
**Reviewed by** Shelton Woods (Boise State University)

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**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

*The Vietnam War in the Pacific World*, edited by Brian Cuddy and Fredrik Logevall, consists of nineteen essays varying in length and topics. The material provides valuable insights about how regional developments shaped the origins, conduct, and legacies of the Vietnam War. Contributors demonstrate a wide breadth of knowledge, which is apparent in their narratives and analyses as well as the historiographical information in their endnotes. While not grouped into specific sections, the essays center on five themes: neocolonial actions in the Pacific immediately following World War II; faulty assumptions by the United States about its Pacific partners; the social impact of the war throughout the region, particularly in Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, and Taiwan; the war’s effect on racial tensions and political decisions in the Pacific, especially in Hawai‘i and Japan; and the postwar legacies in the region, with special attention given to Australia.

Following the editors’ valuable introductory chapter, which includes an overview of the volume’s topics, chapters 2 and 3 effectively demonstrate how Britain’s postwar actions in Southeast Asia created the path the US took toward war in Vietnam. Like France in Algeria and Indochina following World War II, Britain sought a return to its colonial—if not hegemonic—role in Malaya, Singapore, and northern Borneo. Following World War II, the British needed to contend with the Malay Community Party (MCP), which had gained credibility as the most effective fighting force against the invading Japanese during the war. The MCP, at that time, had both momentum and popular support on its side. With the British government economically and politically reeling after the war, Malcolm MacDonald, the British commissioner-general of Southeast Asia, convinced three separate American fact-finding missions of the supposed existential threat Communism posed for the entire region. This action helped lead to America’s war in Vietnam nearly a decade later.

One of the many faulty aspects to this nascent domino theory was how MacDonald connected Vietnam with China. Even a casual reader of history should have recognized Vietnam’s historical fierce independence and wariness of its towering northern neighbor. But failing to recognize this made October 1949 (the founding of the People’s Republic of China, PRC) and June 1950 (North Korea’s invasion of South Korea) faux evidence that Communist China was gearing up to stretch its military and political influence into all of Southeast Asia. American advisors could not see through the false assumptions espoused by MacDonald. As Wen-Qing Ngoei writes, “MacDonald’s genius was in rhetorically intertwining the campaigns of the Vi-
etminh and the MCP with U.S. fears of China expanding southward into the sub region” (p. 19).

The next several essays explain America’s misreading or faulty assumptions of its Pacific partners. In this regard, two items are highlighted: an individual (US Secretary of State Clark Clifford) and a Southeast Asian country (Indonesia). A. Gabrielle Westcott details the aura surrounding Clifford, who, before becoming secretary of state, was a close advisor to President Lyndon Johnson. At first an advocate for intervening in Vietnam, Clifford began to change his view about the region during his 1967 fact-finding visit with US partners in the Pacific. Meetings with military and political leaders from Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, South Korea, and the Philippines shifted his perspective. He concluded that Communism was not an existential threat to these other Pacific countries. While each leader expressed gratitude for America's role in fighting the Vietminh, these other Pacific nations were reluctant to commit any more human resources to the war effort. While not explicitly stated in the essays, this reticence should have sent a clear signal that these Pacific leaders were not convinced of a US victory in Vietnam. Clifford grew increasingly exasperated with South Vietnam's government and military, which clamored for more money. He concluded that the South Vietnamese themselves did not want the war to end.

Another false idea presented to the US public was that Indonesia was a key player in America’s motives and decision-making policy in Vietnam. Mark Atwood Lawrence makes it clear that even scholars who may hold this view rarely mention Indonesia while writing about the war. In his masterful book, The Vietnam War: A Concise International History (2008), Atwood mentions Indonesia only three times. America’s hot and cold relationship with President Sukarno demonstrated its inability to grasp the political, social, and cultural nuances of the planet’s largest Islamic country. Perhaps more than any other Pacific country, Indonesia provided ample proof of China’s inability to adequately support Communist causes outside its borders. Indonesia also demonstrated that Southeast Asian military forces could brutally stamp out left-leaning governments.

Indonesia and Clifford’s assessment also weakened the credibility of the “buying time” thesis, a theory that Mattias Fibiger terms a “less sophisticated cousin [of] the domino theory” (p. 232). Fibiger’s “Buying Time?” is one of the volume’s strongest essays in terms of scholarship, content, and style. Many people, such as William Lloyd Stearman, who served on the National Security Council for four presidents, were convinced that the Vietnam War was successful for the US because it gave other Southeast Asian countries time to establish strong postcolonial governments and institutions that could stand up against domestic and foreign-sponsored Communist movements. To be sure, Southeast Asia’s nascent postwar governments needed space and time to gain their footing, and the Vietnam War attracted world attention, allowing other neighbors to escape the spotlight on their internal struggles. One wonders what would have been the world’s reaction to the half million Indonesians who were killed when the right-leaning military overthrew President Sukarno in 1965 if the Vietnam crisis had not been on the front page of newspapers.

But there are two fundamental flaws in the buying time thesis. First, it is clear that Communism—particularly the PRC’s variety—was not gaining traction in other Pacific countries. Second, this theory follows the end justifies the means moral judgment. The loss of life on all sides of the Vietnam War is beyond human calculation, and so “the buying time thesis reveals itself as morally bankrupt” (p. 251).

Several of the book’s essays quantifiably detail the social impact the war played in the Pacific. For example, an inducement for serving in Vietnam was the US military’s rest and relaxation (R&R) program that promised every soldier who served
a one-year tour in Vietnam a five-night paid outing to one of the following cities: Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Honolulu, Taipei, Sydney, Manila, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Tokyo, or Singapore. Close to two million American servicemen enjoyed the R&R program between 1965 and 1972. It was estimated that the soldiers spent an average of two hundred dollars a day while on paid leave.

The economic and social effects of these visits are detailed in various essays, including Zach Fredman’s, “The U.S. Military’s R&R Program in Taipei, 1965-1972.” The consensus by the hosting cities was that the economic infusion by these young soldiers offset the social and cultural challenges that accompanied this program. In most of these cities, designated red-light districts made it so that the bars, prostitutes, and alcohol-induced fights were far from the public view. Numerous cities publicly described these soldiers as naive childish boys who sought attention and comfort. At the same time, they were hailed as brave freedom fighters keeping their cities safe from China’s threatening invasion.

Two aspects of this program warrant further investigation. First, the US insisted that participating countries must agree that the US military enjoy exclusive jurisdiction over the R&R participants. Taiwan almost lost out of the opportunity to host an R&R site because it refused to go along with this demand. Eventually, it changed course giving the US unprecedented judicial authority in the PRC. A second point made in passing is that the one unique destination for R&R trips was Sydney, Australia. Unlike every other location, there was minimal—if any—prostitution services for the soldiers who visited Sydney. The soldiers spent their time on beaches and it was not unusual for them to strike up friendships that resulted in an invitation for a home-cooked meal with a family. Enjoying an evening around a family’s dining table and relaxing on the beach defined the R&R experience in Sydney.

The R&R program ceased in 1972, but its echoes remain in Taipei and Southeast Asia. The entertainment options remained while the soldiers were replaced by Japanese and Chinese men, especially in various portions of Bangkok. An overlooked legacy of the Vietnam War in neighboring countries is the paradigm put in place by the US military’s R&R program.

Apart from the South Vietnamese and American soldiers, South Koreans contributed the most troops in the war as more than three hundred thousand Koreans served in Vietnam. In desperate need for money, serving in Vietnam proved to be an economic windfall for Korean soldiers who earned thirty times their regular army salary (p. 164). In Vietnam, they ate well and also enjoyed R&R privileges. But the social stigma associated with fighting for America crept into Korea’s society. This turn of events is chronicled in Alice Kim’s essay. The Vietnam War took on a negative connotation in Korean society. So, the term “Vietnam” became a pejorative adjective. The Vietnamese skirt was given this name because it exhibited an extremely simple and crude pattern. The bluegill fish—which was despised by Korean fishermen—was called the Vietnamese fish. Kim provides other examples of such derogatory epithets connected to Vietnam. Given this social stigma for Vietnam, readers receive a glimpse of how the war affected the material culture in neighboring countries.

Two essays cover other islands in the Pacific but with a twist. Marc Jason Gilbert writes about Hawai’i’s congressional delegates while Noriko Shiratori explores American soldiers’ anti-war activism in Japan. The history of Hawai’i and its mixed political representatives in the Senate and Congress during the war (two Democrats and one Republican) have mostly been overlooked by historians. Gilbert demonstrates how Hawaiians were more sympathetic with the doves than the hawks. While their politicians supported both Presidents Johnson and Richard Nixon, the
primary message from the citizens of Hawai'i was the desire for cessation of hostility in favor of peace negotiations. While not explicitly noted in Gilbert's essay, the memory of Pearl Harbor as well as the marginalization of the islands’ indigenous population must have affected their desire to choose peace over war.

Race tensions were evident among American troops during the Vietnam War. Japan became the unlikely refuge for disgruntled Black soldiers, deserters, and anti-war soldiers. When the US began bombing North Vietnam, an anti-Vietnam War movement began in Tokyo. Having experienced American bombing just two decades earlier, the Japanese sympathized with North Vietnamese citizens who now experienced the terror that Tokyo residents had. Shiratori describes the coffee shops and underground support systems that the Japanese in Iwakuni provided to the American soldiers disillusioned by the war policies and the endemic racism within the US military. Her essay is particularly poignant because the reader hears from the participants—both Japanese and American—as they recalled their motives, tactics, and ultimate outcome of acting on their deep-seated principles.

The final five essays focus on the war's legacies. These essays include the clandestine exodus of the Chinese from South Vietnam at the end of the 1970s and the assimilation—and flourishing—of the Vietnamese who migrated to Australia. The general impression of the exit of the Chinese from South Vietnam is that their secret escapes were unrelated to racial discrimination. The Chinese were harassed not because of their race but due to their economic standing. Related to this, it would be helpful to have read more in these essays about the domestic turmoil in Vietnam between 1975 and 1985—a time, as described by Frederick Z. Brown, that the Vietnamese call the “subsidy period.”[1]

Perhaps the most moving portions of the book are the testimonies from Vietnamese men who rose to high positions in the Australian armed forces. Many of them arrived in Australia as young children of refugee parents. They were treated with kindness and dignity in schools and society and remain proud of both their heritage and adopted country.

The one glaring omission in this volume is how little the Philippines is mentioned. The US had invested its reputation and human resources in the archipelago more than in any other country in Asia, since it served as an American colony beginning in 1898. The knowledge of the Philippines’ rural leftist anti-Japanese movements (the Hukbala and then the New People’s Army) during and after World War II should have tempered the US advisors’ acceptance of MacDonald’s assertion of China’s inordinate influence in Southeast Asian states. There does not appear to be one reference to the vital role that President Ramon Magsaysay made in demonstrating how to effectively work with indigenous Communist groups. Max Boot’s insight on Magsaysay and Ngo Dinh Diem presented in his book The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam (2019) would have been a strong addition to this volume.

And in terms of the social and cultural consequences the Vietnam War had on regional partners, one can hardly overstate the war’s effects on the Philippine cities of Angeles and Olongapo—homes to Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base. In Baguio City, the John Hay Air Base and the US bases around San Fernando, La Union, also deeply changed the social landscapes. All these bases experienced greater activity and importance due to the Vietnam War.

This volume should be on every bookshelf of those who want to learn how a war never starts, progresses, and ends in a vacuum. The essays are accessible, and the diverse approaches and material make it engaging and illuminating. While not every aspect of the Pacific region is covered, there is enough material for the reader to have a solid
understanding of the war’s impact on East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Hawai‘i.

Note


Shelton Woods serves as associate dean and professor of Southeast Asian history at Boise State University. He is the author of three books on Vietnam. His latest book, Governor of the Cordillera: John Early among Philippine Highlanders was published by Cornell in 2023. Sheltonwoods.com

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