
BOOK REVIEW

Imbalance of Scholarship: Gareth Porter's Vietnam War

Gareth Porter. *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xviii + 403 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$27.50.

Gareth Porter has a well-earned reputation as a scholar of Vietnam, with edited volumes of documents and work on the internal dynamics of Vietnamese politics and society on his curriculum vitae.¹ Perhaps because of his impressive body of scholarship, however, this effort is deeply disappointing. He claims to be offering a new and dynamic explanation for the American intervention into Vietnam—namely that the United States has such a dominant global position, so much more power than its rivals, that it chose to throw its weight around to create a political world according to its designs.

Porter's argument, alas, falls apart from the first. The idea that the United States had predominant power was a staple of New Left historiography in the 1960s and 1970s and has been adapted by even establishment historians such as Melvyn Leffler more recently, so Porter's stake of originality is suspect.² Even more, Porter does not explain how having power and choosing to wield it is a cause or a motive or an explanation or even a strategy. Foreign policy, if we are to accept his explanation, is based on little more than the idea of using power

1. See, for instance, his edited volumes, *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions*, 2 vols. (Standordville, NY, 1979); or his books, including *A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam, and the Paris Agreement* (Bloomington, IN, 1975); *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism* (Ithaca, NY, 1993); or one of his more important articles, "The Myth of the Bloodbath: North Vietnam's Land Reform Reconsidered," Interim Report no. 2 (Ithaca, NY, 1972).

2. The body of New Left literature is vast, and one of the salient arguments used by many New Left authors was precisely that the United States had overwhelming power compared to its Communist rivals and acted to shape the world according to its own designs. See, for instance, the works of William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko, Lloyd Gardner, Walter LaFeber, Noam Chomsky, and others. See also Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA, 1992). Indeed, the idea that the United States was using its vast power indiscriminately was a standard argument among antiwar authors in the Vietnam era. See, notably, J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York, 1966), or "Introduction by Bertrand Russell," in *Against the Crime of Silence: Proceedings of the Russell International War Crimes Tribunal, Stockholm, Copenhagen*, ed. John Duffett (New York, 1968).

for the sake of using power, or “we’ll do it because we can.” But what of other possible explanations like political economy, national security, spreading the ideology of liberal capitalism, or others? Porter does not account for such possibilities, instead contending that “neither historians nor international relations specialists have satisfactorily explained why the United States chose to fight a major war in [Vietnam]” (p. vii). Surely, this would come as a surprise to so many scholars who are familiar with the works of George Herring, Gabriel Kolko, George McT. Kahin, Lloyd Gardner, Marilyn Young, Andrew Rotter, and others. Indeed, those historians have offered us some compelling reasons for the U.S. war on Vietnam, including the desire to rebuild a capitalist order in Asia, to contain Chinese-oriented communism, to thwart a nationalist revolution, and to assert America’s global credibility. Yet, Porter contends that “little more than the suggestion that Cold War ideology was to blame” (p. vii) is evident in the literature.³

Having dismissed generations of scholarship on the Vietnam War, Porter begins to show us the error of our past ways and finally teach us why the United States fought a brutal war in Indochina. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, he tells us, were unduly influenced, if not hoodwinked, by their bellicose advisers who convinced skeptical presidents that the weaknesses of the Soviet Union and People’s Republic of China would make them highly reluctant to counter American moves; military officials were willing to accept “much higher risks and costs in the use of force in Vietnam” than their civilian counterparts and constantly pushed for aggressive actions; and the attitudes and values, as well as personal relationships, of JFK and LBJ were “vitally important in the policy-making process” too (p. xi).

Porter’s first two chapters lay out his “imbalance of power” theme, and they are useful, if not original. His basic point is that the United States had overwhelming military superiority in the early Cold War years over the Soviet Union and later the People’s Republic of China, and that both of these rivals understood their weaknesses vis-à-vis the Americans and in fact were conciliatory toward the United States with regard to Indochina. But, one has to ask how this differs from the conventional narratives that Porter attacks, namely the Cold War context that he has rejected. If American power is so great versus its Communist rivals, and that emboldened U.S. leaders to intervene in Indochina, then the Cold War is in fact the primary political condition driving policy, and

3. Among the many established works that posit compelling and nuanced explanations for the U.S. commitment to and military intervention into Vietnam are George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (Garden City, NY, 1987); Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, The United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York, 1985); George Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th ed. (New York, 2002); Andrew Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY, 1987); Lloyd Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu, 1941–1954* (New York, 1988) and *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago, 1995); and Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York, 1991).

the USSR and PRC, not Vietnam, are ultimately the countries that matter. Based on Porter's reasoning, one could assume that, had Soviet and Chinese power been more proportional to U.S. strength, then American leaders would have had stronger reservations about adventures in Vietnam, again putting Indochina firmly within the Cold War context. And, as for Porter's claims of originality, it is telling that his notes for these chapters principally cite secondary sources, indicating that this idea of overwhelming U.S. strength is a well-established one.

When Porter addresses Vietnam policy directly, he remains a one-trick pony. Again, Ho Chi Minh and his comrades understand that their unfavorable global power position will force them to be more pliable, to back down at Geneva and acquiesce in the partition of Vietnam, and to move slowly in beginning armed conflict thereafter. Indeed, Vietnamese officials repeatedly acknowledged that the Soviet and Chinese evaluation of predominant U.S. power drove their responses and that it would be "folly," in Prime Minister Pham Van Dong's words, to begin armed struggle in the late 1950s. A few years later, even amid the turmoil in the South and the Diem regime's overtures to Hanoi, the Vietnamese Communists still were deeply reluctant to risk an American military intervention against them. But is this really revelatory? Hanoi's cautious approach to engagements in the South has become a staple in histories of the Vietnam War. From Ho's acceptance of the Fontainebleau agreement through Geneva up to the Politburo's reluctance to support an armed movement in the South, the Vietnamese Communists were always aware of, and wary of, facing an armed enemy with vastly superior force. Vietnam, an underdeveloped, agrarian country wracked by occupation, famine, and civil war, obviously had great reservations about taking on an army in the South, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, that was invented and armed by the Americans, and even more fear of taking on U.S. forces themselves. And the United States, still enjoying the fruits of global hegemony in the aftermath of World War II, had little fear of such a small Indochinese state. Indeed, Porter has created what he claims is a grand theory out of a situation better described as *res ipsa loquitur*, "the thing speaks for itself"—in this case a particular result, war in Vietnam, occurred because of a negligent analysis, that U.S. power would prevail in Vietnam. Other than explaining the power dynamic, Porter's thesis tells us little. States with great power, as Thucydides recognized in *The Melian Dialogues* millennia ago, tend to do as they wish, and the weak usually submit as they must, though Vietnam clearly broke from this paradigm.

When Porter addresses the specific policies of the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson administrations, he falls into the apologist's camp that is disturbingly growing.⁴ The dovish Kennedy, Porter tells us, was aware of the

4. On this recent surge in apologetics on not just John Kennedy's role in Vietnam but American intervention writ large, see Robert Buzzanco, "Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock, or How I Learned to Quit Worrying and Love Vietnam and Iraq," *Counterpunch*, April 16/17,

power of anti-Communist politics and so had to “hide his true beliefs” about peaceful cooperation in favor of Cold War rhetoric for “political protection.” Specifically, Kennedy “concealed his real policy toward Vietnam not only from the public but from most of his national security bureaucracy” (pp. 142–43). Fortunately, for us, it was not concealed from Porter, who tells us that the U.S. president was not concerned with Saigon’s overtures to the Communists, was seeking a negotiated settlement, was trying to deescalate the American role in Vietnam, and was intimidated by his advisers into taking steps that he knew were wrong. Looking at Porter’s notes for Chapter 5, however, one is struck by how few of the documents cited express the president’s thoughts or were generated by Kennedy himself. Because it suits his thesis, Porter seems to rely heavily on a few oral interviews given after the war. Even more, though, Porter shrugs off what we do know about Kennedy. As a young congressman, he supported putting Ngo Dinh Diem in power in the putative state of South Vietnam and referred to the Republic of Vietnam as the “finger in the dike” of anticommunism in Southeast Asia. As president, he increased the number of American “advisers” in Vietnam from 800 to about 16,000 in barely a thousand days. He also sent armor, helicopters, Agent Orange, and other U.S. assets into the war against the Vietnamese Communists. Far from being intimidated into war by bellicose advisers, the young Cold Warrior was staking a good deal of his, and the country’s, credibility on maintaining an anti-Communist state below the 17th parallel.⁵

Porter’s treatment of Johnson is similar. The president only sought to reassure Saigon, not signal that he was gearing up for war, when he told Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge to inform the South Vietnamese leaders that he “would not be the first president to lose a war” and that he would “stand by our word” in Vietnam (p. 183). Johnson’s escalation, moreover, was foisted upon him by his advisers and the hawkish military establishment. In fact, in Porter’s version, Johnson had grave reservations about the alleged attacks on American ships in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964, but his advisers “usurped” his powers and forced him into an aggressive response.⁶ Johnson’s advisers assured him, as

2005, <http://counterpunch.org/buzzanco04162005.html>; abridged version reprinted in *Passport*, December 2005, <http://www.shafir.org/newsletter/2005/December/buzzanco.htm>.

5. On Kennedy’s aggressive approach to Vietnam, see, inter alia, Lawrence Bassett and Stephen Pelz, “The Failed Search for Victory: Vietnam and the Politics of War,” in *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961–1963*, ed. Thomas Paterson (New York, 1989); Thomas Paterson, “Bearing the Burden: A Critical Look at JFK’s Foreign Policy,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 54 (Spring 1978); Noam Chomsky, *Retbinking Camelot: JFK, the Vietnam War, and US Political Culture* (Boston, 1993); Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York, 1996), chaps. 4–5; Edwin Moise, “JFK and the Myth of Withdrawal,” in *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, eds. Marilyn Young and Robert Buzzanco (Malden, MA, 2004), 162–73; Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000).

6. For the most thorough treatment of the Tonkin incident and LBJ’s role in it, see Edwin Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996).

Porter sees it, that Hanoi would do all it could to *avoid* a confrontation with U.S. military power, and that there was no threat of a major escalation in the South if the U.S. bombing campaign continued and intensified. Porter gives special emphasis to the military's role in decision making too, claiming that the brass was eager to fight in Vietnam and pushed the president in that direction.

Again, Porter's apologetics for a president fly in the face of what we know. The idea that the president, like his predecessor, was dovish on Vietnam and was pressed to escalate by his advisers is curious at best in light of the many works that have detailed Johnson's steps toward a large-scale war.⁷ More so, the argument that his advisers were hawkish is not original, and his point about the military pushing him to do more is simply wrong, for in fact service officials were much more reluctant to fight in Vietnam than their civilian counterparts.⁸ Ironically, Porter even suggests that Johnson's alleged hesitancy to fight in Vietnam emerged from his belief that a strong government in the South was necessary to prosecute a war, whereas it is much more clear that Johnson escalated the war in order to maintain the fiction that there was a government in the South.

Such is Gareth Porter's work. Under the guise of critic, he offers a strong apology for a war that he rightly condemned while it was being fought and thereafter. If we are to believe, almost conspiratorially, that presidential advisers, perhaps drunk on power and outmaneuvering dovish presidents, wanted to show their swagger and use national power in Vietnam without Soviet or Chinese retaliation simply because they could, then we are accepting a rather primitive and ultimately antihistorical, if not unreasonable, view of American policymakers. Power is not a motive per se, and Porter does not attempt to seek out any larger reasons. Based on decades of work on Vietnam, we can reasonably believe that U.S. leaders wanted to create a global order with American hegemony, and that Asia was a major component of that vision. Toward that end, they intervened in Vietnam to facilitate the reemergence of Japan as a regional power and economic partner and to prevent the establishment of another Communist state on the border of the PRC. Once committed, and with American credibility at stake, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson continuously increased the U.S. commitment to Vietnam in the hopes of preserving the invented country of the Republic of Vietnam while using the rhetoric of anticommunism and democracy to provide cover for an aggressive war that never really went very well.

Surely, Gareth Porter knows this and his earlier work made a powerful contribution to our understanding of the Vietnam War. *Perils of Dominance*, alas, is a step backward, and scholars of the war will now have to revisit issues that should have long been settled. It is indeed curious, to put it mildly, that national leaders who took the United States into a war that went so badly, that was so

7. See the works cited in note 3.

8. On the military's often powerful dissent from war planning for Vietnam, see my *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era*.

unpopular, that has been analyzed so critically, can now be rehabilitated, and that an outstanding scholar like Gareth Porter can have a role in that process. Leaders with power can act in aggressive ways, as we are currently seeing in Iraq, but that is not a motive for wars—it is a description. And I think we all expect more than that from scholars like Gareth Porter.