

Vietnam's American War

The American war in Vietnam was more than the sum of its battles. The ground war in the South and the air war in the North were certainly important in shaping its course, but they alone fail to explain why Hanoi and its Viet Cong partisans bested Washington and the regime in Saigon in the end. After all, communist armies lost most battles and suffered disproportionately higher casualties than US and South Vietnamese forces throughout the conflict. To make sense of the American War, we must look beyond the conflict itself. We must understand its context and, above all, the formative experiences, worldview, and motivations of those who devised communist strategies and tactics. Theirs was more than an anti-American crusade; it was an existential struggle for the soul of Vietnam instigated years before the United States became militarily involved in their country. And that is the story this book relates: the background to the US intervention to save the noncommunist Southern Vietnamese republic, and, fundamentally, how and why Northern communist leaders and their armies made that intervention so utterly futile in the end. This nonpartisan account is as richly detailed as it is original, thought provoking, and readable.

Pierre Asselin is Professor of History and Dwight E. Stanford Chair in the History of US Foreign Relations at San Diego State University. His books include *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (2002) and *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (2013).

“Now with detailed attention to the regime in Saigon, alongside already excellent coverage of Hanoi, the second edition of *Vietnam's American War* offers a deep, balanced assessment of Vietnam's wars involving France and the United States. This is a must-read for anyone interested in Vietnamese perspectives.”

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Vietnam's American War

A New History

Second Edition

PIERRE ASSELIN

San Diego State University



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and to whom I owe all of my professional successes and much of
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Preface to the Second Edition

There are second editions and then there are second editions. This is the latter.

The narrative that follows is fundamentally revised – substantively and interpretatively – from the original, published in 2018. In many ways, this is a different book. The first iteration of *Vietnam's American War* focused almost exclusively on the struggle conducted by Le Duan and Vietnamese communist authorities to defeat the United States. It took little account of and dismissed as inconsequential the regime in Saigon as well as those who fought for and otherwise supported it. This new edition remedies that imbalance on the basis of innovative research reflecting the dynamism of the fields of Vietnam and Vietnam War studies. Some extremely important works on the American War, Southern Vietnam, and related topics were published in recent years. These works have for all intents and purposes revolutionized my understanding of the conflict.

Two fresh schools of thought on the war have molded the narrative that follows. The first is the *École française* (French School), as I call it, of modern Vietnamese history. French-trained scholars François Guillemot and Christopher Goscha are its primary architects and disciples. Together, they have put to rest once and for all the myth of millennia-old Vietnamese national unity and indomitability in the face of external aggression by documenting the myriad, profound fractures inherent in Vietnamese society, past and present. Most importantly, they have shown that the most consequential events to unfold in Vietnam between 1945 and 1975 were conditioned by a violent, ideologically driven conflict between and among Vietnamese. A relatively homogenous group of committed Marxist-Leninists fixated on “liberating” and reunifying

Vietnam under their exclusive control steered one side; a more heterogeneous coalition of noncommunist nationalists championing pluralism and anticommunists hellbent on destroying the communists directed the other. The French and American wars in Vietnam, and the involvement of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China in both, considerably aggravated the cleavages and violence among Vietnamese, but were not their primary cause. "No mere Cold War proxy struggle," historian Sean Fear and political scientist Tuong Vu surmise on the basis of *École française* scholarship, the schism between communists and non/anticommunists in Vietnam "was irreconcilable long before American intervention began in earnest, and it lingers among Vietnamese across the globe even today."¹ In this new edition, I refer to the bloody contestation between and among Vietnamese of different and competing political persuasions as the Fourth Civil War for Vietnam, because it marked the fourth time in their history that the Vietnamese (and their ancestors) were involved in a decades-long civil war. The direct military interventions of France and then the United were both phases of and stages in that fratricidal conflict, I argue.

The second school shaping this new narrative is the one I label the Southern Republican School. It is informed by the writings of specialists of South Vietnam – the State of Vietnam (1949–55) and the Republic of Vietnam (1955–75) – whose research is based on the archives of the former noncommunist regime in Saigon. Those archives are now in the custody of the communist government in Hanoi, but rather easily accessible for both Vietnamese and foreign scholars at National Archives Center 2 in Ho Chi Minh City. Keith Taylor, Tuong Vu, Nu-Anh Tran, Simon Toner, Heather Stur, Geoff Stewart, Ed Miller, Sean Fear, and Brett Reilly have produced fascinating works on, variously, noncommunist nationalism, anticommunism, and republicanism in South Vietnam using those archives. George Veith, who does not read Vietnamese but has good friends and collaborators who do, published a seminal work in 2021 addressing heretofore unknown or neglected facets of the regime of President Nguyen Van Thieu and the so-called Second Republic of Vietnam (1967–75). Thanks to these scholars and their contributions, the field of Vietnam War studies is moving beyond its traditional essentialization of South Vietnam as a corrupt and illegitimate entity owing its existence and therefore being beholden to the United States. We no longer oversimplify and are learning to appreciate the South's "complex political landscape," in the formulation of historian Nu-Anh Tran.² The

Preface to the Second Edition

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vibrancy and vitality of noncommunist South Vietnam and its people are evident in this new edition.

This second edition of *Vietnam's American War* remains the story of how and why Hanoi won. However, it offers more extensive and nuanced insights into Southern Vietnamese history, politics, and society than the first. It also underscores the civil war dynamics that shaped the contours of the American War, and the French War preceding it. As such, this edition does better justice to and is more deserving of its title.

And, yes, I plagiarized the opening line of this preface from a James Bond movie.

Notes

- 1 Tuong Vu and Sean Fear (eds.), *The Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1975: Vietnamese Perspectives on Nation Building* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 10.
- 2 Nu-Anh Tran, *Disunion: Anticommunist Nationalism and the Making of the Republic of Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2022), 4.

Acknowledgments

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS (FIRST EDITION)

I first became interested in the so-called Vietnam War after watching *Rambo: First Blood Part II* on television. I was a high school student in Québec City, Canada, at the time. Growing up in a highly homogenous white, French-Canadian, Catholic environment, I had no idea who or what the Vietnamese were, or even that the United States had lost a war in their country a little over a decade earlier. Watching the movie, only parts of which I understood because it was in its original English version, I thought Sylvester Stallone's character was going after mean Chinese soldiers detaining Americans for no other reason than that they were Chinese, and mean. (I had only ever personally interacted with one Asian person at the time, a nice kid in my high school and my badminton partner whom I assumed was Chinese on account those were the only Asians I knew. It turns out he was, by way of Madagascar, no less!) My ignorance became apparent the next day when I asked my History teacher about the movie and he pointed out that it was actually set against the backdrop of the "Vietnam War," and the United States had never gone to war against China, as far as he knew. I ended up writing a paper for his class naïvely entitled "The Vietnam War" relating the various types of booby traps used by Vietnamese communist forces against US troops, based on a single book with lots of pictures in it. Rambo and that paper were all it took to pique my curiosity in the conflict and set me on the path to becoming a History professor specializing in the American war in Vietnam.

This book represents a culmination of my efforts to make sense of the people who were mean to Rambo and his buddies, of the "other side"

in the “Vietnam War.” It is a summation of what I have come to understand about the leaders of that side and how they won that war. It is also a labor of love, a testament to my deep respect and appreciation for a country, a people, and a history that have fascinated me since I began studying them.

Several individuals and organizations contributed in various ways to this project. Lewis Bateman of Cambridge University Press expressed interest in it before its first page was written. Had it not been for Lew, this book may never have been produced. My gratitude extends to Debbie Gershenowitz, who assumed charge of the project following Lew’s retirement, Kristina Deusch, her assistant, Josh Penney, my content manager, and John Bowdler, my copyeditor. It was a privilege to work with such a diligent and competent editorial team.

My comrades in Vietnam War and Cold War studies have made learning about those topics fulfilling to the extreme. Pierre Journoud, Pierre 1 as our peer group has labeled him on account of his superior looks (and intellect too, I am sure), has done more for me professionally than I could ever repay him. “Mon Journoud” has organized several of my visits to France and provided invaluable feedback on my writings. I will never regret choosing Vietnam as my field of expertise if only because it allowed us to become friends. I can say the same about Lien-Hang Nguyen, whose scholarship and generosity sharing source material have been of tremendous benefit. Larry Berman has never turned me down when I needed his assistance and meaningfully impacted my professional development. Antoine Coppolani has been most supportive and a joy to be around, along with “La Dominique.” Fred Logevall and Chris Goscha remain exemplars: Fred on account of his assiduousness and prolificacy, Chris for his meticulousness and unparalleled knowledge of modern Vietnamese history. I also appreciate the support and friendship of David Anderson, Jessica Chapman, Sean Fear, Marc Gilbert, Pierre Grosser, Martin Grossheim, Ang Cheng Guan, George Herring, Jim Hershberg, Alec Holcombe, Liam Kelley, Ben Kerkvliet, Mark Lawrence, Lorenz Lüthi, Shawn McHale, Ed Miller, Mark Moyer, Jason Picard, John Prados, Andrew Preston, Geoff Stewart, Balazs Szalontai, Hue-Tam Tai, Carl Thayer, Nu-Anh Tran, Tuong Vu, Alex Vuving, Qiang Zhai, and Peter Zinoman. Bob Brigham, William Duiker, David Elliott, Sophie Quinn-Judge, Bill Turley, and Odd Arne Westad continue to inspire me. Marilyn Young always made time; I miss her terribly.

Certain organizations have been indispensable for my research. Special thanks to the Cold War International History Project and its

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director, Christian Ostermann, and program leader, Chuck Kraus; to The Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University and its director, Steve Maxner; to the Vietnam Studies Group and its contributors; to the Institut Pierre Mendès France in Paris, its president Eric Roussel, and his assistants Murielle Blondeau and Vincent Laniol; and to the staff at the French Diplomatic Archives at La Courneuve, the National Archives of the United Kingdom in Kew, and Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa. Thanks, too, to the wonderful people at the National Archives of Algeria, and Mesdames Mehareb, Ratiba, and Gater in particular. For their financial support, I am indebted to the National Endowment for the Humanities and Hawaii Pacific University, where I taught for nine years before finding a new home in the History Department at San Diego State University.

A good part of the information and insights I present in the pages that follow derives from time spent in Vietnam mining archives and “talking story” with colleagues and students there. Professors Hoang Anh Tuan, Pham Quang Minh, Nguyen Van Kim, Vu Duong Ninh, and Le Mau Han share an unmatched passion for their country’s history and have taught me much. Professor Tuan has also been instrumental in helping me secure access to Vietnamese document repositories. My frequent interactions with graduate students in the History Department at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi have proven equally edifying, as have my exchanges with journalists Bao Trung and Chi Trung. Special thanks to Professor Phan Huy Le for sponsoring my first visits to Vietnam and remaining a good friend through the years. My utmost gratitude extends to the people at National Archives Center 3 in Hanoi, a remarkable collection I have been mining for more than two decades. I am especially appreciative of the assistance rendered by *Chú* Dinh, *Em* Thanh, *Em* Ly, and, more recently, Director Tran Viet Hoa, Deputy Director Nguyen Minh Son, and staff members *Em* Nhung and *Anh* Tien. All have been incredibly accommodating and indulgent with me. And I am truly sorry for making their lives so miserable at times!

This book in particular owes much to extraordinary input from certain individuals. Jay Veith volunteered essential feedback, as did Brian Price of Hawaii Pacific University. Ed Moïse read parts of the manuscript and offered precious input. Ho Thanh Tam of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi provided indispensable assistance, facilitating my access to archives and helping me obtain the photos that appear in this book as well as the permissions to reproduce them. The family of Nguyen Ba Khoan, his daughter Hoa in particular, allowed

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I owe my career and achievements as an academic to those who taught me. John Keyes and Tom Tynan formed me in my younger years at St. Lawrence College. Yves Frenette at Glendon College made me want to become a History professor. The late Huynh Kim Khanh at Glendon, Ron Pruessen and Hy Van Luong at the University of Toronto, and Gary Hess as well as Tim Naftali during their passage at the University of Hawaii at Manoa opened my eyes to important realities of Vietnamese and Cold War history. Stephen O'Harrow of the University of Hawaii has nurtured my passion for Vietnam since 1988. Last but not least, Idus Newby, formerly of the University of Hawaii, meticulously combed over my book and article manuscripts. He was generous with his time and trenchant with his words. He was a scholar's scholar, a man of infinite wisdom and intellect. He passed away shortly before this book went to press. Even though old age precluded him from going over this manuscript, it owes its best aspects to his mentorship, to the judiciousness he imparted to me.

My mother and sister in Québec City remain an exceptional support system despite the distance that separates us. Our phone conversations and the time we spend together when I visit provide much relief from the stresses of life. I do owe my mother an apology: I should call more often, just not as frequently as I do when the Habs are in the playoffs, and I need to vent after each period of play. Pierre-Marie, thanks for still keeping an eye on me.

Grace, my scintillating wife, is still the best thing that has happened to me. I hate growing old as much as she does, but I love getting old with her. She is the reason I have enjoyed, and I mean really enjoyed, the last twenty-plus years of my life. I thank her for putting up with my inadequacies, and for all the love she has given me during our time together. This book, like the others, owes much to her forbearance. As for you, Ursula, you may have come from the streets of Honolulu, are missing a pretty noticeable part of one ear, are wheezy all the time, have disproportionately long toes, and look weird for all your uniqueness, you are still my favorite companion. Thanks for constantly reminding me to take life in stride, for making it impossible for me to be stressed when I am around you, and for making me feel like I can be an indispensable source

Acknowledgments

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of support, literally, to another living being. You were far from my first choice that day at the Humane Society but, luckily for us, I have a wife who has much better judgment than I do, especially when it comes to adopting cats.

My father passed away a couple of years ago. If academics are allowed to have fans, he was my most devoted and loyal one. I realize now that one of the reasons I enjoyed publishing to the extent that I did was because it made him so damn happy to see his son's name in print. Pride is just not strong enough a word to convey what he exuded whenever I achieved an important milestone. There has been this deep void in my heart since he passed. I cry as I write these words because they remind me of just how much I enjoyed having him around. Life is not as beautiful without him in it. He was a good, honorable man who made me want to be as decent, respectable, and just. I am still working on that.

All contributions aside, I alone accept responsibility for any shortcomings in this work.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS (SECOND EDITION)

I am immeasurably proud of this revised and updated edition of *Vietnam's American War* but cannot take full credit for it. Several individuals contributed in meaningful ways to its making. Foremost among them were two former graduate students at San Diego State University (SDSU). Cody Billock has proven the old adage true: the diligent student can become the master. As a doctoral student working under the extraordinary guidance of Alec Holcombe at Ohio University, Cody has morphed into a stunningly competent authority on Vietnam and the American war there. His recommendations and comments on early iterations of this book dramatically improved the final product in several different ways. This is a far more trenchant, thought-provoking, and accurate account of the genesis, course, and outcome of the so-called Vietnam War owing to his assistance and insights. Gene Phillips, arguably the most meticulous graduate student I have supervised, read a late version of the manuscript with extreme care, and provided feedback of the most useful and penetrating sort. His input was invaluable in helping me refine and develop the core arguments presented in the pages that follow. While I do not have children of my own, if I had, I could only wish I would be as proud of them as I am of Cody and Gene.

Jay Veith, an authority on South Vietnam, took time from his busy schedule to painstakingly comb over the manuscript and provide

essential feedback, especially concerning the situation in Saigon at various stages of the conflict, and events immediately preceding April 1975. Jay has for years been a great colleague and friend. Sean Fear, Annika Frieberg, Christopher Goscha, Nguyen Hai, Pierre Journoud, Lorenz Lüthi, Jim Hershberg, David Prentice, and Stein Tønnesson commented on other recent writings that shaped the contours of this work. The same is true of my “Dutch connection” – namely, Brian Linn, Huw Bennett, Martin Thomas, Roel Frakking, and Thijs Brocades Zaalberg. Their expertise and friendship have made the last years of my professional life the best, most interesting, fulfilling, and productive to date. The Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences in Amsterdam (NIAS) brought us together, to the credit of Director Jan Willem Duyvendak. My comrades of the Vietnam Studies Group (VSG) and Olga Dror’s Informational Network for Scholars of Vietnam (“Grapevine”) always answered the call when I needed them. Greg Daddis, who joined the History Department at SDSU recently, has become my dearest colleague and an even better friend. He helped me with this project, as well as in keeping my sanity in a professional environment not always conducive to that. Greg, it is an honor to work alongside the second-best scholar of the Vietnam War at SDSU. I can only imagine how privileged you must feel learning from me and finally getting the story of the war right.

I have returned multiple times to National Archives Center 3 in Hanoi since completing the first edition. Each time I learned much I did not previously know, thanks largely to the assistance of its staff. I am immensely grateful for Director Hoa’s support, appreciative of *Anh* Tien’s patience, and beg *Em* Nhung for her forgiveness: she somehow always gets stuck with my requests for documents, and all the issues that come with that. If Vietnam was a Catholic country, I would push for her canonization. Professor Ho Thanh Tam and Rector Hoang Anh Tuan of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi facilitated my trips to the archives. My last visit in 2022 took place under exceedingly trying, unrelated personal circumstances. Gerard Sasges offered reprieve and relief in ways he will never understand. Though I am sure the innumerable beers we shared also helped, I will always value our relationship on that account.

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Doing what I do comes at a social cost. Digging through archives and writing are gratifying but lonely endeavors. Since moving to San Diego in 2017, I have been lucky to find my own cast of supporting characters in the guise of Jake, Kenny, Frankie, Pauly, Steve, Leo, and the other regulars at Jake's lunchtime pickup hockey. Their friendship and positive demeanor more than make up for their lack of talent on the ice. Allow me, gentlemen, to express here a sentiment I would never dare profess in the locker room: I love you! The same goes to fellow members from *Beer with History*: Mike (founder), Jeremy, Ricardo, Matt, Griffin, Brittany, Stephen, and, last but certainly not least, Minister Peter. The latter is not Catholic and therefore doomed to perpetual hell – or so I have been taught – but I respect the way he insists on serving God anyway. I carry Jeannine and you in my thoughts always, Peter.

I completed the manuscript of this second edition during the summer of 2023, the better part of which I spent in the Netherlands. Tom van den Berge and Marieke Bloembergen provided me with the best office in the world. Mike Glod's friendship and capacity for imbibing alcohol proved vitally important. And Thijs, Madelon, Roel, Anne, and Bart were, as always, absolutely delightful to be around.

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I alone accept responsibility for any and all errors in this work.