoi’s public release of the agreement and Kissinger’s own statement that “peace is at hand.” What Kimball does show is that Nixon had mapped out his political strategy before the Christmas bombing began. Knowing even then, apparently, that even after this last brutal and very costly exercise of American power he would have no choice but to sign roughly the same agreement, he instructed his minions to begin portraying him as the man who *compelled* peace by dropping the bombs. (It is curious that the bombing of Korea concluded in a similar fashion in 1953, when the United States bombed valuable hydroelectric power dams after agreement on peace had been reached with the enemy, but not with our South Korean ally.) Kimball does not quote, as he did at the Kennedy Library in 2006, the fall 1972 conversation between Nixon and Kissinger in which Kissinger assured the President that he could survive the eventual fall of South Vietnam if he could blame it on South Vietnamese incompetence. But he shows in detail how both men immediately abandoned that strategy in 1975 and began blaming the American people and the Congress instead. Kimball also notes that Nixon failed to live up to the example of his

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conservative heroes Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle, the latter of whom patiently explained to the French people that further attempts to hold on to Algeria would weaken, not strengthen, the greatness of France, and survived right-wing assassination attempts as a result. (I am not sure what episode in Churchill's career Kimball is thinking of.) That is certainly true, but it also gave him the opportunity to pay tribute to one of the few heroes of this story, President Gerald Ford, who genuinely tried to put the war behind us in the midst of the collapse of South Vietnam in April 1975, and drew on another historical example to do so:

“On January 8, 1815, a monumental American victory was achieved here--the Battle of New Orleans. Louisiana had been a State for less than 3 years, but outnumbered Americans innovated, outnumbered Americans used the tactics of the frontier to defeat a veteran British force trained in the strategy of the Napoleonic wars.

“We as a nation had suffered humiliation and a measure of defeat in the War of 1812. Our National Capital in Washington had been captured and burned. So, the illustrious victory in the Battle of New Orleans was a powerful restorative to our national pride.

“Yet, the victory at New Orleans actually took place 2 weeks after the signing of the armistice in Europe. Thousands died although a peace had been negotiated. The combatants had not gotten the word. Yet, the epic struggle nevertheless restored America's pride.

“Today, America can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned. As I see it, the time has come to look forward to an agenda for the future, to unify, to bind up the Nation's wounds, and to restore its health and its optimistic self-confidence.”¹

Both these articles show that Ford, like de Gaulle, was exceptional. Wars, and especially lost wars, arouse such passions as to be irresistible fodder for political debate, especially in the midst of the kind of crisis in which the United States finds itself today. History, clearly, provides no cure for controversy—both of these articles show that it feeds it. That is why those of us who regard Vietnam as a tragic strategic mistake can hope only for better judgment in the future, so as to avoid new defeats that will also poison our politics for decades to come.

David Kaiser is Professor, Strategy and Policy, Naval War College; author of *Economic Diplomacy and the Origins of the Second World War*, *Politics and War: European Conflict from Philip II to Hitler*; *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War*; and *The Road to Dallas, The Assassination of*

¹ <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=4859&st=&st1=>

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John F. Kennedy. His current project is on US entry into the Second World War, 1940-1.

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