

FEATURE REVIEW

Vietnam: A Truncated History

Robert Buzzanco. *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era*. New Cambridge University Press, 1996. xvi + 386 pp. Notes, bibliography, index.

One of the several anomalies of the Vietnam War is that for many, especially in academia, the twenty-five-year American involvement there became much Truman's war or Eisenhower's war or Kennedy's war or Johnson's war or Nixon's war as the military's war. In his 1963 letter to the University of Air ROTC director, Bill Clinton, then a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, reflect animus, saying that opposition to the war in Vietnam was the reason "so fine people have come to find themselves still loving their country but loathe the military."

Robert Buzzanco, an assistant professor of history at the University of Houston, would at first appear to continue in that obliquity. He too makes no secret of his loathing for supporters of the Vietnam War, even faulting Clinton for his failure to "fend off repeated allegations of draft dodging." "Rather than frame his decision as a necessary response to an illegitimate war," he writes, "Clinton dodged and stalled, thereby obfuscating what was arguably the noble political act of his career" (p. 3).

That biased beginning is unfortunate, for some will merely dismiss Buzzanco's work out of hand as just another Chomskyesque ideological screed of a type so common in academia during the 1960s. And he does himself no favor when he refers approvingly to Bruce Cumings's "brilliant study of the origins of the Korean War" (p. 5).

As a July 1995 Georgetown University symposium on the origins of the war made clear, with the opening of the archives of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, Cumings's credibility approached that of another Communist apologist, Lloyd Hellman, of whom Mary McCarthy once said "every word she writes includes including 'and' and 'the.'"

Given this slanted introduction, Buzzanco's primary themes come as no surprise, since they contradict the basic tenets of the protest movement. "There are four interrelated themes that inform my work and comprise the backbone of this study: military recognition of the parlous nature of war in Vietnam; criticism of the U.S. role there; civilian responsibility for decisions to fight in Indochina; political maneuvering between civilian and military leaders."

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the war; and interservice division over the commitment to and strategy used in Indochina” (p. 4).

But before examining those themes, there are two overarching shortcomings that diminish the quality of Buzzanco’s analysis. First is his ethnocentrism. *Masters of War*, like almost all other U.S. accounts of the conflict in Vietnam, presents a severely distorted view of that conflict. Concentrating on the period of massive U.S. troop involvement, it concludes its analysis with the 1968 Tet Offensive. Yet the war itself would continue for another seven years. As former CIA Director William Colby noted, “the historical record given to most Americans is therefore similar to what we would know if histories of World War II stopped before Stalingrad, Operation Torch in North Africa and Guadalcanal in the Pacific.”¹

This is a major defect, for such a truncated version obscures the true nature of the war, concentrating as it does on the Viet Cong guerrillas and the flawed American efforts at counterinsurgency. But the war against the guerrillas was won, albeit by default. After their abortive Tet uprising the Viet Cong were a spent force, and for the next seven years the battlefield was dominated by the PAVN (People’s Army of Vietnam), the regular forces of North Vietnam.

As Douglas Pike, then the director of the Indochina Studies Program at the University of California, Berkeley, noted a decade ago, “Increasingly after 1968 the burden of warfare was shifted to PAVN units. By the Easter Offensive of 1972, PAVN accounted for about 90 percent of the day-to-day combat. For practical purposes the PLAF (People’s Liberation Armed Forces or Viet Cong) had been destroyed.”² It was PAVN’s multidivision cross-border blitzkrieg in April 1975 that ultimately proved decisive. In the account of his victory, PAVN General Van Tien Dung barely mentions the role of guerrilla forces.

The second shortcoming, related to the first, is Buzzanco’s tendency to rely almost exclusively on U.S. sources, as if the war was being waged in a vacuum. In any study of war, one should never factor out the enemy, for what makes war so exasperating, as Carl von Clausewitz observed a century and a half ago, is that “In war the will is directed at an animate object that reacts.”³

And react the North Vietnamese did at every stage of the conflict, especially after the debacle at Tet. While the North Vietnamese vehemently denied such involvement at the time, their postwar official histories tell a different story. While not as earth shattering as the revelations of the Soviet archives on the origins of the Korean War, they do shatter the illusions of those in the antiwar movement, who believe that the war was precipitated by the United States and was exclusively a matter for the southern dissidents.

1. William E. Colby, “Vietnam after McNamara,” *Washington Post*, 27 April 1995.

2. Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA, 1986), 49.

3. Carl von Clausewitz, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret *On War* (Princeton, 1976), 149.

“Necessity dictated that northern involvement deliberately be kept obscure,” Pike noted, “but PAVN presence was extensive.”⁴ His analysis was corroborated by the second volume of the official PAVN history covering the years 1954–1975 written by the staff of the Military History Institute of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam’s Ministry of Defense and published in Hanoi in 1994.

In February 1961, months before President John F. Kennedy’s November 1961 decision to increase American involvement in South Vietnam, the Politburo of the Vietnamese Communist Party had approved a resolution directing PAVN to be prepared to take action to “guarantee victory for the revolution in South Vietnam when the opportunity presents itself.” It also approved a five-year plan setting out detailed goals for PAVN operations during 1961–1965, including increased military action in the south, laying the foundation for a major escalation of North Vietnamese direct involvement in the war.⁵

Although much of Buzzanco’s analysis has to do with the reluctance of U.S. military officers to wage war, he seems to think this is a purely American phenomenon, which he attributes to the basest of motives. He could have profited greatly from a reading of Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington’s 1967 classic, *The Soldier and the State*, especially Huntington’s observation that “the military man rarely favors war. . . . This has been his typical role in most modern states, including fascist Germany, communist Russia, and democratic America.”⁶

Be that as it may, Buzzanco provides a wealth of data to back up his assertion that in the 1950s “the armed forces worked against military involvement in the First Indochina war more than any other institution, in or out of government” (p. 25). Even after it almost lost its reason for being with the atomic strategies of the Eisenhower administration, “the Army still was not terribly eager to fight in Vietnam or to change its mission to emphasize [the Kennedy administration’s] counterinsurgency [strategies]. . . . The Army did not hunger for war on the Mekong, or for an overhaul or its traditional approach to combat” (p. 79).

Buzzanco scathingly brands as absurd the notion by Oliver Stone and others that John F. Kennedy was a closet pacifist who was assassinated because he wanted to withdraw from Vietnam. “Kennedy began a war of aggression,” he writes. Kennedy made Vietnam “the centerpiece of the cold war” and “planted, then fertilized, the seeds of disaster in Vietnam.” By comparison, most military officers “recognized the perilous situation in Vietnam, were never eager for

4. Pike, *PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam*, 47–48.

5. Senior Colonel Phan Dinh et al., *History of the People’s Army of Vietnam*, vol. 2, *The Coming of Age of the People’s Army of Vietnam during the Resistance War against the Americans to Save the Nation (1954–1975)* (Hanoi, 1994), trans. and quoted in Merle E. Pribbenow, “1961 – Year of Decision,” forthcoming in *Vietnam* magazine.

6. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 69.

combat, understood the various obstacles to success and were aware of the domestic political implications of warfare in Indochina” (pp. 82–83).

“By the end of 1965,” however, “both uniformed and civilian leaders had created a trap for themselves. Though fearing long-term failure in Vietnam, they were just as reluctant to accept the political responsibility for ‘losing’ Vietnam in the short term” (pp. 154–55).

“At the same time,” Buzzanco writes, “U.S. officers, at the outset of the war, were creating the ‘revisionist’ critique that American troops had to fight with ‘one hand tied behind their back’ ” (p. 155). That theme echoes through the book, but my own experience is that, except for some airpower fanatics who believed massive bombing of Hanoi would have won the war, that theme was never strong within the military itself.

In teaching the Vietnam War for almost ten years at the Army Command and General Staff College and the Army War College to officers who had fought in Vietnam, such sentiments were almost never heard. Most blamed General William C. Westmoreland, the long-time MACV commander, for our failures there. Although that was manifestly unfair, by taking the heat Westmoreland drained off the animosity of the officer corps, and as a result a “stab in the back” syndrome never developed in the post-Vietnam military.

Buzzanco’s look at what he calls “the war on three fronts” in 1966 is among the book’s most trenchant chapters, as he examines the “U.S. Forces versus the Viet Cong,” “Westmoreland versus the Marines,” and the “Military leaders versus the White House.” These convoluted struggles evidence the quagmire than Vietnam had become, and Buzzanco quotes approvingly Dave Richard Palmer’s “hard truth that the United States was strategically bankrupt in Vietnam in 1966.” As he concludes, “with American forces unlikely to attain success in Vietnam, civilian and military leaders were scrambling to avoid blame in Vietnam” (p. 273).

By contrast, Buzzanco’s chapter on “the myth of Tet” is among his worst. For one thing, he obviously does not comprehend that war is waged simultaneously on three distinct levels. The tactical level involves actual firefights on the battlefield, and on that level the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces were almost uniformly successful. The next level is the operational or theater of war level, and there too the United States and its allies emerged victorious. The communist “Great General Uprising” never materialized, the guerrillas were unable to hold any of their initial gains and were in fact destroyed in the process. On those two levels the military could rightfully claim success.

But at the strategic level, the use of military force to attain political ends, Tet 1968 was an unmitigated disaster. President Lyndon Johnson, the military’s commander-in-chief, was psychologically defeated by the attack and General Earl Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, duplicitously sought to use the disaster as leverage for forcing a general mobilization and conned General Westmoreland into going along with a phony two hundred thousand-man

troop request.⁷ Buzzanco, however, is so caught up in his “military defeat” fantasy that he completely overlooks that dimension of the story. But at least he finally discovered that the enemy might have something to do with the war. “Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara, for all their shortcomings, did not cause America’s defeat,” he writes. “The Vietnamese Communists did” (p. 340).

And Buzzanco returns to lucidity in his concluding chapter. The *objective* is the first and most important of the “Principles of War,” since it provides focus and direction for the application of power. But the strategic objective in Vietnam was never established. “Although constitutionally structured to defer to civilian authority,” Buzzanco writes, “the military was institutionally trying to pin down the administrations of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson and make them determine Indochina policy” (p. 345). But that never happened. “American generals . . . nonetheless ignored their own bleak analyses with the full complicity of the civilian policy-making establishment” (pp. 350–51).

As if to emphasize the schizophrenic nature of his work, Buzzanco follows up his criticism of Vietnam-era military leaders for failing to speak up to prevent the debacle in Vietnam with a condemnation of present-day military leaders for exerting too much pressure on the civilian leadership. Earlier in the book he argued that “under Clinton, the draft dodger-cum commander in chief, the military . . . has opposed, publicly, any deeper involvement in Bosnia, Somalia, or Haiti” (p. 22). In his epilogue he concludes that “it is safe to say that ranking officers . . . may have the upper hand whenever questions of American defense policy are being debated” (p. 361). It may be safe to say, but it is also balderdash, as the troops who served in Somalia and Haiti and those who are now serving in Bosnia could testify first hand.

To his credit, Buzzanco demolishes the myth that Vietnam was the military’s war. But he replaces it with an equally pernicious myth that the military has now slipped the bonds of civilian control. Like its predecessor, the latter myth is also the product of biased analysis and shoddy scholarship.

The fact that *Masters of War* won the 1996 Bernath Book Prize reflects no credit on the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations.

7. See my “Turning Point of the War” in the February 1993 issue of *Vietnam* magazine. See also Colonel Paul J. Miles, “The Origins of the Post-Tet 1968 Plans for Additional American Forces in RVN,” drafted by him for General Westmoreland in April 1970. Colonel Miles, then with the Department of History, U.S. Military Academy, provided me with a copy in August 1981.