An Anthropologist’s Reflections on the Vietnam War

Gerald Hickey’s famous work, *Village in Vietnam* (Yale, 1964), was the first anthropological work on Vietnam that I came across as a student of Vietnamese culture. It remains one of the only ethnographic studies on Vietnam in many university collections. However, his oblique references to the RAND Corporation in the introduction made me curious about his background and involvement during the turbulent period when he was in Vietnam (1956 to 1973). Hickey’s biographical work, “Window on a War,” instantly sparked my interest and answered some of my questions about this anthropologist’s involvement in the Vietnam conflict. My curiosity was not, however, entirely appeased.

Hickey organizes “Window on a War” chronologically, starting with the period immediately following the defeat of the French, when he first arrived in Vietnam. This period of relative peace and optimism is quickly overshadowed by an increase in insurgency and American involvement. The turning point in his narrative is the account of his involvement in the attack on Nam Dong, which marks for him the beginning of the war, though it preceded full American involvement by a year. In his words, “The window that had thus far opened on a beautiful, intriguing but increasingly troubled land became a window on a war” (p. 11).

Following the events at Nam Dong, war became increasingly inevitable and American involvement escalated when troops became officially involved in 1965. This escalation culminated in the Tet Offensive of 1968. Hickey’s account of this entire period provides an interesting perspective. As a civilian, he seems to be neither a part of it nor entirely removed, and his telling gives you the feeling of being caught in an eddy while the currents of war relentlessly wash past. Nowhere is this more poignant than when he describes “watching the war” over drinks on balconies and rooftops in Saigon (pp. 253-255). The story ends with Hickey’s discouraging experience of trying to personally extricate himself from Vietnam and return to an American academia that rejected him for the role they perceived he played in Vietnam.

At the center of Hickey’s narrative is an ever-present dilemma: he had a deep sympathy for the Vietnamese and for the minorities who live in the highland areas, but at the same time, he was contracted to assist the American government gather information that would help them in their own, sometimes conflicting, aims. American-supported strategies, such as the strategic hamlet initiative and the resettlement programs, often harmed the very people he wanted to help. Hickey’s reports and repeated warnings of the damage that was being done to these people were largely ignored. The sense of frustration palpably hangs over this biographical account, making “Window on a War” sometimes grim and oppressive reading.

The sense of injustice and frustration finally erupts near the end of the book with this poignant passage: “I had at first naively expected reflection to be intrinsic to decision-making in Saigon, Washington, and Santa Monica [headquarters of the RAND Corporation]. But in time...”
I became aware that Washington was an incredibly unreflective place. It was (and still is) a swamp of mediocrity made worse by an excessive number of mediocre people with power fantasies” (p. 281).

I wondered why it had taken so long for him to get to this. The book would have been more interesting if this level of rage appeared more often. However, I frequently questioned why Hickey so passively endured failure for so long and chose to maintain his association with RAND. Why did he continue to work for an organization that was supporting American involvement when he seemed so continually discontent with the results? It is clear that Hickey opposed most of what was happening: forced resettlement, the strategic hamlet program, the attrition strategy. He spent a great deal of time and energy urging a policy of compromise in order to end the war. At the same time, he was working for an organization that was complicit in helping the U.S. Government with the war and he received a salary by gathering information to help the government (which he claims they almost never used). It is this dilemma that should be at the heart of this book, but is not addressed. Yet Hickey displays a stunning lack of reflectivity on this point and is shocked and saddened when the academy rejects him for his involvement. One can sympathize with his position, but the lack of a frank discussion, even if it was in defense of his participation, means that the book in many ways never addresses the most important point.

Hickey’s sense of injustice for the bitter situation of the people he studied and befriended, as well as his sense of futility for being repeatedly ignored, often overshadows some of the more horrific parts of the book. He frequently refers in passing to people being blown up or shot, with the cast of characters so large that it was often hard to keep track of who any of them were. Sentences such as "One victim was FÃ©lix Polin, the young French coffee planter, who was arriving on a C-130 that crash landed” left me wondering where (or if) he had been mentioned previously. Searches through the index would usually not help, leaving me with a sense of having missed something. Hickey’s seemingly endless list of people he has met is impressive, but their mention detracts from the narrative. The result is that, unintentionally I think, the book tends to come across at times as self-indulgent, confusing, and tedious.

“Window on a War” nonetheless provides a unique view of the war in Vietnam. Hickey provides a first-hand account of the events immediately following independence from French colonial rule, through the escalation to full-scale war, to the eventual withdrawal and decline of American power in Vietnam. It is a period which has received enormous attention, but rarely from this perspective. Most often it is the broader historical and political issues that are dealt with, on the one hand, or individual accounts from either soldiers or journalists, on the other. The result is that Hickey is able to provide an account which juxtaposes his own experiences with the broader events taking place at the time. Having lived as an ex-pat in Vietnam myself, it was interesting to see that there were civilians living an ex-pat life of cocktail parties even while the war went on around them.

“Window on a War” describes the Vietnam conflict from a unique viewpoint and for this it is has value on the bookcases of scholars interested in Vietnam. It is of particular interest for those who want to know about the impact of the war on the minority people living in the central highlands of Vietnam, though he does not adequately explore this to avoid diverting the book from its biographical purpose. Hickey ties his narrative to the developments of escalation and withdrawal of the American presence in Vietnam and makes frequent references to events current at the time. These references seem directed to an audience that already knows about the history of this period in Vietnam. Readers who do not know about Vietnam’s history may be baffled. In short, “Window on a War” gives interesting insight on an important scholar in Vietnamese studies, but has a fairly limited audience and does not adequately explore some of the personal themes that would have made it a more compelling read.

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