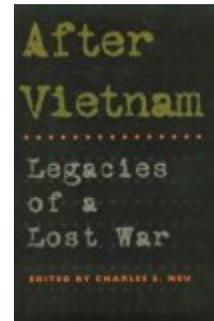




Charles E. Neu, ed. *After Vietnam: Legacies of a Lost War*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xix + 166 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6332-5.

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Legacies of the Vietnam War

LEGACIES OF THE VIETNAM WAR

The five essays in this slender volume originated as talks presented at a symposium on May 1, 1998, at Johns Hopkins University. Four are by historians, and one by former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. All are documented; 28 pages of endnotes follow the 129 pages of text.

Charles Neu, in “The Vietnam War and the Transformation of America,” traces the progression from illusions of omnipotence, which took the United States into Vietnam, through disillusionment as it was recognized that the country’s goals in Vietnam were beyond its reach. This material should be pretty familiar to most readers. Not all of the other authors openly support Neu’s view that the United States could not have won the war and should not have tried, but none oppose this view.

The title of Brian Balogh’s “The Domestic Legacy of the Vietnam War” is misleading. The essay devotes substantial attention to the “Vietnam Syndrome” in U.S. foreign policy, not just to domestic issues. Balogh argues that the war has gotten more than its fair share of the blame for such things as the fragmentation of authority and of shared national purpose. People don’t want to blame these things on the civil rights revolution, the end of the Cold War, or other transformations they approve. So they throw all the blame on the Vietnam War, of which they disapprove.

George Herring’s “Preparing *Not* to Refight the Last War: The Impact of the Vietnam War on the U.S. Military”

is excellent. Clear organization and clear writing enable Herring to deal with a remarkable range of issues in less than thirty pages. He starts with the decay of morale and discipline in the late stages of the Vietnam War, and the prolonged process of restoring them after it. The restructuring of the Army that placed crucial support functions in Reserve units, without the support of which the combat units or the regular Army would not be able to fight effectively, began just as the war was ending. This was designed to make impossible what Lyndon Johnson had done in 1965: sending the Army to war without a mobilization of the Reserves.

The 1970s also saw a flowering within the military of thought about strategy, doctrine, and military history. This began at the Naval War College; then the Army created the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). The new doctrines that emerged stressed conventional warfare, not limited war or counterinsurgency (thus the title of Herring’s essay). There was a general trend to more serious and realistic training for combat.

More disturbing has been the gap separating the military from civilian society in the decades after Vietnam. Military men tend to see the defeat in Vietnam as having been caused by American civilians. Herring comments (p. 78) that “the notion that the press lost the war in Vietnam remains, especially among military people, one of the most persistent and pernicious of the many myths of that war.” There was also a lingering suspicion of top civilian policymakers, fueled by a belief that top military leaders submitted too easily to disastrous pres-

idential policies during the Vietnam War. Herring describes how General Colin Powell, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the early 1990s, vigorously resisted presidential policies he considered unsound.

(If the reviewer may be permitted to digress for a moment from the book under review: whether or not one accepts Herring's view that Colin Powell's activism as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs gave him more control of national policy than that office properly should have, it is plain that he brought into the office more power than previous chairmen had had. Colin Powell has now become Secretary of State. Will he pull into that office more control of U.S. foreign policy than it has had in recent decades? It might be no bad thing if he did.)

The war of course had a far greater impact on Vietnam than on the United States. Robert Brigham's "Revolutionary Heroism and Politics in Postwar Vietnam" does not attempt to summarize all the legacies the war left for Vietnam, but focuses on a single issue: the way the Vietnamese Communist Party has used the image of revolutionary heroism that it established, in the decades of struggle against foreign invaders up to 1975, as a major source of legitimacy. It needs to stress the past in this way because its exercise of power since 1975 has been marred by too much corruption and economic mismanagement. The party seemed to be initiating a serious reform effort in the second half of the 1980s, but the pace of reform slowed in the 1990s.

Robert McNamara's "Reflections on War in the Twenty-first Century" is an appeal for a foreign policy based less on "realist" theories of power politics, and more on morality. He particularly emphasizes the prevention of war through collective security, and the abolition of nuclear weapons. To the extent that McNamara draws on a 20th-century event to provide lessons for the 21st, it is the Cuban Missile Crisis, not the Vietnam War, which indeed is barely mentioned. This omission is a pity; when McNamara says the United States should be

willing to intervene abroad in order to defend democracy, and to block aggression across borders, it would be relevant to note these were two of the announced goals of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam.

One cannot really criticize a volume so short, and one that makes no claim to comprehensiveness, for its omissions. Still, the reviewer would have liked to see some discussion of the fact that the glass of American national power was, in the years after Vietnam, half full as well as being half empty. True, the U.S. armed forces suffered from serious problems for a decade, and American willingness to use military power abroad was limited by the "Vietnam Syndrome" for a longer period. But at the same time, the United States continued to function as the world's dominant power.

There are occasional errors in *After Vietnam*. Balogh exaggerates when he says the Vietnam War "monopolized" U.S. foreign policy (p. 43), and he is flatly wrong when he says the average age of the Americans who served in Vietnam was nineteen (p. 29). The median age was at least 21, and the mean age was significantly older than the median. Brigham states that all of the men who made up the Communist Party Politburo in the 1960s and 1970s "were founders of the Indochinese Communist Party (1929), and all joined the Central Committee at the First National Congress in 1945." The problems with this passage are: 1) The Indochinese Communist Party was founded in 1930, not 1929. 2) Nguyen Chi Thanh was not a founding member of the party; he did not join until 1931. 3) The First National Congress was in 1935, and the Second not until 1951; there was none in 1945. Almost certainly what Brigham had in mind was the Second National Congress in 1951. The reviewer also doubts Brigham's statement (p. 97) that "all political prisoners" in Vietnam were released in 1987.

None of the essays in *After Vietnam* is really bad, but this reviewer recommends only the ones by Herring and Brigham.

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