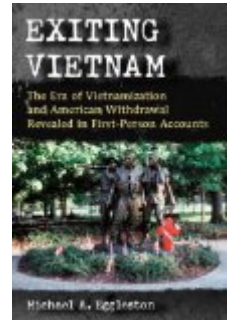


Michael A. Eggleston. *Exiting Vietnam: The Era of Vietnamization and American Withdrawal Revealed in First-Person Accounts.* Jefferson: McFarland Publishing, 2014. 228 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-7772-2.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Although titled *Exiting Vietnam: The Era of Vietnamization and American Withdrawal Revealed in First-Person Accounts*, Michael A. Eggleston's new work actually provides a broad overview of the Vietnam War between 1961 and 1975, primarily through a mixture of oral history and self-reflection. *Exiting Vietnam* is half-memoir, as Eggleston served two tours of duty in Vietnam: first as a military advisor (1965-66) and subsequently as an executive officer in a Signal Corps battalion (1970-71). Throughout the volume, Eggleston offers substantial commentary from his own experiences training Vietnamese forces, working in the Signal Corps, and confronting the enemy. On the other hand, Eggleston pulls together a number of original oral histories and some letters, memoirs, and diaries of soldiers who fought in Vietnam to illustrate various points in his narrative history of the war. He hopes that an audience of interested readers will glean both the general history of the war and some insights into how it ended.

Eggleston does not have a central thesis. Rather, in each chapter Eggleston pursues a specific theme and advances an argument rooted in the historiography of the Vietnam War. For example, he contends that the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) were corrupt and lazy. He insists that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's insistence on systems analysis led to a faulty prosecution of the war effort. He provides a standard narrative of the failure of Lam Son 719 (the invasion of Laos) while arguing that the entire operation was meant to prop up Richard Nixon's "Vietnamization" and help him to win reelection. He also suggests that Lam Son 719 was a botched plan and poorly executed by General Creighton Abrams. Eggleston accuses American and South Vietnamese leadership of possessing a "tennis-court mentality" that contributed to American defeat (p. 154). He also blames the US Army's disintegration on drug abuse, alcoholism, racial tensions, and soldiers' waning commitment to the cause. He concludes that, primarily because of South Vietnamese ineptitude, Americans were fated to

lose the war and no amount of bombing, political maneuvering, or influx of American soldiers could have prevented defeat.

The most interesting accounts come through in chapter 3, "Taking Over the War—No End in Sight." In this chapter, Eggleston allows his interviewees an opportunity to express their experiences in granular detail. One benefit of this approach is that readers can discern some of the soldiers' vocabulary: for example, repeatedly referring to mutilated bodies as "hamburgers" or horrific wounds as "hamburger meat." These interviews also capture some aspects of soldiers' culture: different ways that soldiers passed time and anticipated their Date Eligible for Return from Overseas (DEROS), coping mechanisms during and after combat, and the ways that men handled racial tensions. This chapter offers a rich understanding of the soldiers' experience in Vietnam. Had Eggleston followed this approach in his subsequent chapters, his volume may have achieved more of his initial objectives.

Eggleston's source base is confined to some commonly used official accounts and an oral history base that is almost wholly composed of American combat veterans. His rationale for relying almost exclusively on American veterans is that "U.S. government and South Vietnamese accounts are often self-serving" and "the best judgment that I would trust was that of the [American] veterans" (p. 10). This source bias, when coupled with the author's reliance on his own testimony, limits the range of voices in this book.

There are at least two significant problems with this volume. First, only the last third of the book actually discusses exiting Vietnam or "Vietnamization." Most of the volume is concerned with early phases of the war: American commitment to defend Vietnam, the role of military advisors, and the early antiwar movement at home. Second, and no less important, is that Eggleston bills this work as revealing the history through first-person accounts and oral histories. However,

this methodology and source base takes a backseat to a semi-autobiographical account of Eggleston's two tours of duty and a general survey that includes the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the Tet Offensive, and Lam Son 719. Finally, on a similar note, Eggleston tends to draw broad conclusions about a wide swathe of history from his own experiences (e.g., that because several Vietnamese he advised were corrupt, then nearly all Army of the Republic of Vietnam [ARVN] forces were corrupt).

On the whole, I recommend this book to readers who might benefit from selective readings of Eggleston's remembrances and the oral histories that he reprints within the chapters. For a survey of the Vietnam War, I would recommend more comprehensive and classic studies, such as George C. Herring's *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (fifth edition, 2013).

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