The Vietnam War Reexamined

Going beyond the dominant orthodox narrative to incorporate insight from revisionist scholarship on the Vietnam War, Michael G. Kort presents the case that the United States should have been able to win the war, and at a much lower cost than it suffered in defeat. Presenting a study that is both historiographic and a narrative history, Kort analyzes important factors such as the strong nationalist credentials and leadership qualities of South Vietnam’s Ngo Dinh Diem, the flawed military strategy of “graduated response” developed by Robert McNamara, and the real reasons South Vietnam collapsed in the face of a massive North Vietnamese invasion in 1975. Kort shows how the US commitment to defend South Vietnam was not a strategic error but a policy consistent with US security interests during the Cold War, and that there were potentially viable strategic approaches to the war that might have saved South Vietnam.

Michael G. Kort is Professor in the Division of Social Sciences at Boston University. He is the author of several books, including The Soviet Colossus: History and Aftermath, The Columbia Guide to the Cold War, and A Brief History of Russia.
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In memory of my parents

And for Maya
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I am deeply indebted to military historian D. M. Giangreco, who not only read and critiqued the entire manuscript but also offered his irrepressible brand of encouragement from the inception of this project to its completion and, during lengthy phone conversations, provided me with invaluable tutorials on technical military matters. James H. Willbanks, Vietnam War veteran and now one of the leading historians of that conflict, on short notice, read the manuscript and provided extremely helpful comments. Cathal Nolan, my colleague at Boston University and also a military historian, likewise on short notice, provided a valuable critique of the entire manuscript. Robert Wexelblatt, also my colleague at Boston University, read and then reread large sections of the manuscript and offered key suggestions that helped me move forward when I seemed stuck in Chapter 1. William Tilchin, Jay Corrin, and June Grasso, my colleagues in Boston University’s Division of Social Sciences, evaluated or discussed parts of this manuscript with me and were always available for consultations when needed. My thanks to Lewis Bateman, the editor at Cambridge University Press who was willing to take a chance on this project; to the anonymous evaluators enlisted by Cambridge University Press for comments and criticism that guided me in crafting and completing this project; and to Kristina Deusch, copy editor Linda Benson, Saranya Jeeva Nath Singh, Robert Judkins, and the staff at CUP for their hard work in helping bring this project to fruition.

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version of the manuscript before I sent it to the publisher. More important, as she has done for half a century, she held body and soul together as I struggled to complete a project that turned out to be far more difficult than I had originally anticipated. As always, my deepest gratitude is reserved for her.
Vietnamese names begin with the family name. That name usually is followed by a middle name and then the given name. The middle name can indicate the generation to which a person belongs, which is one, but not the only, reason siblings often share that name. For example, the brothers Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu (and their two other brothers) had the same middle name. Complicating matters further, Vietnamese refer to each other formally by the given name. That is why, for example, following accepted practice, in this volume Ngo Dinh Diem is referred to as “Diem”; Vo Nguyen Giap, the North Vietnamese general, is referred to as “Giap”; and Nguyen Van Thieu, the president of South Vietnam, is referred to as “Thieu.” The one exception to this system, admittedly a major one, is Ho Chi Minh, who, again following accepted practice, is referred to as “Ho.” As in most recently published books, Vietnamese individuals are indexed in this volume according to their family names. Thus in the index Ngo Dinh Diem is followed by Ngo Dinh Nhu under the letter “N,” General Giap is listed under the letter “V” as Vo Nguyen Giap, and, not an exception in this case, Ho is listed under “H” as Ho Chi Minh. Some important individuals are listed both ways: for example, Ngo Dinh Diem is found under his full name and under “Diem.” Readers of this volume also will notice a large number of people named Nguyen. This is not because they were related but rather because Nguyen is the most common family name in Vietnam; in fact, almost 40 percent of the people in Vietnam carry the family name Nguyen. It was Ho Chi Minh’s real family name (Nguyen Sinh Cung) as well as the family name of the alias (Nguyen Ai Quoc) he used for many years before becoming “Ho Chi Minh.”
Many of the books and articles that served as sources for this volume were written by serving or retired officers in the US military. In referring to them in the text for the first time, I have used the highest rank they reached of which I am aware. For example, Dave Richard Palmer, a colonel when he wrote *Summons of the Trumpet*, later became a general and is referred to as “General Dave Richard Palmer” in this volume, and James H. Willbanks, who published his major works after retiring from the US Army as a lieutenant colonel, is referred to by that rank when first mentioned in the text.

With regard to the spelling of the words “communism” and “communist,” my system is to spell them with a lowercase “c” when referring to that concept in the generic sense and with an uppercase “C” when referring to the Soviet variant and its various offshoots.
Abbreviations

APC Accelerated Pacification Campaign
ARVN Army of the Republic of Vietnam
DMZ Demilitarized Zone
CCP Chinese Communist Party
CIA Central Intelligence Agency
CMAC Chinese Military Advisory Group
CORDS Civil Operations and Revolutionary (later changed to Rural) Development Support
COSVN Central Office for South Vietnam
CPSU Communist Party of the Soviet Union
DAO Defense Attaché Office
DIA Defense Intelligence Agency
DVN Democratic Republic of Vietnam
GVN Government of (South) Vietnam
ICP Indochinese Communist Party
JCS U. S. Joint Chiefs of Staff
MACV Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NLF National Liberation Front
POL Petroleum, Oil, Lubricants
PPBS Planning Programming and Budgeting Systems
PRC People’s Republic of China
PSDF People’s Self Defense Force
ROEs Rules of Engagement
RVN Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
RVNAF Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) Armed Forces
**List of Abbreviations**

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<td>Vietnam Nationalist Party</td>
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