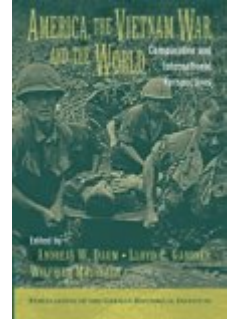


Andreas W. Daum, Wilfried Mausbach, Lloyd C. Gardner. *America, the Vietnam War and the World: Comparative and International Perspectives.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 372 S. \$24.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-00876-1.



Reviewed by Edmund Wehrle

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Over a decade after the first President Bush declared an end to "Vietnam Syndrome," the painful after-effects of the war appear as alive as ever. Twice in the past year, Vietnam-related stories have graced the cover of *Newsweek* magazine. Persistent charges that Iraq is or is becoming "another Vietnam" surface almost daily in the media, dogging the administration of the second President Bush. With all its might, the American war in Vietnam resists slipping into the past.

In 1998, the German Historical Institute sponsored a conference aimed at placing the Vietnam War in a broader theoretical and international context. *America, the Vietnam War, and the World* is a collection of papers presented at that conference. These endeavors fit neatly into a larger project now over a decade in process: the globalization of American history, a drive to destroy lingering notions of "American exceptionalism," among the most politically incorrect of politically incorrect historical concepts. The book's editors are ambitious. They aim to explore the "wider geographical, political, and cultural ramifications" of the war, and to move toward a "full history" or

synthesis still regrettably absent, despite tomes written on the war (p. 8). In the end, although generally instructive and occasionally proffering fascinating insights, the essays compiled never break the fresh ground envisioned by the editors. Too often, authors present retreads of previously published material, rarely incorporating new primary research. Instead, one is left with only pieces of what one suspects is a larger, more complex puzzle.

The book is divided into three parts, perhaps a reflection of the overly broad agenda of its editors. The first section, in many ways the most disappointing of the three, aims to illuminate through historical comparison. Drawing such parallels is tricky business: one risks distorting as much as informing. John Prados, a researcher at his best when unraveling the intricacies of U.S. intelligence and military operations, offers a somewhat strained analogy between the Japanese invasion of China and the American experience in Vietnam. Both military operations, Prados argues, were "peripheral wars," depleting the attention and resources of Americans and Japanese from

greater strategic objectives. While Michael Lind has argued elsewhere that Vietnam was a "necessary" peripheral war, affirming U.S. credibility in Southeast Asia at a dangerous hour, Prados sees only disastrous results, driven by "great-power hubris" and shortsightedness. Prados's analogy surely would have worked better had the United States invaded North Vietnam. The existence of the South Vietnamese government and army is ignored entirely. Likewise, given Japan's geographic proximity to China and its desperate hunger for natural resources, one wonders if the Japanese invasion can be considered a peripheral war in quite the same fashion as U.S. intervention in Vietnam. If anything, one is more struck by the differences between these military operations than by their similarities.

German scholar Fabian Hilfrich builds on the concept of center and periphery in his essay comparing the U.S. experience in Vietnam in the 1960s to the Philippine-American War at the turn of the century. In language often laden with political science jargon, Hilfrich argues that grand discursive "visions" drove both interventions. The comparison, although not without merit, occasionally seems forced, as when Hilfrich insists imperialists such as Alfred T. Mahan "proceeded with perfect, domino-like, step-by-step reasoning" (p. 50). In another essay, T. Christopher Jespersen compares Vietnam to the eighteenth-century American struggle for independence. Like other pieces in the first section, Jespersen's comparisons are often clever but offer little in the way of crucial insights.

Despite the drumbeat assertions of authors throughout the book's first section that the American War in Vietnam represents no unique phenomenon, one is left only partially convinced. Indeed, after reading Michael Adas's essay centered on the concept of "recolonization"--arguing that the American war differed little from that of the colonial French--one almost wonders if an emphasis on *what was unique* about the U.S. experience

might yield fresher insights than such awkward labors to fit Vietnam into various proposed models.

A second series of essays specifically addressing the resonance of the war beyond the immediate combatants will prove more useful to informed readers eager for new insights. Leopoldo Nuti's essay on the noxious impact of the Vietnam War on U.S. efforts to promote an anticommunist left-center coalition in Italy well illustrates the far-reaching waves set in motion by the Vietnam War. The deleterious effect of the war on the U.S. economy has been explored by historians such as Robert M. Collins, but Hubert Zimmermann places the collapse of the "dollar-gold link" in international (or at least European) context. While the financial repercussions of the U.S. war may have been exaggerated, Zimmermann argues Vietnam "progressively undermined confidence" in a system deeply reliant on the American dollar, and facilitated "attempts at European monetary unification," leading to the euro (p. 173).

Fredrik Logevall's multi-archival research and tightly presented arguments have placed him among the most insightful of the new generation of Vietnam post-revisionists. In this volume, he offers a fascinating essay depicting Lyndon Johnson's stillborn "More Flags" campaign, LBJ's quest to internationalize the conflict in Vietnam or at least present a veneer of international support. In the mid-1960s, not even Great Britain offered substantial support, despite Johnson's persistent arm-twisting. In Logevall's essay, America's current dilemmas resonate loudly. Johnson's awkward and frustrating search for wartime allies, like that of the current president, reminds us that the American Empire--if there is such a thing--hardly dictates its destiny. We are also reminded of the deep roots of Franco-American tension, as Jacques Chirac appears in many ways reprising a role originated by Charles de Gaulle. While fascinating, like so many other essays in the collection, Logevall's contribution is almost directly pulled

from his prize-winning book, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam*.

One country that enthusiastically chose to add its flag to the American war effort was Australia. Fearing communist expansion in Southeast Asia, and eager to ensure American and British commitment to the region, Australia initially charged ahead as America's partner in Vietnam. Peter Edwards's essay, essentially a synopsis of his excellent book on the subject, recounts not only an early eagerness for war, but the Australian public's growing disenchantment after 1967. Self-interest and pragmatism are also the subject of Canadian scholar Arne Kislenko's study of U.S.-Thai cooperation during the war. Kislenko credits the not-always-harmonious relationship with protecting a crucial domino and providing "the stability that promoted the economic development on which the motivation for democratic reforms was contingent that surfaced by the mid-1970s" (p. 201).

Of sixteen essays included, only two treat the impact of the war on the communist bloc. As the U.S. struggled with political fallout from the war, so too apparently did its rivals. Eva-Maria Stolberg depicts an intense ideological struggle between China and the Soviet Union over Vietnam. Early on, Mao recognized the Vietnam War might serve "as a vehicle for China to forge a national identity" (p. 243). Eager "to clash with the United States," Mao's support "made guerrilla warfare possible in the South and led, moreover, to a dangerous escalation" (p. 244). Soon, however, the Soviets, the Chinese, and the North Vietnamese were locked in a musical chairs game of rivalries and alliances. By the end, Stolberg concludes, "mutual mistrust and suspicion" ruled the day, and Vietnam hastened the Sino-Soviet break (p. 256). Like the U.S., the "communist powers also failed" in Vietnam (p. 256). Gunter Wernicke's piece on the bumpy history of the East German government-sponsored German Peace Council (which actually

appears in section three of the book) echoes Stolberg's depiction of quagmire even among America's foes.

Part 3 examines the Vietnam War's domestic impact in various countries. In an article on the antiwar movement in West Germany, Wilfried Mausbach contends that student protesters wielding analogies comparing Vietnam to Auschwitz were actually coming to grips with their own nation's ugly recent history. The international antiwar movement, argues Barbara Tischler, provided "organizational, theoretical, and personal lessons" to the emerging feminist movement (p. 321). Although Tischler is largely focused on American women and loses sight of Vietnam entirely when discussing feminism in France, Germany, and Britain, she caps her essay with a brief recitation of the career of Jane Fonda as evidence of the deep interconnection between antiwar activism and feminist consciousness.

The final chapter is offered by veteran scholar Lloyd Gardner, one of the collection's editors. One might have expected Gardner to undertake the daunting job of synthesizing the previous fifteen essays (a task admittedly partly accomplished in a lengthy introduction). Instead Gardner seems to throw up his hands and posit "that Vietnam was not simply one war" (p. 342). He then sticks to *his* Vietnam War and offers an American-centered, traditional diplomatic history, blasting U.S. policymakers as the victims of "self-enchantment" (p. 350).

The essays compiled in this book are diverse. For those well versed in the history of the Vietnam War, there will be few major insights--although, no doubt, much of interest. Those less familiar with the literature will come to recognize a more complex, far-reaching war than they might have previously imagined. In the end, while the editors promise to move beyond the "unending debate" towards new perspectives and synthesis, their work falls somewhat short. The conflict remains too fresh and controversial to yield to such

synthetic designs. Yet more primary research, especially in challenging foreign archives, is needed in order to produce more solid, straightforward scholarship. Only then may we expect a new generation, unburdened by the immediate legacy of the Vietnam War, to produce works of true context and synthesis.

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