

Pierre Asselin. *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xi + 190 pp. \$22.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-5417-4.



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A Bitter Peace

In Paris, on January 27, 1973, representatives of the principle combatants in the Vietnam War signed the "Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring the Peace in Viet-Nam." With his book *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the making of the Paris Agreement*, Pierre Asselin, assistant professor of history at the Kapiolani campus of the University of Hawaii, makes an important contribution to our understanding of this agreement. As is suggested by his book's title and its inclusion in *The New Cold War History Series*, published by The University of North Carolina Press, Asselin goes beyond the boundaries of traditional U.S. diplomatic history, and places the agreement in a more international context.

Asselin states that his principle aim is to "explain the circumstances that doomed the peace promised by the agreement." Washington and Hanoi, he argues, signed the Paris agreement with the understanding that its implementation would be "highly problematic." Since 1968 the war had settled into a stalemate that neither side could break. With both sides facing domestic difficulties,

by 1972 they had come to the conclusion that finalizing an agreement that served their immediate objectives was more important than actual peace. For Washington, those objectives included the release of American POWs and the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam without capitulation. For Hanoi, they included the withdrawal of American forces, preservation of the revolution in the North, and improving the chances for reunification with the South. Once these objectives were achieved, the other terms of the agreement could be ignored. Actual peace, therefore, was "doomed" (p. xi).

Asselin also states two additional aims of his work. First, he wants to place the peace negotiations into an international context. North Vietnam, he argues, was convinced by the failure of the 1972 Spring Offensive that military victory was unlikely, and was "as active a player" in the negotiations as the United States. In addition, South Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), although not directly involved in the private discussions that led to the agreement, exerted considerable pressure on the Unit-

ed States and North Vietnam, respectively. Second, Asselin emphasizes the centrality of diplomacy in the Vietnam War. The ground and air wars were secondary, and sometimes even manipulated, to serve the purposes of the negotiations. The outcome of the war, he contends, was "not determined on the battlefield but at the negotiating table" (pp. xii-xiii).

Asselin demonstrates each element of his thesis in his explanation of why the January 1973 negotiations succeeded in producing an agreement when the October 1972 negotiations had failed. Many scholars have been highly critical of the Nixon administration for not accepting the October draft agreement, claiming that the "Christmas bombings" accomplished little except to convince North Vietnam to let the United States sign the agreement it had rejected in October. This criticism, Asselin claims, reflects "the America-centered conception of American diplomatic history, the idea that Washington acts and other nations and peoples react." The reality, he claims, is that the October agreement failed because "circumstances beyond Washington's control" prevented it. First, the Saigon government rejected not only the October agreement, but the very idea of negotiations and was willing to give up American aid rather than sign it. Second, Hanoi and its PRG allies refused to make the concessions that would have been necessary to allay Saigon's fears. Third, Washington, despite its threats to the contrary, was unwilling to abandon South Vietnam (pp. 178-179).

By January, he argues, the situation had changed. The United States now needed a settlement. The last American forces would soon leave Vietnam, and with them would go the leverage their presence gave Washington. Additionally, the newly elected Congress would soon begin its session and President Nixon would be unable to resist its demand to reach an agreement without risking further aid to Saigon. Hanoi also had compelling reasons to finalize an agreement in Janu-

ary. The intensified bombing of December had disrupted the progress of the Revolution in North Vietnam and Vietnamization had disrupted the war in the South. Furthermore, detente threatened Chinese and Soviet aid and alleviated American fears about a wider war. It was this combination of factors that brought the negotiations to a successful conclusion in January 1973. While some readers will disagree with Asselin's conclusions, most will agree that his argument is more sophisticated than the standard debate over whether or not the "Christmas bombings" succeeded in bringing about a quick agreement (pp. 179-180).

Asselin supports his thesis with research in both U.S. and Vietnamese archives. In the U.S. he has drawn extensively from the Nixon Presidential Materials Project at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, and in Vietnam, from the State Archives Center of the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, in Hanoi. He has supplemented his archival work with government documents, personal memoirs, and interviews in both English and Vietnamese. Asselin's goal of placing the Paris Agreement in an international context could not have been successful without his ability and willingness to undertake this multi-archival research.

While specialists of the Vietnam War will make up Asselin's primary readership, the importance of his conclusions will likely lead to their incorporation in general histories of the war, where they will reach a wider audience. Overall the book makes a strong contribution to the field and should be added to the collections of college and university libraries.

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