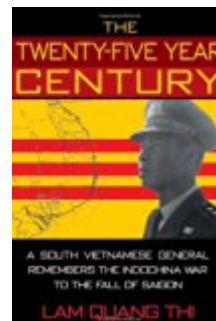


Lam Quang Thi. *The Twenty-Five Year Century: A South Vietnamese General Remembers the Indochina War to the Fall of Saigon.* Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2001. ix + 423pp. \$32.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57441-143-0.



Reviewed by Jeffrey G. Grey

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Remembrance of Things Past

The Vietnam War impacted primarily and most directly upon the Vietnamese, but the Vietnamese themselves, and especially those former soldiers and citizens of the Republic of Vietnam, are largely invisible in the extensive published literature on the war. The people, the nation, and the cause on whose behalf we fought have yet to be consciously and effectively written into the history of their own war.

Many Americans viewed the South Vietnamese with ambivalence (or even outright hostility) at the time, and those views have continued to color such treatment as the RVN and its armed forces have received since the U.S. defeat in 1975. The popular view, fed through some of the historical accounts and much of the memoir literature and film and television treatment, is of a corrupt, incompetent, venal, and cowardly army and government, an unreliable ally deserving of our contempt. Not worth fighting for, not worth dying for.

Not the least of this book's virtues is to remind a largely uncomprehending Western readership of the protracted experience of war that

was the lot of many Vietnamese whose allegiance lay with the anti-Communist side in a long revolutionary civil war. Lam Quang Thi and his brother joined the forerunner of the National Military Academy at Dalat in 1950, having experienced already something of the First Indochina War while at school: members of his family and some of his class mates were killed by the Viet Minh, while other friends fought in its ranks in the anti-French and anti-colonial struggle. As the title of the book implies (borrowing an allusion from Victor Hugo), for his generation the next quarter century of unrelenting conflict was, and remains, all-consuming.

His career reflects both the strengths and weaknesses of the ARVN and of the South Vietnamese state, and as a senior military officer in a country where the military and the government were generally synonymous he has many interesting observations to make about key personalities and events. Nor does he shy away from the obvious criticisms concerning political interference in command (he was himself removed from front line command at one point for "political" reasons)

and corruption in its various forms (with a telling little story from his time in command of the 9th Infantry Division). While praising the relationship between Americans and Vietnamese in the field, especially the U.S. "counterparts," he has some sharp things to say about American ethnocentrism and arrogance towards senior Vietnamese officers and officials. He has some equally sharp things to say about the ceasefire process in 1973, and about the International Commission for Control and Supervision and the activities of the Communist members of that body in undermining the security of ARVN units during "inspection" visits. His account of the final campaign in 1975, by which time he was commanding ARVN I Corps in the northern provinces, effectively conveys the chaos and tragedy of those final weeks in the life of a country and an army to which he had devoted the whole of his adult life.

The book will probably add little for specialists, but its straightforward, self-effacing style should appeal to a general readership interested in understanding the experiences and viewpoints of our South Vietnamese ally. General Lam is to some extent a prisoner of his own perspective: "to this day," he writes, "I am certain that, had we continued to receive American fire support, we could have stopped and crushed the NVA's offensive during the critical months of February, March, and April 1975" (p. 290). Whilst probably true, it begs the question as to what response the ARVN, and the RVN, might have had to the inevitable further northern offensives that would have ensued. Nor does he explicitly recognize the fundamental weakness of the ARVN in terms of its lack of strategic mobility. But for those outside a very small group of specialists on the South Vietnamese and their war, this thoughtful book provides a valuable gateway into an army, and a country, that no longer exists.

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